

Otto v. Habsburg

At daybreak on November 4, 1956, when Khrushchev's armies began their attack in Hungary, there were many in the Western World who secretly or even openly criticized the freedom fighters. They claimed that the Hungarians had been hotheads, and that they would have accomplished more through "moderation" and "diplomacy". What had happened was considered to be in part at least the responsibility of those who were crushed by the Russian tanks during those hours.

A time span of ten years separates us from this event. We are slowly beginning to reach a perspective and, for the first time, we have the possibility of formulating a historical judgement of our own. Such an evaluation is possible only over extended periods of time. He who judges events at the time of their occurrence assumes a great risk of committing an error. Keeping this in mind, it is possible today and even more so tomorrow to place past criticisms of the Hungarian uprising in their correct perspective. It will become evident that they were made on the spur of the moment. Those who criticized did, therefore, not recognize the significance of the great historical event which took place in the streets of Budapest.

No matter how hard it may be for the individual, ten years, which in his life time represent a tremendous span, are historically speaking scarcely more than a moment. The undulating motion of human development takes place over a relatively long period of time; therefore, the interdependence of cause and effect can only be fully comprehended after the span of a generation has lapsed.

Only thus can the events of 1956 be evaluated within the realm of world history. The Hungarian uprising has set forces in motion whose full impact is yet to be felt.

In November of 1956 a fact was frequently overlooked which today has already become a moving force behind the events. In the statement in which Khrushchev justified the entry of troops into Hungary, he referred to the consent given by the Chinese Central Committee. At that time this was considered to be a normal gesture of Communist solidarity.

In fact, however, it was the first grasp of Asia at Europe. The fact that the Russians had to refer to the Chinese, in order to commit their armed forces for action in the West, marked an important stage in the development of events. From this moment on, the weight of the yellow empire has been pressing down heavily on Soviet policy like a constantly growing mortgage. If such a situation of constraint had not been created by Hungary, it would have taken several years longer until the Russian-Chinese conflict would have assumed those proportions which today essentially contribute to an international relaxation.

Equally important, however, is also a second fact. In the streets of Budapest not only Hungarians lost their lives, but also one of the most important dogmas of the Soviet empire broke down. Until 1956, the Communist rulers of Central and Eastern Europe were thoroughly convinced that they were invincible in their domestic policy. They believed that, once in power, Communism could never be overthrown except by an external war. Budapest furnished evidence to the contrary. From this hour on, the totalitarian dictators were compelled to pay increased attention to the public opinion of their countries. The first step toward polycentrism was taken.

Budapest has decisively weakened the giant empire of the Soviets created at Yalta. If this fact has not produced any major and concrete effects as yet, this is largely attributable to the lack of ideas in Western policy which has failed to avail itself of the tremendous opportunities open to it. In spite of all this, the decline and fall continues, an achievement of the Hungarians and the other people of Central Europe who did not give up their hope for freedom.

If, at some time in the future, history will record the rise and fall of the Communist world empire, one of the most significant chapters might well bear the following title: "It started in Budapest". This can safely be stated today already. In Hungary forces were set in motion which can no longer be halted. Not one of those who fell in Budapest gave his life in vain.