was rejected by the Americans; the Hungarians and the Soviets were not interested in initiating proceedings against him; after all, he had tried to change sides and hindered deportation of the Budapest Jews. Horthy settled with his family in Estoril in Portugal. He had no private fortune because, unlike many of the kings and republican heads of state of the inter-war years in Central and Eastern Europe, he was personally incorruptible. The Regent may have been a life-long anti-Semite, yet he and his wife were able for many years to live a comfortable life in exile thanks to the generous support of two Jewish families. He died on 9 February 1957, a few months after the Hungarian Revolution of October 1956.

Horthy and his regime remain a part of Hungary's past with which it has yet to come to terms. The repatriation of his mortal remains to Hungary—exclusively for family reasons—and the solemn burial service on 4 September 1993 with its emotional and political overtones, showed that the "Admiral on the white horse" is still a highly controversial figure in Hungarian history.

34. Victory in Defeat: 1945–1990

The scene on that Saturday afternoon was impressive. On 28 September 1946 close on a quarter of a million people packed the huge tradition-filled Heroes' Square in front of the Millenium Monument in Budapest. Many waved flags—Hungarian or red ones. Banners demanded "Removal of the People's Enemies from the Coalition" and "Forward to the People's Democracy!" It was the triumphant prelude to the first public congress of the Hungarian Communist Party (MKP), founded on 24 November 1919.[1] At exactly 14.30 a blond young man named János Kádár, the deputy General Secretary, gave the opening address; behind him on the tribune sat the leading functionaries of the Party and local and foreign guests.

Two-and-a-half hours later a festive meeting took place in the Opera House, where the heads of foreign delegations and representatives of the other Hungarian parties read out messages of greeting. On Sunday the 386 delegates, representing 4,800 local party organizations with 650,000 members, assembled for their three-day caucus in the Congress Hall of the Parliament.

During their party conference at Whitsun 1945 the Communists already claimed 150,000 members, but at the first free (also secret) general elections in November 1945 they came off only as the third—strongest element with barely 17 per cent, behind the bourgeois-peasant Smallholders' Party (57 per cent) and the Social Democrats (17.4). Nonetheless they demonstrated strength, and the self-confident, at times aggressive tone of their reports left no doubt that they were going all-out to be the determining factor in Hungarian politics.

Bourgeois politicians and many Social Democrats viewed with misgivings the dizzying rise of the Communists, whose proudly proclaimed membership figures were perplexing. And in fact they

resembled a political and statistical miracle. Kádár himself admitted many years later that during the war there were only a few hundred (never more than 1,000) members, and after a wave of arrests in 1942–3 no more than 70–80, of whom he was in constant contact with only about ten activists.[2] In spite of this, the number of CP members had reached 30,000 in February 1945, rising by the end of the year to half a million. It was an open secret that the Communist Party, led largely by Jewish Muscovites, relied principally on the "minor Arrow Cross" followers (*kisnyilasok*), i.e. on people from the margins of society—unskilled labourers, members of the lower middle class and frightened civil servants—who felt threatened by the radical change and the generally unexpected return of Jewish owners of "Aryanized" shops, factories and apartments. In the early summer an editorial in the party newspaper *Szabad Nép* (A Free People) affirmed a certain "understanding" for the misguided "*kisnyilas*", and the crypto-Communist author József Darvas, officially a member of the National Peasants' Party, chimed in with alacrity.[3]

The membership statistics of the other parties also gave the impression of an astounding increase. As early as the summer of 1945 the Social Democrats proudly claimed half a million members, but what could one make of the fact that in a city, where a carnival of death and hell had still been raging between October 1944 and February 1945, the very people who for twenty-five years had been subjected to nationalistic, revisionist propaganda turned overnight into democrats, Socialists and even Communists? None of this was of any interest to the principal speakers at the Communist Party congress in 1946. Their task was to don the camouflage of grand-coalition and peoples' democracy and, in contrast to the leftist Social Democrats, strictly refrain from using Socialist slogans and not even to utter the word "Socialism". At the time the top leadership still counted on a lengthy period of transition pending the full collectivization of the economy and their complete seizure of power.

However, it turned out quite differently. Within less than two years the die was cast, and the Communists seized total power in Hungary—as in the other countries in the Soviet sphere of interest. At the beginning of 1949 Stalin let out the great secret: Peoples' Democracy would assume the function of the Dictatorship of the

Proletariat. But already, before this unmasking, the iron fist of the "Working Class", in other words the State Security Service and the military Counter Intelligence, had done away with every genuine, potential and concocted opposition, at first outside the CP and, soon after May 1949, within it too.

The conduct of the "liberators"—as in all Soviet-occupied territories—was not conducive to arousing friendly feelings towards the Soviet Union. Rape, plunder and brutal interference in domestic policy led to the hatred of the Soviets becoming even stronger than before the defeat. The uncertain fate of more than half a million prisoners of war, the abduction of tens of thousands of civilians to forced labour, the Soviet-supported Communist offensive to undermine and finally destroy the young Hungarian democracy, contributed in the ensuing months and years to a feeling among of the large and later overwhelming majority of Hungarians that with the new era under the red star a new bondage had begun.

The four men who gave the principal speeches in the venerable hall of Parliament in that Indian summer of 1946 knew better than most other delegates, and the 123 guests (not entitled to vote) from the state and Party apparatus, the army, the police, the press, the labour unions and large enterprises, that for historical and mass-psychological reasons Hungary was an extremely unfavourable breeding-ground for the Communists. This was also true, if to different degrees, of the other "Peoples' Democracies", except for Czechoslovakia, where a strong legitimate CP had already existed during the inter-war years. Despite complete control by Moscow and more or less similar developments throughout the Soviet sphere of power, the personalities of the four top functionaries in Hungary and their relationship to one another and to the masters in the Kremlin gave the country's post-war era a particularly dramatic, often surprising and occasionally gruesome character. The political turbulences and startling turns in the positions of the men at the summit of the Party and the state confirm the warning by Isaiah Berlin not to view history "as a motorway without exits":

> At crucial moments... every accident, individuals with their decisions and actions, not necessarily foreseen even by themselves, and which are rarely foreseeable, are able to change the course of history... Our decision-making leeway is not wide. Let us say: one per cent. But that one per cent is what matters.[4]

It is possible, even probable, that without the distinctive personality of Mátyás Rákosi, Hungary would still have gone through the crucial junctions on the way to dictatorship and the status of Soviet colony (liquidation of the other parties, nationalization of the economy, pushing heavy industry especially armaments at the expense of consumers, expulsion of ethnic Germans, the arrest of real or alleged opponents, and so on.) Yet all historians of the post-war era agree that Rákosi was the driving force behind the bloody purges and the political coordination before and after Stalin's death. We should recall the words of the Swiss historian Herbert Lüthy: "History is not anonymous. It is known to us as a real happening only to the extent that we rip away the anonymity of the protagonists, individualizing and identifying them... Dates and facts do not really mean anything if we cannot get a picture of the consciousness of the personalities in action."[5]

As Secretary-General of the Party, Rákosi gave the first address about the "country's domestic and foreign-political situation and the tasks of the Party". Politburo member Imre Nagy (a former Agriculture and Interior Minister) spoke next about a "thriving agriculture for a prosperous peasantry". The third speaker, Rákosi's deputy in the Party apparatus, János Kádár, spoke of the "Party's organizational tasks", and finally Interior Minister László Rajk, as chairman of the nomination commission, presented the list of candidates for the new Central Committee.

Who was this First Man of the Party, who from 1945 to 18 July 1956 held steadily increasing personal sway as "Stalin's best pupil", who parcelled out authority and responsibility among covert rivals, and who directed the setting up of constantly changing power centres within the Party machinery?[6] Born in 1892, the first child of the grocer József Rosenfeld (Magyarized to Rákosi in 1904), he grew up in the small village of Ada, near Szabadka (today's Subotica). In spite of his humble background he was able to study at the Oriental Academy at Budapest after passing his high school exams with distinction.

In 1912 he went on a scholarship to Hamburg and in 1913 to London, where he worked as a clerk, returning to Hungary on the outbreak of war. As a sergeant on the Eastern Front he was captured in 1915, and during his three years as a prisoner-of-war learned

Russian and Italian. As one of the founding members of the Hungarian Communist Party, he became the youngest commissar in the top leadership of the short-lived Soviet Republic. After a brief spell of internment in Austria with other Communist leaders Rákosi re-emerged in the summer of 1920 in Moscow as an employee and later one of the secretaries to the executive committee of the Comintern. Thanks to his linguistic abilities—he also spoke French and Turkish—he helped during the early 1920s to launch Communist parties from Prague to Livorno and from Paris to Berlin, and in some cases was requested by the Comintern to arbitrate their internal faction fights. After criss-crossing Europe with six forged passports, he returned to Budapest, only to be arrested with forty activists a year later and, after a lengthy court case, sentenced to eight-and-a-half years' imprisonment. Rákosi became known world-wide in 1935 when, instead of being set free at the end of his term, he was sentenced to life imprisonment, this time for his activities in 1919, in the face of protests from all over the world. The Supreme Court eventually combined the two sentences, so that in 1940 the Communist leader was allowed to leave for the Soviet Union in exchange for the Hungarian flags seized by Tsarist Russian troops in 1849. After fifteen years and thirty-seven days the legendary comrade was received and honoured as a hero in the Fatherland of the Proletariat. He was even permitted to stand close to Stalin on the dais in Red Square for the anniversary celebrations of the Revolution on 7 November 1940.

In reality Rákosi owed his survival to the Horthy regime. Had he been released in 1935, he would almost certainly have become a victim of the purges. He would even have provided a sound reason—from a Soviet Communist viewpoint—for his liquidation because under interrogation in 1925 he had started much too soon to talk about Comintern matters. All he got now was a reprimand for the old sin, for which Stalin allegedly remarked that he had already atoned. Be that as it may, Rákosi only returned to Hungary on 30 January 1945 with his eleven-years-younger wife Fenya Fiodorovna Kornyilova, a prosecutor from Yakutsk in Northern Siberia, whom he had met at a rest home and married in 1942. However, in Hungary a quite different story was in circulation. In its "Personalities" column the Hamburg news magazine *Der Spiegel* printed in

June 1948 a brief report that Rákosi was "taking an aristocratic line. He has applied for a divorce from his Mongol wife, and wishes to marry Princess Odescalchi. He is following in the footsteps of many Russian Communist leaders, who married aristocrats after the victory of the Revolution." This would indeed have caused a sensation if it had been true, but in fact "Matyi" and Fenya lived happily together until his death on 5 February 1971.

During his twelve years in office Rákosi proved to be one of the best-educated, most eloquent and at the same time most morally evil politicians in Hungarian history. Without doubt, according to the playwright Gyula Háy, who had met him in his Soviet exile, he was the ugliest:

> A short, squat body, as if the creator had been unable to finish his work for abhorrence: the head disproportionately large, topped by an enormous bald dome and fronted by a pallid, bloated face with a sweet-and-sour smile frozen on to it. Virtually no neck between the high shoulders, so that it was left more or less to the observer whether he called him a hunchback or not. Clumsy in movement, with a tendency to flatfootedness; short, stubby fingers...[7]

His biographers claim he had no passions: he neither drank nor smoked, nor—unlike "the number four", the good-looking chief ideologue József Révai—did he have affairs. Human emotions such as love and hate played no part in his life. Rákosi lived only for his power, but the tactics and strategy of handling power, the intensity with which even a number one exerted that power, depended on the distant despot Jossip Vissarionovich Stalin. The relationship of his vassal chieftains to the "Red Tsar" in the Kremlin remained for ever uncertain, unsteady, fluctuating.[8] Rákosi spent all his holidays on the Black Sea, and not even his inner circle knew whether and when he had met Stalin. Between 1945 and 1947 a reliable party comrade installed a direct radio communication with Stalin's office in the attic of Rákosi's villa. Its operator, a veteran of the Spanish Civil War, did not reveal even to his wife the nature of his job at the Party chief's house, and even in his memoirs published thirty-five years later did not waste any words about his undoubtedly exciting work.

The fact remains that Rákosi discussed every politically significant decision with the "Soviet friends" on the spot (the "advisers" were for ever present in all important institutions), or sought

consent by telephone or by a letter sent by special courier to Stalin's personal secretary Alexander Poskryobyshev. The decisive move, which dealt the death-blow to the young democracy, was the arrest in February 1947 by Soviet security police of the Secretary-General of the Smallholders' Party, the deputy Béla Kovács. The second-ranking figure in by far the strongest coalition party, whose immunity had been explicitly confirmed by the parliamentary majority, was abducted to the Soviet Union on the pretext of "setting up armed terrorist groups and spying for a Western intelligence service against the Soviet Union", and only released in 1956.

The punishments, approved by all democratic parties, of extreme-Right politicians of the Horthy regime and, above all, of Arrow Cross members, meted out by specially established courts with the participation of party and trade union delegates, had already opened the way to the Communists' later arbitrariness. Between the end of the war and March 1948 the People's Courts sentenced 16,273 persons, albeit half of those to less than one year's imprisonment. Of the 322 death sentences 146 were carried out. Among those executed were Szálasi, the former Prime Ministers Bárdossy, Imrédy and Sztójay, and those officials of the Ministry of the Interior and the gendarmerie directly responsible for the deportation of Jews. Every party also endorsed the unjust and unacceptable forcible resettlement of a quarter of a million of Hungary's ethnic Germans.

Gatherings of rightist opposition deputies and their friends ("Hungarian Community"), blown up into a gigantic anti-state conspiracy, were used as a pretext for seven court cases with 260 sentences and the liquidation of the Smallholders' Party. In a famous speech delivered after the "Year of Change", Rákosi invented a term which was to become well-known—"salami tactics"—to describe the slice-by-slice destruction of political rivals.

Having proscribed and eliminated the bourgeois politicians as conspirators, Rákosi turned to the church. Within a few weeks 225 Catholic priests were arrested, and the show trials of Cardinal József Mindszenty and, two years later, Archbishop Grösz of Sopron were organized, resulting in sentences of life imprisonment and fifteen years respectively. Cases against the large Maort and Standard industrial enterprises led to the conviction of top executives and experts. Numerous other repressive measures became important

building-blocks in the totalitarian system's intensifying reign of terror. In the end they all had their turn: the real opponents of the Communists, right and left Social Democrats in the coalition, and many others who did not fit in with Rákosi's concepts.

The open declaration of war against the heretic "Titoists" and the excommunication of the Yugoslav Communists from the Cominform (the Communist information bureau founded in the autumn of 1947) denoted the actual turning-point *within* the ruling Party, the overture to the great bloody purges. The search for enemies of the Party and agents of foreign powers within the ranks of the "victors" inaugurated in 1949 that chain of mysterious causes and unpredictable effects, national and international, which could only be grasped, to some extent at least, decades later. Rákosi, Nagy, Kádár and Rajk played different roles at different times in a bizarre drama which could be described as mixture of theatre of the absurd (Ionesco or Beckett), passages from Shakespeare, and a cheap thriller. In the first part Rákosi acted as producer and leading man, and in the final act it was János Kádár. Over the course of time all four key figures became transformed from hunter to hunted, from jailer to victim; Kádár was the only one who made a double role-change, culminating in insanity.

It is impossible to determine whether Rákosi's cruel, even sadistic conduct should be attributed to his long imprisonment—he was in jail between the ages of thirty-three and forty-nine; or to his inferiority complex and consequent dislike of his luckier or better-looking comrades, or to his slavish devotion to Stalin mixed with fear. It is well-known that Stalin declared at this time that all he had to do was lift his little finger and Tito would be finished—a fatal fallacy as far as Yugoslavia was concerned, leading inexorably to the events of 1956. In the case of the vassals, it was precisely Tito's resistance to the Soviet claim to absolutist leadership, on the principle that one could be a Communist without following the orders of the Kremlin, which exacerbated the ageing Stalin's paranoid suspicions.

Stalin did not like Rákosi for several reasons: first, he was a Jew, and secondly he could possibly have been an American spy. This last reservation was due to a famous photo showing Rákosi as a member of a delegation of the Hungarian coalition government, on the lawn of the White House with President Truman. While the other

Hungarian politicians stand stiffly behind or at the side of Truman, displaying embarrassed smiles, Rákosi stands on the American President's left and the two are chatting genially and laughing together. Of all people the Communist, embodiment of evil, seemed to have been an especially welcome guest. The solution to the puzzle is simple: Rákosi, alone among the Hungarian politicians, had earlier visited France and Britain for the consolidation of Hungary's position at the peace negotiations, and spoke fluent English. Stalin looked upon the scene as more than inappropriate, and was so enraged that even in July 1953—seven years later—his heirs still quoted the photo as evidence against the Party chief, then fighting for his political survival.[9]

Rákosi's fear of Stalin was understandable in view of the purges that had taken place within the Soviet apparatus. Yet Stalin appreciated slaves who not only showed boundless devotion to him, but were also clever and efficient. Even for the highest functionaries, access to Stalin was controlled for fifteen years by his personal secretary Alexander Poskryobyshev; this stocky man with a shaven head and a triple roll of fat at the back of his neck was also Rákosi's most important contact in the Kremlin—who knows, perhaps their shared ugliness formed an additional bond between them. At any rate, Rákosi sent the decisive correspondence about preparations for the greatest show-trial ever conducted in the satellite states directly to Poskryobyshev, with the request that his report be forwarded to "Comrade Filippov" (Stalin's code name for correspondence purposes).[10]

The Rajk trial was the starting signal in the entire Soviet Bloc for the witch-hunt for "Titoists" and agents of imperialism disguised as Communists: "enemies with party cards". We know today that the whole of the indictment against the former Hungarian Minister of the Interior and later Foreign Minister, including the death sentences, was authorized by Stalin. The arrests and interrogations by forty Soviet "specialists" under the direct supervision of General Fyodor Bielkin, chief of Soviet State Security in Eastern Europe, then named MGB, were prepared and carried out with his knowledge.

Why had Rajk been chosen as chief defendant? László Rajk as Minister of the Interior was just as convinced a Stalinist as his successors, a merciless destroyer of the bourgeois parties and chief

architect of the repellent show-trial of Cardinal Mindszenty. His participation in the Spanish Civil War, his subsequent internment in a French camp, his role in the Communist underground in Hungary, his arrest and survival due to the intervention of his brother, the Secretary of State in the Arrow Cross government, provided the requisite "connection" with his erstwhile Yugoslav brothers-in-arms, as well as the "Fascist Horthy regime" and the "American secret service". Moreover he was young, slim, tall—and good-looking. As one of the few non-Jewish top functionaries he was doubtless the most dangerous potential rival of the ill-favoured Rákosi whose inferiority complex made him time and again quote from Shakespeare, and from Plato, during Politburo meeting about the danger of "lean and hungry" men.

As "Stalin's best pupil" Rákosi too went all the way in his extreme inhumanity, giving each arrest a particularly odious note. The world found out only from the memoirs and interviews of survivors and the later publication of secret documents why the accused had confessed, and through what sadistic methods of torture they had been transformed into their own accusers and informers on their comrades. Every political act in the underground or abroad was rigged into a crime, with the victims—completely cut off from the outside world—unable to defend themselves.[11]

On 29 May 1948 Rajk and his wife were invited by Rákosi for lunch. When they were saying their good-byes, the smiling Party chief promised that he would drop in on them within the next few days to see their new-born son. Rajk's closest friend and successor in the Ministry of the Interior, János Kádár, who had been involved in the preparations for the past few months, suggested to the Party leader that he would meet Rajk the following day for a game of chess in order to divert his attention; Kádár was a practised player. After a good hour Kádár said to his friend "Checkmate". Rajk drove home, and fifteen minutes later was arrested by a group of high-ranking security officers led by General Gábor Péter, Chief of State Security (ÁVH). When Rajk remained unyielding even after the most brutal torture with rubber truncheons, one evening Kádár and Mihály Farkas, Defence Minister and at the same time Party supervisor of the Secret Police, came and tried to persuade him to make a comprehensive confession. Rákosi had the whole conversation

taped (the transcript was later used as a weighty means of pressure against Kádár). When the persuasive powers of these two failed, Rajk was tortured so severely that he made a short confession that same night.[12]

The secret correspondence, appeals and records published since show the hatred and eagerness with which old accounts were being settled during the following years among the torturers as they fought for their own survival. In the event it was Rákosi himself who, despite his cunning, admitted in his notorious speech after the trial to a howling crowd of activists in the Budapest Sports Stadium: "I had to spend many sleepless nights before the execution of the plan was finalized." All his later attempts to shift responsibility to others were thus condemned to failure from the outset.

In the Rajk trial Stalin's classic method was used—the so-called "amalgam" or the linking of quite disparate elements. Hungarian Communists who had been living abroad for long periods, especially veterans of the Spanish Civil War, right and left ("Trotskyists"), Social Democrats, "Fascists" (e.g. wartime officers who had joined the resistance) and "Zionists" (Jewish Communists) were potential targets of the vigilance campaigns. Of the ninety-three who were condemned directly in connection with the Rajk trial and its sequels, fifteen were executed and eleven others did not survive their jail sentences. But that was only the beginning of the ever-faster-gyrating, fiendish merry-go-round of purges.

On 24 April 1950 the Head of State Árpád Szakasits—former Secretary General of the Social Democrats, now merged with the Communists—was invited with his wife to dine with the Party chief. Afterwards Rákosi had his guest arrested on the evidence of forged records, apparently proving that he had been an informer for the Horthy police. He was arrested there and then by General Gábor Péter who had been waiting next-door, and locked into the cellar of the Rákosi villa for a few days before being taken to prison. The verdict on the stonemason-turned journalist was a life sentence, and according to the usual practice his entire family were exposed to continual harassment.[13] Szakasits was freed six years later in 1956—incidentally at the same time as Zoltán Tildy, his predecessor as Head of State and erstwhile leader of the Smallholders' Party. He had been forced by the Communists to resign in July

1948, and his son-in-law, a diplomat, was executed for alleged corruption. Tildy and his wife were placed under house arrest for eight years. In a total of twenty political trials 180 leading Social Democrat politicians were sentenced to long prison terms, not to mention the many internees. Right- and left-wing Social Democrats, who fought bitter battles among themselves, suffered the same fate almost without exception.

Incidentally, of the two successors as State President one was a crypto-Communist in the guise of a Social Democrat, the other an alcoholic crypto-Communist masquerading under the name of a Smallholder (he remained in office for fifteen years). Under normal circumstances this would have remained completely irrelevant, except that the latter of these two helped Kádár in 1956, by way of a back-dated certificate of appointment of the so-called "Hungarian Government of Revolutionary Workers and Peasants", to lend an appearance of legality that was fragile even by Communist standards.

Almost simultaneously with the persecution of the Social Democrats, Rákosi and his closest accomplices, Defence Minister Mihály Farkas and General Gábor Péter, pursued a bloody purge of the top military. In the spring of 1950 twelve generals, among them the Chief of the General Staff and high-ranking officers were executed, and thirteen were sentenced to life imprisonment. (The changing of the guard was so successful that in 1954 only 15 per cent of the officer corps had higher than primary school education—however, two-thirds were Party members.)[14]

The basic method was always the same: false accusation, intimidation of witnesses, torture by deprivation of food, water, light and sleep, and if necessary by electric shocks and use of the traditional rubber truncheons. The role-change of perpetrator-victim was often dramatic: eight months before his own execution General Kálmán Révay, head of the Military Academy, had commanded a firing squad which shot his friend and comrade, former chief of Military Counter-Intelligence and a courageous resistance fighter, György Pálffy, in the courtyard of the military police headquarters.

Meanwhile propagandists fantasized about Hungary as the "land of iron and steel", promising a doubling of industrial production as well as a 50 per cent rise in real wages within only four years. In fact real wages and salaries fell between 1949 and 1952 by 20 per cent.

Small enterprises were in effect liquidated, and as a counter-move temporary rationing was introduced during the 1950s.

Diehard Communists were loyal to the Soviet Union, not to their own country. At issue were not only reparation payments, but also the notorious Soviet-Hungarian airline, shipping on the Danube, oil drilling and pumping, bauxite and aluminium mining joint companies. By 1954 the Soviets were able to pocket more than $1 billion in "profits" from Hungary. An administrator or manager only had to utter "suspicious" views about these unequal relationships, be rumoured to nurture anti-Soviet "nationalistic" resentments, be denounced, usually anonymously or at the whim of a functionary, to be put "on record"; and once a Secret Police file existed it was almost impossible to remain unscathed over the years. Between 1951 and May 1953 alone, around 850,000 police convictions were recorded; between 1950 and the first quarter of 1953, 650,000 people were arraigned, of whom 387,000 received sentences (most were fined). In addition 44,000 were interned and in the spring of 1951, 15,000 "bourgeois" and "unreliable elements" were deported, mainly from the capital to remote settlements where they were made to do agricultural work under harsh conditions. The black humour of the time divided the population into two groups: those who were already under arrest, and those who would be arrested next. The ubiquitous ÁVH could count on the services of more than 40,000 informers at any given time, and supposedly held records on over a million individuals, i.e. 10 per cent of the population.[15]

What many Hungarians believed at first, and many foreign observers said about the purges later—that the hated Communists were settling accounts with each other—was outstripped by the dynamics and dimensions of the permanent purges. Although between 1948 and 1951 a total of 400,000 members, largely former Social Democrats but also "minor Arrow Crossites" and "passive petit bourgeois", were purged from the Party, the "vanguard of the working class", now calling itself the MDP (short for Hungarian Workers' Party), still counted 828,000 comrades. Already at the beginning of the 1950s the Party employed 30–40,000 full-time functionaries and officials in its various committees and organizations. According to an informed estimate, between 1945 and 1985

2 million Hungarians, i.e. one in three adults, belonged for a shorter or longer time to the Communist Party (operating under various names).[16]

The initial enthusiasm of many Hungarians for the establishment of a supposedly equitable society which would give independence and prosperity to peasants through land reform, in which tens of thousands would find employment and upward mobility in the central and local administration, in which the youth would have access to secondary and tertiary education and with it the chance to level out the former huge differences of income—as the years passed, this abated more and more. The accelerated rearmament ordered by Stalin at a meeting of the satellites in the Kremlin in January 1951, which Rákosi translated into action with enthusiasm, led to a severe economic crisis in this agrarian country without resources. The armed forces, inflated to 200,000 men (with border patrols and the militia almost 300,000), together with armaments, swallowed up 25 per cent of the annual budget between 1950 and 1952. Just the wages and salaries of army personnel in one year were five times greater than the total expenditure on education.[17]

Even Stalin warned Rákosi against unbridled collectivization. In those years 9 per cent of arable land lay fallow, and the former granary of Central Europe had to import foodstuffs repeatedly to cover domestic needs. The peasants were harassed (also under Imre Nagy when he was Minister of Agriculture) with impossible delivery demands and threatened with fines. The so-called kulaks (71,000 families), peasants with more than 12 hectares of land, were brutally persecuted; even more peasants were forced into cooperatives, and the workers were outrageously exploited by the hated norm system whereby they had to fulfill artificially high or repeatedly increased production targets.

Within a short time even those who had kept this system going with initial enthusiasm from above, or those in the top echelons who had accepted (or rather had to accept) the reports of the Rajk and Szakasits trials with loud or tacit approval, themselves became victims in the cycles of repression. At the end of 1950 and beginning of 1951 Rákosi singled out as the main targets of his purges the so-called home-based Communists—those who had not been in Soviet exile. With Stalin's consent he ordered a veritable witch-hunt

against these young functionaries. One of them was Kádár's successor in the Interior Ministry, Sándor Zöld, who had been elected to the Politburo with Kádár at the March 1951 party congress. At a meeting of this body in April Zöld was sharply criticized for his personnel selection; he then drove home without a word and with his service revolver shot his wife, mother, two small children and then himself. Zöld knew what awaited him in the torture chambers of the Secret Police. Thereupon the Party chief ordered the arrest of the other home-based Communists, chief among whom was the best-known top functionary, Kádár—"in order to impede their flight", as reported in a radio message to Stalin.[18]

A couple of days before 1 May the 13,750 Party organizations received the directive not to carry any pictures of Kádár during their march-past. Everybody took the hint. Kádár was charged with having been an informer for the Horthy police in 1943, dissolving the illegal CP on their orders, and establishing in its place a "Peace Party". Szakasits was said to have passed on the instruction to him.

In the eyes of the true Bolsheviks the "liquidators", as they were called from the times of Lenin's fight against the Mensheviks, were evil deviants and "objective" tools of the class enemy. What might seem to later generations a ridiculous splitting of hairs was a matter of life and death at the time. The charge of "deviationism" could easily be used as a pretext against one's potential opponents. Kádár was still at large and even acted as a member of the leadership, yet he had to write increasingly self-incriminatory weekly reports for Rákosi about his earlier conduct. It was a variation of the technique described by Arthur Koestler in his novel *Darkness at Noon*, and also known from the great Moscow show trials.[19]

In contrast to most Muscovite and home-based Communists, Kádár, born out of wedlock in 1912 in the port city of Fiume (today's Rijeka) to a half or wholly Slovak washerwoman and household-help, actually came from the class in whose name he later acted, namely the working class. He met his natural father and three half-brothers for the first time only in 1960 when he was already head of the Party. Kádár—he changed his name officially from Czermanik (later Csermanek) in 1945—grew up among the poorest in the country and later in the capital. It was an exceptional achievement in those days for anyone from such a background even to complete

four classes of the higher elementary school. The trained typewriter mechanic (who never actually worked in that capacity) soon found his way to the Communists. The fact that Kádár had formally belonged for five full years to a Budapest district organization of the Social Democrats, and there met artists and intellectuals, may well have shaped his later attitude. In all he spent a total of seven years in various prisons, by far the worst being three-and-a-half in solitary confinement between 1951 and 1954. However, in contrast to what is asserted in most reference works, he was never tortured; unnerved, humiliated and psychologically at the end of his tether, he signed the requisite confessions without any need for physical force. In a secret trial shortly before Christmas 1951 he was given a life sentence.[20] Kádár was spared the fate of his friend Rajk, whom, as Interior Minister, he had persuaded to confess eighteen months earlier first by false promises and then by torture; he personally attended Rajk's execution by hanging, an experience that must have been remained with him for the rest of his life. At the beginning of the 1950s the motto was "survival".

When, contrary to all expectations, he was released in 1954, Rákosi—the very man who had had him arrested—now received him solicitously, expressed pleasure at seeing him again, and inquired after "Comrade Kádár's" health. Kádár, as he would later tell his biographer, was also pleased, above all because he was still alive, and did not reproach the "Chief". The two men agreed that after taking a holiday Kádár would be appointed Party secretary of the capital's Thirteenth District—something that would strike any ordinary mortal as unbelievable. Kádár's words spoken at a banquet held in May 1972 for his sixtieth birthday could perhaps serve as at least a partial explanation for this odd situation: "Only certain things can be credited to an individual as a service. Let us say—and I for one would regard this as a kind of service—when someone recognized at the right time that he is neither a leopard nor a tiger, but also not a mouse." It would perhaps be truer to compare the longest-serving successful politician of the Communist world to a fox, and a particularly cunning one at that.[21]

In any case, while Kádár languished in solitary confinement under incomparably worse conditions than under Horthy, the entire nation had to celebrate in March 1952 the sixtieth birthday

of "Stalin's best pupil". Almost forty years later one of the chief manipulators described in a pamphlet the racy details of the preparations. These might have been planned by the general staff.[22] The highlight of the festivities was a gala performance in honour of Rákosi in the Opera House. There he sat under his own giant likeness, flanked on the right by a similarly huge image of Stalin and on the left by one of Lenin, "modestly" accepting the innumerable tributes paid to him and the singing of a song specially composed for the occasion.

During that late autumn and winter the persecution mania of Stalin reached a new zenith. The notorious Slánsky trial in Prague (eleven out of the fourteen accused were Jews) and the Moscow conspiracy of the "murderers in white aprons" (nine top doctors, six of them Jews, were said to have tried to murder Stalin on the orders of the American-Zionist espionage services) were a warning for everyone, but especially for functionaries of Jewish origin.

In this tense situation a personal emissary from Stalin turned up in Rákosi's office at the beginning of January 1953, and reported that General Fyodor Bielkin from the Soviet Ministry of the Interior had been unmasked as a British spy, and revealed under interrogation that Gábor Péter, with whom he had staged the whole Rajk trial, was also a British spy and traitor. In the tried and tested manner Rákosi invited in the Police Chief—and his wife, who ran his secretariat—to dinner the following evening. On their arrival the commander of the host's bodyguard handcuffed both of them, and they were locked for safety's sake in the icy cellar of the villa while eighteen high-ranking security officers were dismissed from the ÁVH. Only after the purge was over were Péter and his wife transferred to the special jail.

Gábor Péter (alias Benö Eisenberger) had already been an NKVD agent before the war and was regarded as most trusted tool of the Soviets', even by Stalin personally.[23] That a man such as the Communist General Secretary Slánsky, who had spent the war years in the Soviet Union, or a top agent like Péter, with whom at a reception in the Kremlin in 1948 Stalin clinked glasses as a special sign of esteem, could now be sacrificed to the anti-Semitic persecution mania of the ageing dictator showed that all party chiefs of Jewish origin were now under threat, including Rákosi.

Elias Canetti's reflections on power are applicable also to Rákosi (and naturally to his master in the Kremlin): "... the actual intention of the true dictator is as grotesque as it is unbelievable: he wants to be the *only one*, he wants to survive all others, so that no one else should survive *him*."[24] To prove his reliability and indispensability to Moscow, Rákosi lost no time and ordered the arrest of prominent Jewish Communists, doctors and members of the Jewish community. He too now wanted to prepare a "Zionist trial" with Zoltán Vas, one of the few popular Muscovites—a man who had spent fifteen years in jail with Rákosi, as the chief defendant. It has only recently become known from Swedish sources of plans to prosecute in a special trial some of the doctors and functionaries of the Jewish community arrested at the time for having allegedly murdered Raoul Wallenberg in January 1945 (the date and circumstances of Wallenberg's death have never been discovered).[25]

Then on 5 March 1953, in the midst of the totally unpredictable last great wave of purges from Moscow to Prague and Budapest, Stalin died. At first there was no political reaction. The Hungarian dictatorship even celebrated an overwhelming victory of the unity ticket in the so-called parliamentary elections: 98 per cent of the electorate voted, and 98.2 of the votes cast were in favour of the MDP. The "Wise Leader and Teacher of our People and our Party", since the summer of 1952 both Party Chief and Prime Minister, appeared to be at the height of his power, but appearances were deceptive. Much was happening, not only in Budapest but in Moscow. As early as June the collective leadership struck its first fateful blow. We know today that Stalin's heirs fought each other like scorpions in a glass bottle, but they were united on one point: that Hungary was potentially the most dangerous trouble-spot, and Mátyás Rákosi, the man responsible for the highly disquieting situation, should immediately resign as Prime Minister. A large Hungarian party and government delegation—its members "chosen" by their "hosts"—was summoned to visit Moscow on 13–16 June. The members of the collective leadership, first and foremost Secret Police Chief Beria and Prime Minister Malenkov, but also Party Secretary Khrushchev and Foreign Minister Molotov, attacked their devoted Hungarian disciple with unprecedented sharpness and irony in Stalin's study in the presence of his astonished attendants. The collective leadership decided unanimously that the fifty-

seven year old Imre Nagy, deputy Prime Minister and Politburo member, should become Rákosi's successor.

If it were asked today why a popular uprising broke out in October 1956 in Hungary and only there, then two factors have to be taken into consideration against the background of general developments in the Eastern bloc from de-Stalinization to partial reconciliation with the heretic in Belgrade. First, Hungary was the only Bloc member where—already four months after Stalin's death, on the initiative of a worried Soviet leadership—Stalinism was openly condemned and a new reform course was proclaimed; and secondly, only there did two factions with two diametrically opposed concepts in the Party battle on for over three years over the future direction to be taken. The popular uprising could only happen when the Party, notably its top echelon, became so divided on the question of de-Stalinization that it could no longer assert its power.

The optimistic new beginning and all that happened later can only be viewed in conjunction with the personality, career and inner transformation of the new Prime Minister Imre Nagy. He was, and remains, a key figure in those events, and one of the principal questions is: why was the Soviet leadership united in choosing him as the head of government? A purist could demur that it was incomprehensible for the head of government in a sovereign state to be unseated and another appointed as the result of decisions taken in a foreign capital. However, this was the political reality, and in this one case it was a boon: without Soviet authority Nagy could not have been appointed, nor could "the baldhead" (as Rákosi was known in Opposition circles) have been banished.

Be that as it may, from Moscow's viewpoint Imre Nagy represented the ideal solution. He was one of the very few non-Jewish Muscovites; he had spent a total of twenty years in Soviet emigration, was an agrarian expert, and as Minister for Agriculture after 1945 had carried out the popular land reform. He was afterwards Minister of the Interior for a short time, and subsequently President of Parliament until September 1949, when he was ousted from the Politburo after lengthy conflicts with Rákosi and his loyal followers due to "right-opportunistic deviation" over the agrarian question. Because of his opposition to the over-hasty collectivization of agriculture, Nagy had temporarily to step back into the second rank,

but after his self-criticism he was re-instated into the top leadership, both in the government and in the Politburo, evidently with Moscow's backing. Now the Soviet leadership explicitly confirmed the correctness of his former opposition over the agrarian question and condemned his expulsion from the Politburo.

This man, who gave the impression of a jovial professor and—in contrast to Rákosi—spoke to the people in lucid, pleasant-sounding Hungarian, was willing to launch a "new line", based on the trust of his Soviet patrons. At a closed meeting of the Party's Central Committee, the new Prime Minister-designate made an epoch-making speech—which, however, did not become public knowledge any more than the significant party resolution that followed. A wall of silence surrounded the affair. Some details only became known after thirty-three years, and the speech was published as late as 1989. Nagy held Rákosi primarily responsible for the deplorable state of affairs and not only him but also the other three members of the notorious "quartet"—Mihály Farkas for breaking the law, Ernö Gerö for his adventurous economic policy and József Révai for the poor state of education and culture. He spoke of "intolerable conditions characteristic of a police state". The resolution was a sweeping indictment of the Rákosi clique: "It was improper that Comrade Rákosi gave the ÁVH direct instructions on how to conduct their investigations and whom to arrest, and it was improper for him to order physical mistreatment of those arrested, which is against the law."

Despite Imre Nagy's good intentions and changes of personnel, power over the political apparatus still remained in the hands of Rákosi and his followers. The fact that another Muscovite, Ernö Gerö, was appointed Minister of the Interior (on Soviet orders) was not likely to encourage faith in "Socialist legality". Yet the speech given in Parliament by Imre Nagy as the new head of government on 4 July 1953 came as a bombshell. The promise to end police despotism, disband the internment camps, decree an amnesty and revoke deportations immediately enabled tens of thousands, including the author of this book, to return to normal life. Work norms were also lowered and the forced collectivization of agriculture was stopped. The standard of living rose and important reforms considerably improved the atmosphere. But that was only the beginning. Rákosi promptly launched a counter-attack, which from the outset restricted the room for manoeuvre of Nagy and his comrades-in-arms.

The main issues in the struggle between Nagy and Rákosi were the scrutiny of the secret trials and purges, the priorities of economic policy (light versus heavy industry), and the revival of the People's Front—not as a "transmission belt" for the Party's instructions but as a means of winning the confidence of the people. In no other Eastern bloc country was there such a fierce political battle. It was not about ideological hair-splitting but about the freedom, wellbeing and personal future of hundreds of thousands of oppressed, disfranchised and, in part even up to the autumn of 1956, imprisoned people. In Hungary the surviving victims of the trials—writers, journalists and artists, especially the former standard-bearers of the Rákosi era—were those who, betrayed by the ruling clique and plunged into conflicts of conscience, gathered around Imre Nagy, who was still isolated at the top. They dictated the tempo of the reform movement.

Rákosi meanwhile cleverly exploited the power struggles in Moscow, especially the fall of Beria in June 1953 and of Malenkov in the spring of 1955; both had promoted Nagy. At that time and more than thirty years later, the rumour was deliberately spread that Nagy was "Beria's man", later even that he was an NKVD agent. His biographer, János M. Rainer, concludes in the hitherto most thorough study that at the time of the great purges Nagy, like so many others, acted as a temporary informer, rendering "modest services" to the "organs", but definitely not as an "agent".[26] Even so, neither genuine nor forged documents can alter or detract from the position of Imre Nagy in Hungarian history between 1953 and 1958.

The ups and downs of the power struggles in Moscow and in the relationship with Yugoslavia were closely connected with the murderous jockeyings for position and feelings of bitter resentment and paranoia of the leading cadres in Hungary. Their conclusions, warnings and above all mutual denunciations fill countless pages in the reports of the Soviet ambassador and later Party chief Yuri Andropov and of his press attaché, the future Secret Service chief, Vladimir Kriushkov, both of whom spoke and understood Hungarian after their long stay in Budapest.

All his life, especially in crises, Imre Nagy tended to adopt an often passive wait-and-see policy, in which his later heart condition

probably also played a role. Still, following his defeat by Rákosi, he refused the usual self-criticism. In the spring of 1955 he was expelled with the Kremlin's consent from all Party bodies and toppled from the post of prime minister, which then went to András Hegedüs, a thirty-three-year-old functionary from peasant stock and a Rákosi and Gerö favourite.

After Nikita Khrushchev's historic squaring of accounts with Stalin and his policies during the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the USSR, and under pressure from Tito, the campaign for the rehabilitation of Rajk and the other victims of Rákosi's reign caused disarray in the Party machinery. The turmoil in Poland, especially the bloody conflicts in Poznan, encouraged the beleaguered Party chief to use this tragedy as a "coup" against the Opposition, which was becoming increasingly strong and defiant. The Soviets realized too late that Rákosi had become a political liability. Anastas Mikoyan, Khrushchev's trouble-shooter, was sent to Budapest, where for weeks he carefully prepared Rákosi's removal and took part in the decisive meeting of the Central Committee on 18 July 1956.

The news of Rákosi's stripping of power came as a political earthquake. The public was delirious that, straight after the Central Committee session, the dictator should disappear in the direction of Moscow "for health reasons". The rehabilitated Kádár's re-entry into the Politburo was also received with enthusiasm. Yet a bitter pill had to be swallowed straight after this, when Rákosi's place was taken by another old Kremlin hand, Ernö Gerö. Even more disappointing was the non-appearance on the scene of Imre Nagy, who in the mean time had been expelled from the Party, and from his professorship at the Economics University. But the clamour for him became increasingly strident. Knowledgeable observers claim with hindsight that the last chance to avert an explosion of bottled-up fury at the unbearable and cynical offences against the people and their nation would have been a genuine changing of the guard—in other words, the re-appointment of Imre Nagy as head of government and the selection of Kádár instead of the discredited Gerö as First Secretary of the Party. Without that, the situation could only become more dangerous.

As so many times before in Hungarian history, a funeral set the masses in motion. In this case it was the public burial of the

rehabilitated victims of the first great show-trial, Rajk and his companions; what is more, it took place on a profoundly symbolic date: 6 October, the day of mourning for the thirteen martyred generals of the revolutionary army executed by the Habsburgs in 1849. A crowd estimated at 200,000 waited in the cold, drenching rain and howling winds to pay their last respects to the dead. As well as the mourning, there was also a palpable sense of threatening determination. Although the man who now carried the hopes not only of the intellectuals but also of a large section of the people—Imre Nagy—was allowed to rejoin the Party, that was all; nothing more happened on the political scene. Half of the Politburo, including Gerö, Kádár and Hegedüs, went on a state visit to Yugoslavia for a full week. In the event it was the disturbances in Poland and the Soviets' threatening gestures against Gomulka's return to the top leadership which provided the detonator for the explosive accumulated tensions in Hungary. On 23 October students demonstrated their solidarity with Hungary's traditional friends, the Poles.

As in 1848, so in 1956, intellectuals and students were the harbingers of the "unexpected revolution", of which Hannah Arendt rightly wrote "that never before had a revolution attained its goals so rapidly, so thoroughly and with so little bloodshed".[27] Since then thousands of works by Hungarians and foreigners—books, pamphlets, studies, essays by participants and eyewitnesses—have been published on the course and consequences of these events. All serious presentations agree that the numerous propaganda writings of the Kádár regime between 1957 and 1988 told little of the truth about the fundamental questions.

October 1956 was a natural political phenomenon without a focus, without a concept and without coordinated leadership. That the almost 900,000-strong Party was a colossus with feet of clay that, apart from a few functionaries, evaporated from one day to the next was proved by the events that took place between 23 October and 4 November. The key players in the armed clashes were mainly young workers, students and soldiers, but also members of the so-called "*lumpenproletariat*". It was the people from the "streets of Pest" (*Pesti utcán*)* who fought with weapons in their hands from

* This was the title of a moving collection of portraits of young men and women sentenced to long prison terms after the defeat of the uprising.

the beginning to the bitter end against superior forces, and who can be hailed as the real heroes of those tempestuous days. This time too, as so often in Hungarian history, hero and traitor—Imre Nagy and János Kádár—played contrasting symbolic roles which were also politically decisive.

We know today from original sources that after the outbreak of the spontaneous uprising the situation in the centres of power in Moscow and Budapest changed not merely from day to day but often from hour to hour. Politburo members, even the chief protagonist Khrushchev, wavered in their opinions, which changed during a single meeting as they strove not to endanger their own positions.[28] In Budapest the reformers, led by Imre Nagy who strictly adhered to Party discipline, wanted a correction of the system, not its abolition. Hardly anyone within his closer circle and among his thousands of convinced followers suspected that in the Hungary of the autumn of 1956 a correction was tantamount to the end of the system.

Yet during the evening of 23 October Nagy's first meeting in front of the Parliament with a vast crowd of people estimated at 200,000 showed that something hitherto unheard-of in a Communist country was in the offing. His opening word "Comrades!" was answered by whistles, and his mollifying, pedestrian explanations by obvious disappointment. Hours before shots were aimed at the demonstrating people in front of the radio building, and before the appearance of Soviet tanks summoned by the panic-stricken Gerö, a popular rising had begun. This elemental outburst of rage by the Hungarian people against the symbols of dictatorship and foreign rule, combined with the panicky and provocative reaction of Party leaders blinded by their monopoly of power, caused events in the capital and later all over the country to run out of control. Particularly intolerable were the lies put out over the radio about a "counter-revolution"; these focused the young people's unbridled rage on the mendacious political puppet-show by Rákosi's heirs, further increasing their resolve. Alexander Solzhenitsyn expressed this aptly in his acceptance speech when presented with the Nobel Peace Prize for Literature in 1970: "Force can only shroud itself by lies, and lies can only be upheld by force." To most Hungarians Imre Nagy was a symbol of new departures. Those who demanded

among other things his appointment as Prime Minister on that radiantly beautiful, memorable autumn day hoped to gain from a Nagy government free elections, a free press, the reintroduction of Hungarian national holidays and national symbols, and, after the early evening hours, negotiations for the withdrawal of Soviet troops.

As it turned out, the sixty-year-old bearer of the people's hope was installed as Prime Minister during the night of 23 October, but he remained at first a prisoner of his past and his surroundings in Party headquarters. Isolated from the "Pest streets", from the young people who had taken up arms, he too appeared to represent the Soviet-dictated hard line; he too spoke in his radio address about counter-revolution. On 25 October Kádár replaced Gerö as First Secretary on the initiative of Mikoyan and Suslov, who were staying in Budapest from 24 to 31 October, yet the fighting continued, and what occurred in the fantasy world of the Party committees in their headquarters in Academy Street, encircled by Soviet tanks, became increasingly irrelevant.

Nagy, the vacillator, was in trouble. Exhausted, suffering from heart trouble, he was being crushed between the grindstones of his loyalty to the Party and the Soviets, his deep-rooted patriotism, the pressure from the streets and the personal urgings of his closest advisers. His popularity began to wane.

The change, linked to the name of Nagy, became apparent only on 27 October with the reshuffling of the government and the beginning of negotiations with the freedom fighters, who were no longer being labelled as counter-revolutionaries. Several thousand young people compelled this change of course because they were determined to fight till the very end, and because they enjoyed the moral and frequently also the practical support of the population. The Soviet leadership and their dogsbodies—now at the helm of a disintegrating party—had to acknowledge with a gnashing of teeth that in the midst of the Soviet bloc's greatest crisis, the lifelong Communist and Muscovite Imre Nagy was choosing the side of the people. The three core points that Nagy decided on for himself and the country were: first, the events were not a counter-revolution but a national, democratic revolt encompassing the entire populace (28 October); secondly, this urgently necessitated re-introduction of

the multi-party system, dissolution of the CP and establishment of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party; and thirdly it necessitated too a proclamation of neutrality and withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact (1 November). An armistice came into force on 28 October, and for 150 hours Hungarians lived in a virtually surreal overall mood of expectancy. But after initial to-ing and fro-ing the die was cast already on 31 October in Moscow in favour of a massive intervention, i.e. before Hungary's withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact and proclamation of neutrality could come into effect.

When on 29 October Nagy moved from Party headquarters to the Parliament building a few hundred metres away, he gave a signal to the Party and perhaps to the world: that the political centre should henceforth no longer be the Party but the government residing in the tradition-hallowed Parliament. But the free world, which had waited so many years for such an event that would weaken the Soviet sphere of influence, was at that moment focused on something quite different: the closure of the Suez Canal by the Egyptians and the anachronistic reaction to this from Britain and France. The Hungarians, as so often in their history, had to rely on themselves and were left to the mercy of an oppressive hostile power.

In his efforts to unite the reformist élite and the people in this terribly difficult, nerve-racking and deadly-dangerous tightrope walk, Nagy believed that he could rely on the active support of the First Secretary, János Kádár—or so it seemed at the beginning of November. On the evening of the 1st, the Nagy government's Minister of State*—Kadar—extolled the Communist intellectuals and youths as "the driving impulse behind the glorious rebellion" against "Rákosi's despotism and political gangsterism".[29] At the time when this recorded speech was broadcast, Kádár and the man who had set up the defection—Minister of the Interior, old Communist, Spanish Civil War veteran and Soviet agent, Ferenc Münnich—were probably already on their way to Moscow. They had decamped from Parliament in the early afternoon to the Soviet embassy.

Preparations for the crushing of the freedom fight by the Soviets were entering their last phase. Britain and France, the Western

* The Minister of State was a minister without portfolio but in an elevated position. This designation was used both before and after 1945.

powers engrossed in the Suez adventure, as well as the United States as "onlooker without direct interests" (Henry Kissinger), gave the split Soviet leadership virtual *carte blanche* in Hungary. Tito condemned the first Soviet intervention but endorsed the second one. The leaders of the satellite parties, even including Gomulka in Poland, supported the Soviet measures.

On a foggy, damp and chilly Sunday, 4 November, at 4 a.m. Soviet tanks began their general attack on Budapest. The freedom fighters, although they numbered about 10,000, had no chance against the overwhelmingly superior forces. The Hungarian army remained in barracks. Many young Hungarians put up a desperate resistance.

Most of the 2,700 officially registered dead and 19,000 wounded had originally taken up arms in the naive expectation of Western aid. Encouraged by Radio Free Europe's ambiguous commentaries with the general drift that the West and the United Nations would not leave Hungary in the lurch, phantom hopes were being aroused. Only gradually did the Hungarians appreciate the moral bankruptcy of the "Western liberation concept" as represented by President Eisenhower and Secretary of State Dulles. Details of the Tito regime's two-faced attitude did not come to light till many years later.

Prime Minister Imre Nagy, who had accepted the "sanctuary" offered by Yugoslavia on the morning of 4 November 1956 and fled with his forty-three closest associates to its embassy, did not know that it was nothing but a put-up job. From the memoirs of the former Yugoslav ambassador to Moscow, Veljko Mičunović, it is clear that all the details of the intervention, including who would be the next party and government chief, had been discussed between Khrushchev and Tito on the island of Brioni forty-eight hours before the attack. Accordingly, Nagy was supposed to be persuaded directly or indirectly from Belgrade during his stay in the embassy—from 4 to 22 November—to resign officially and to acknowledge the "workers' and peasants' government" under Prime Minister Kádár, set up on 4 November simultaneously with the Soviet attack.

The Hungarian people's tragedy of 1956–7 is in some ways reminiscent of the War of Independence in 1848–9. On this occasion as on the previous one, it was the Russians who brutally crushed a war of independence.

After 4 November 1956 János Kádár was the man of the moment. The playwright Háy once wrote of him: "His personality had a certain fascination, a fascination of weary compromise."[30] This observation might have been appropriate for the Kádár of the 1960s and '70s, but in the early days after his arrival in the shadow of Russian tanks, he was a traitor by definition, the stooge of a hated regime in the service of a foreign power. By contrast Imre Nagy became a tragic hero of Hungarian history. He, better than anybody, knew how tens of thousands had been consumed in the accelerating purge-machinery in Moscow and later in Budapest, and how the prosecutors and Communist journalists who built castles of falsehood, as was required of them, remained steadfast to the end. Perhaps he could still have saved himself by resigning by self-criticism, but in that historic moment he wanted to remain true to himself and to the idea of *his* October.

Now it was the turn of the Russians and especially Kádár. He repeatedly promised Imre Nagy and his friends safe-conduct, and immunity from punishment to the participants in the rising. The breach of these promises, the abduction of the entire Nagy group by the Soviets, their deportation to Snagov in Romania followed by their transportation back to Hungary in April 1957, and finally the secret trial and execution in June 1958 of Nagy, General Maléter, the journalist Miklós Gimes and others, remained for three decades an ineradicable moral burden of guilt on the Kádár regime. The fact that during a year and a half no communiqué appeared about their whereabouts and fate, and that even their closest relatives, interned in Romania, had no news of them until their trial, add the final touch to this picture of barbaric retribution.

Of course, this was not confined only to the main characters. After the smashing of the workers' councils, which had resisted for weeks, and after the protest actions of intellectuals and students, 22,000 individuals were condemned, of whom 229 were executed for their part in the Revolution: far more than after 1848–9, more than after the fall of the Soviet Republic in 1919, and even more than after 1945.[31]

However, there was a double standard in operation. The supreme of the torturers Gábor Péter, the Party representative in the Secret Service, ex-Minister of Defence Mihály Farkas, and his son Vladimir

Farkas, who as a lieutenant-colonel had been responsible for the torture of many innocent people, were released already as early as 1959–60. According to the memoirs of the son, the two Farkas lived in a prison that resembled a two-star hotel.

Imre Nagy became transformed in the view of history from a servant of evil into the martyr of the nation and of the fight for freedom. In his closing words at the trial, before being executed on 16 June 1958, he did not ask for mercy but defended his actions which, he said, would ultimately be judged by the Hungarian nation and the international workers' movement.

The events of 1956 were a spontaneous uprising which rapidly expanded into a revolution aimed at overturning a system forced on the population from outside, and which in two phases finally led to an unwinnable war of independence. It was, in the full meaning of the word, a clean revolution. No looting took place, there were no anti-Semitic actions to speak of, although the "leading quartet" and most of the high-ranking officers of the Secret Police in the worst times were of Jewish origin, and there were only sporadic acts of revenge against officers and soldiers of the State Security and police, claiming some innocent victims as well. The government and the freedom fighters categorically condemned lynch law. It was precisely because the aim of this "anti-totalitarian" Revolution was not to restore the pre-war feudal-capitalistic system, and because the Communist regime was swept away by those who had professed to represent it, that the Hungarian autumn had such enormous historical significance.

As in the case of the great freedom fights of the past—the Rákóczi uprising of 1704–11 and the War of Independence of 1848—victory on the battlefield (which this time happened to be the streets of Budapest) was denied, in spite of such a great national show of strength. But the fame of this courageous small nation reverberated all over the world. Of the 210,000 Hungarians who fled—many of the leaders escaped to Austria and some to Yugoslavia—only 40,000 returned to Hungary.

The trauma of Russian repression belongs just as much to the self-image of Hungarians as the memory of how in 1849 and after 1945 the West had left the small country to its fate. The defeat of 1956 opened up old wounds. It has also to be remembered that for

many the anti-Russian propaganda of the Horthy regime had been retrospectively confirmed by the inconceivable behaviour of the Red Army towards the civilian population, and that even the leading Communists despaired of this in 1945. Already on the first evening of the Revolution the crowd burned books about Marx, Lenin and Stalin and pictures of them, and loathing of the cult of Stalin, the Soviet Union and foreign rule generally—which, if simply bearing them were not enough, had to be constantly praised—erupted again and again everywhere. Resentment against the Russian superpower, now the Soviet Union, was nowhere as strong in the "fraternal countries" (apart from Poland) as in Hungary. This is hard to understand unless one also understands the psychosis of a defeated nation.

Coming, as it did, after the 1953 workers' uprising in Berlin, the Hungarian Revolution intensified the push for national and personal liberty into an enormous explosive force, inflicting immense loss of prestige on the Soviet Union and the cause of world Communism. Although Tito had betrayed the originally Yugoslav-supported reformers around Nagy, placing himself squarely on the side of the Kádár-Münnich group, he also gave vent to the bitter truth in a public speech made at the time in Pula: "Socialism has been compromised." A long and winding road, mostly concealed and covert, led from Budapest 1956 to the Prague Spring in 1968 and the Polish Solidarity movement in 1980, which in turn gave an unmistakable impetus to the intellectual and subsequent political ferment in Kádár's Hungary, by then "the merriest barrack of the Socialist camp".

During the time of the revenge campaign, of course, especially after the shock of the totally unexpected secret trial of Nagy, the generally gloomy situation recalled the bitter cry by the great poet Mihály Vörösmarty in 1849: "No more hope! No more hope!" Just as it had been a century earlier, all that the oppressed and gagged country received was rhetorical comfort, particularly from the hypocritical political theatre of the United Nations. It took six years before international pressure achieved at least a comprehensive amnesty for political prisoners in Hungary. The politically inflated price, exploited for propaganda, was the cancellation of the annual debate on Hungary from the UN agenda.

In a strange transformation the hated "Gauleiter from Moscow" became over the years and decades the "father of the nation", respected even by some of his erstwhile victims, and the universally despised stooge of a superpower became an internationally respected statesman. And as early as the 1960s, Hungary changed from the "Sick Man of the Eastern Bloc" to its figurehead. A well-known Polish writer described his impressions in the '60s after his first visit to Hungary since 1956:

> I do not understand why my Hungarian colleagues are so dissatisfied. Look at the lavish shop-windows, the price tags, inquire who has travelled abroad and how often, listen to the tone and the openness of the press! Almost everything is incomparably better than it is with us, let alone the astonishing popularity enjoyed by Kádár as opposed to Gomulka. We won in October 1956, but in the long run we have lost. The Hungarians lost at the time, but in the end they have won.[32]

The question that was already being asked at the time and was frequently repeated later was: although the popular rising had been defeated by force of arms, had it in fact gained a victory after all? In hindsight, and on the basis of documents available today, this question can definitely be answered in the negative. Given the realities in the Eastern bloc, Kádár was not able to achieve what Imre Nagy had stood and died for—a democratic multi-party system and genuine independence—but he had not striven for that. In spite of progress on all fronts, the fundamental fact remained that his "Revolutionary Workers' and Peasants' Government" was born on 4 November 1956 and became viable only by way of a constitutional fiction. Despite all concessions, the regime had to maintain that fiction for almost thirty-three years because it was what it lived by. The events of 1956, Kádár's repeated treachery *vis-à-vis* Imre Nagy and his real role behind the scenes in the Rajk case remained taboo topics until the end of his regime. Nonetheless, despite the past, it has to be admitted that this professional functionary became—next to István Bethlen, and possibly even more so—the most successful and certainly the longest-serving Hungarian politician of the twentieth century.

In November 1957 the then forty-four-year-old János Kádár had to start from scratch, and without illusions rebuild the state party. The profound distrust of the workers and intellectuals was clear

from the extremely small membership of the newly-established "Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party"; by December 1956 it had attracted only 103,000 members. Less than 300,000 old members rejoined by the deadline of 1 May 1957. A Deputy Minister of the Interior of the time estimated the number of actual "class enemies" (former landowners, kulaks, merchants, priests, officers and public servants) at 700,000. Therefore, according to the official admission, "active enemies" still far outnumbered convinced supporters of the Party.

That policy of constant improvisation, of cautious reforms within the framework of monopolistic power, satisfying the people's need for more affluence and a little more freedom, the policy of "whoever is not against us is with us"—all that was later to be called "Kadarism"—began only in 1962–3. However, it bore relatively plentiful fruit within a relatively short time. With the aid of a $600 million long-term loan from the Soviets and other Eastern bloc countries and the boosting of small private enterprises by tax concessions and other measures, the real wages of workers and of other strata rose considerably. By 1960 *per capita* income was already 20–25 per cent higher than in 1956. Privatization and de-politicization proved for a long time to be the most important pillars of the system.

The lack of help from the West in October and November 1956 and the probability that its Suez adventure had contributed to the decisive victory of the interventionists in the divided Moscow leadership caused deep disappointment both to the élite and to the man in the street. Thus political resignation engendered by salutary disillusionment may well have contributed just as much to the consolidation of the Party's regained power as the crushing of the opposition. The interaction of various factors—a change in the foreign policy climate, unlimited Soviet support (after March 1957) combined with Khrushchev's victory over his Stalinist rivals in June 1957 and, last but not least, the widespread apathy of the people—provided the Hungarian Communists with time, opportunity and the necessary elbow-room for a complete "overhaul" of the Party and the state. The thaw and the marginal concessions (professional advancement without Party membership, greater tolerance in cultural life and the abatement of day-to-day harassment) led to a

process of consolidation and normalization, which no one would have dared to anticipate in 1956. The peculiar truce reached its seeming peak as early as 18 October 1964 when Kádár paid warm tribute his "paternal friend and elder brother" Khrushchev after the latter's unexpected fall from power. He stated in this famous speech that the Hungarian CP's moderate political line would not change by an iota—a statement that caused a sensation at the time and strengthened his popularity. Nothing could have illustrated the process of change better than the fact that the two most hated men of 1956 were regarded as the guarantors of relaxation eight years later.

The freedom to travel to the West, which was of immense psychological importance, contributed greatly to the acceptance and growing popularity of the regime. In 1954, 3,040 Hungarians (functionaries, officials, sportsmen and, believe it or not, ninety-five private individuals) were permitted to travel to the West. In 1958 the number had grown to 15,500, in 1962 to 65,000 and in 1963 to more than 120,000. Hungarians in exile in Vienna, Munich and Zurich called it "Kádár's revenge" when more and more of their friends and relatives appeared on their doorsteps. By 1986 the number of travellers to the West had risen to 708,000.[33] Hungary was far ahead of the other Eastern bloc countries in regard to access to further education, priority of specialized knowledge over the red Party book for various positions in industry and administration, and a tolerable climate for small businesses.

One should not underestimate with hindsight the enormous significance of Kádár's style of leadership and government. A point in favour of his achievement as a politician was that, without ever questioning the basis of a one-party dictatorship or absolute loyalty to the Soviet power structure, he was able to obtain in part active cooperation and in part benevolent toleration of the regime by wide sections of society. He became popular because he could get the Party to accept the principle that one should not promise the people a bed of roses but tell the truth, even when it was unpalatable. His style as an orator was also a welcome respite from the tone of Stalinist times. In place of overpowering political jargon he used normal, everyday expressions, often mentioning the break with the past; he would chat, exhort, mock and tell anecdotes. Never a

"covert" democrat, he was a cautious reformer, a tactician with an uncanny political instinct, a gifted technician of power who understood that, despite its monopoly of power and Soviet backing, the Party could not in the long term operate in a political vacuum.

Kádár's almost puritanical lifestyle, personal modesty and sense of humour even gained him the temporary favour of the great poet Gyula Illyés and the national populist writer László Németh. At the same time he was publicity-shy and disliked talking about himself—and being flattered by others. In contrast to the other leaders in the Eastern bloc, Kádár was strongly averse to any form of personality cult. No pictures of him hung in public offices, nor were his photos carried during parades.

Little was and is known about this man who governed the country for thirty-two years. Even the biography planned as an introduction to an English-language collection of his speeches was published only after a formal resolution of the Politburo in spite of Kádár's categorical refusal even to consider the project. In the end the author of the biography was permitted only three days to talk to him without using a tape-recorder or taking notes. The book of course ignored most of the compromising material about the past.[34] Maybe the time is not yet ripe for a balanced judgement, in the form of a biography, about the illusions and lies, promises and traps, tragedies and treason, successes and finally failure of this unusual man, who for longer than anyone else helped to shape Hungary's history. That is also valid for the ups and downs of his relationship with Leonid Brezhnev during the eighteen years of "immobilism" in Moscow. It is unclear to this day to what extent Kádár encouraged and supported, or criticized and (according to the latest Russian publications) betrayed, the "Prague Spring" and specifically Alexander Dubček, whom he had met on nine occasions between January and August 1968.

The encouraging economic reforms were gradually watered down after the invasion of Czechoslovakia on 21 August 1968, in which Hungary participated with two divisions. And Kádár himself became the target of a campaign orchestrated by the Soviets with local "blockheads"—some of it, of course, conducted surreptitiously. New sources indicate that between 1972 and 1974 he was able to save himself only by agreeing to Soviet demands to remove

the most important reformers from key positions. Nonetheless he succeeded between 1978 and 1980 in booting out the Kremlin's moles, the "guardians of workers' interests", and pensioning off his longstanding number two Béla Biszku, nine years his junior, without giving any reasons for it. At the same time he was able to "save" his probably most important and personally most loyal adviser, the Politburo member György Aczél. Being the only Jew in the highest echelon, this old Communist, who had spent 1,868 days in prison under the Rákosi régime, had always been regarded by the Soviet leadership as unreliable. The subtle, often cynical and for a long time successful tactic of neutralizing and later winning over non-Communist or critical intellectuals was linked with his name. He helped many who were willing to compromise, and harmed the very few who would not do so within the framework of a complex triangle of support, toleration and prohibition (called in Hungarian the "Three Ts"). Although demonized by rightist-populists after the collapse of Communism as the true villain of the Kádár era, Aczél had contributed greatly to the creation of an island of measured and relative freedom in cultural life, in glaring contrast to the other Eastern bloc countries. In spite of this, Kádár and Aczél, as well as the entire top leadership with very few exceptions (namely Imre Pozsgay and Mátyás Szürös in the late 1980s), never regarded nationalism as a means of winning over the people, but rather as a factor of subversion against Communism.

What were the reasons for the peaceful collapse of the system, which only a few years previously Western publications had extolled as the "Communist wonderland"? Several factors transformed the political climate during 1987–8 to an extent which was nothing less than dramatic, spelling the abrupt end of "Kadarism". First, an economic crisis (inflation, investments on credit, a lowering of living standards, and increased poverty and social differences) eroded the confidence which had been the basis of the compromise between the regime and the people. Second, the Gorbachev-line and Moscow's new options in foreign and domestic politics, as well as the general bloc-wide decay of "real Socialism", especially in Poland, affected the Hungarian Party's claim to leadership. Third, the crystallization of a new alternative political élite into groups and parties such as the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF), the Free

Democrats (SzDSz), the Young Democrats (FIDESZ) and subsequently the reborn Smallholders, created the basis for a multi-party system. And finally the decline of the ageing Party leader's authority and the impact of a new political dynamics from Moscow opened the way to an intra-Party conflict, which was only resolved by a putsch against Kádár. His tragedy was that he had gambled away the chance of a dignified exit at a time and in a form of his own choosing.

The name of the man who contrived behind the scenes the removal of the afflicted Party chief's power, and of "his" Politburo before and during an extraordinary Party Conference on 22 May 1988, was Károly Grósz. This professional functionary, whom Kádár had appointed as Prime Minister a year earlier, was concerned not with the future of reforms but, like most other "apparatchiks", only with power. However, Grósz lost power barely a year later, and retired completely from politics after the liquidation of the Party.

Imre Pozsgay, Politburo member and the minister best known in the West, was the first publicly to come to terms with the events of 1956 by labelling them a "popular rising" and no longer "counter-revolutionary", thus anticipating the final report of a Central Committee team. However, Pozsgay subsequently proved a bad tactician, who probably lacked the nerve to split the party at the decisive moment. Now it was the radical reformers who set the pace towards a multi-party system and free elections. Miklós Németh (the Party's forty-year-old economic expert, elected Prime Minister in November 1988), Rezsö Nyers (the sixty-year-old creator of the "New Economic Mechanism", later demoted by Moscow at Kádár's request), and Foreign Minister Gyula Horn were the ones who, in the year of transition to Western-style democracy, set the agenda for two events which had worldwide political ramifications: the dismantling of the "Iron Curtain" along the border with Austria in May and, in face of furious protests from East Berlin, promulgating a government resolution on 11 September 1989 which allowed all East German citizens who had fled to Hungary free passage to West Germany. It was a courageous and farsighted decision, which at the same time marked the beginning of the end of the East German state, the GDR.

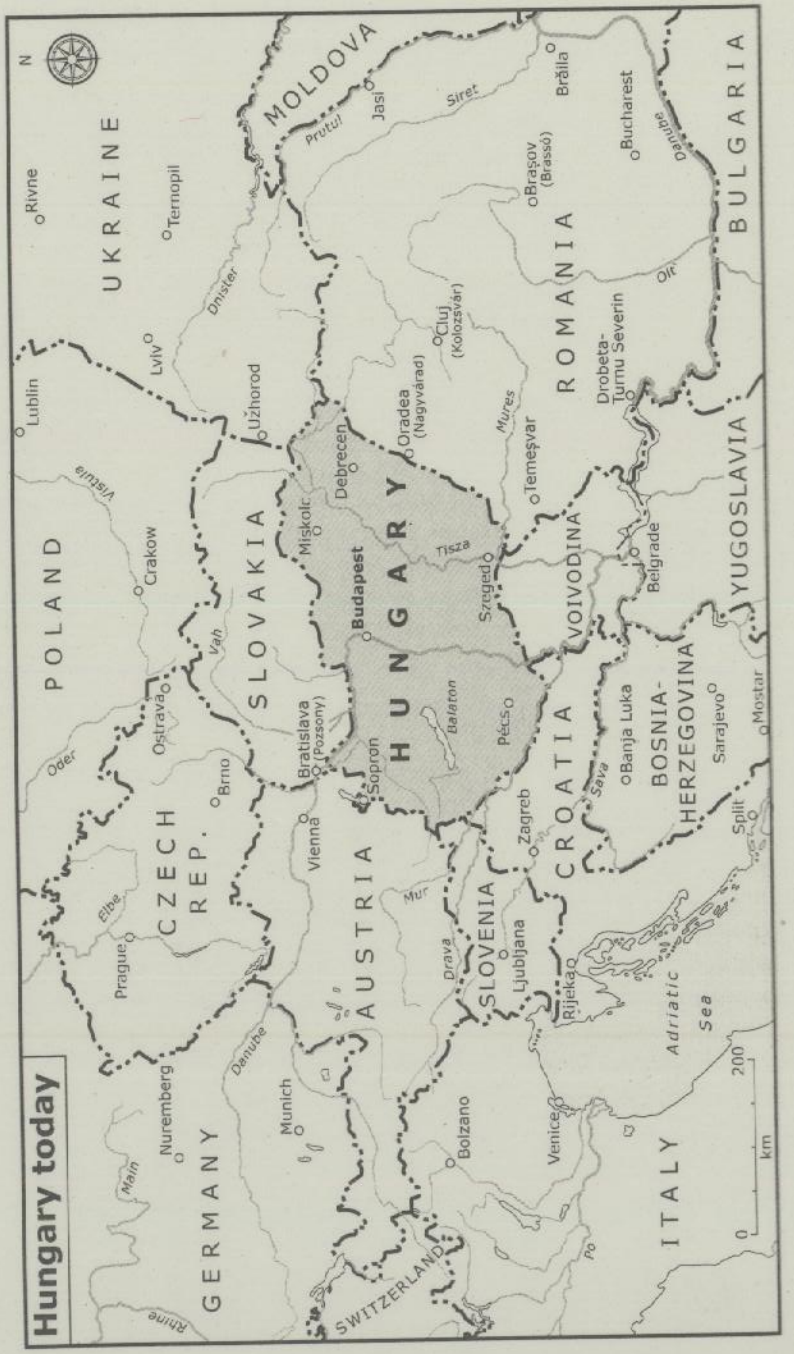
Precisely because the radical reformers accomplished an irreversible break with the Stalinist past on their own, the change of system

that followed did not take the form of a collapse but was achieved (as in Poland) by means of a "round table discussion" with the Opposition which opened the way to free, equal and secret elections. A Centre-Right coalition presided over by the historian József Antall won the elections and, backed by a parliamentary resolution reached by an overwhelming majority, terminated Hungary's membership of the Warsaw Pact and finalized arrangements for the withdrawal of Soviet troops. Ten years later the new Hungary became a member of NATO and applied for admission to the European Union, but that is another story.

The events of 1956 provide an inexhaustible source of spiritual, political and moral strength for the post-revolutionary generation as well. Only since 1989 has it been possible to speak of a "victory in defeat". 23 October was proclaimed a national holiday. The funeral of Imre Nagy and his four companions in misfortune on 16 June 1989, the thirty-first anniversary of their execution, in Heroes' Square, attended by hundreds of thousands of people, and their re-interment in heroes' graves in Plot 301 of the very cemetery where they had been unceremoniously dumped into unmarked mass graves, marked a watershed in Hungary's modern history.

And what of János Kádár? On 12 April 1989, now seriously ill, he made a rambling, totally confused speech of apology before the Central Committee. His allusions to his role in the Rajk trial, frequently interspersed with digressions and stereotyped phrases, and especially to his responsibility for the *volte face* in November 1956 and the execution of Imre Nagy could serve as a case for psychoanalytical study or as the subject of a stage-play. He described the "tragedy of Imre Nagy" as his "own personal tragedy". We do not know whether Kádár had watched the funeral ceremony for Nagy, which was broadcast nationally on television and radio, or whether by then he was already on his own deathbed. By an irony of fate he died on 6 July, the very day on which Imre Nagy was rehabilitated by the Supreme Court.

However, more than 100,000 people paid their last respects to Kádár by filing past his coffin, which lay in state in the entrance hall of the then Party building. All surveys conducted since the change of system show that people remember him as a jovial "father figure" and his times as a "Golden Age", ranking him, despite majority



disapproval, above Franz Joseph or Horthy as the most significant historical personage of the twentieth century.[35] The retrospective glorification of the Kádár régime, especially by the younger generation, this flight into collective amnesia, could be partly a reaction to the enormous problems of today—as everywhere in the former Communist world.

And Rákosi? A slender volume entitled *In Exile* appeared in June 1994 with a cover showing him as an elderly man sometime in the 1960s, as he goes with a bucket in each hand to the well in the Kyrghyz village of Tokmak, near the Chinese border. The author Eugenia Biró, sister-in-law of the dictator who died in 1971, protests in it against the "slandering" of Rákosi and calls for the "historical truth" about him to be told—but she doubted whether she would live to see that. In that prediction she was wrong: in contrast to Rajk, Nagy and Kádár, Rákosi has his place today fixed as one of the greatest political criminals, who appallingly betrayed the dreams of the tens of thousands on Heroes' Square of whom we wrote at the beginning of this chapter.

During the memorable funeral ceremony for Nagy in the same square on 16 June 1989 an unknown twenty-five-year-old bearded man spoke in the name of the younger generation. His name was Viktor Orbán. In an extraordinarily pointed speech considering the conditions of the time, he demanded an escape from the "Asiatic dead-end" Hungary had got into, negotiations for the immediate withdrawal of Russian troops, national independence, and political liberty. Nine years later, at the age of thirty-five, Orbán (now without a beard) became Prime Minister at the head of a Centre-Right coalition. He was narrowly defeated by a Socialist-Liberal coalition in the parliamentary elections of April 2002. However, this young and charismatic politician, who moved from a left-of-centre position at the start of his career to an increasingly nationalistic, neo-conservative one as Prime Minister, is certain to play a significant role in future Hungarian politics as well.