

The Impact of 1956 on the Relationship between the Kádár Regime and the Peasantry, 1956-1966

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Nothing illustrates better the strength, political maturity and on occasion the wisdom of the Hungarian peasantry than the fact that it was able to realize its aspirations and satisfy its interests during the Kádár Era. From the second half of the 1960s on, it was customary in Hungary to brag about the achievements of Hungarian agriculture. The politicians who did this, however, failed to mention the decisive role that was played in the attainment of this success by the demands the peasantry voiced in 1956 and the gradual though reluctant granting of these by the Kádár regime. The compromise that had come about between the Communist Party and the peasantry in this period had dramatic precedents.

For us to arrive at a realistic assessment of the Kádár regime's agrarian policies we must make a brief survey by way of comparison of the principal elements of Hungary's pre-1956 agrarian politics, the peasantry's grievances and the demands that arose from these during the autumn of 1956.

The regime and the peasantry during the first half of the 1950s

The tactless and forceful attempt at the sovietization of Hungary's countryside and agriculture during the first half of the '50s left a deep mark on the practices and especially the mentality of the country's peasantry. This should not surprise us as the Rákosi regime's decisions impacted on every aspect of the peasants' existence. We can outline these decisions only in a cursory manner.¹

The regime continued and even expanded the system of compulsory deliveries that had prevailed during the war. The hardship this

system placed on producers increased from one year to the next. The tax burden on private farmers, especially the better-off ones, was increased exponentially. Disregarding all local precedents, the regime embarked on the establishment of large collective farms on the pattern of the Soviet *kolkhozes*. This process brought with it the consolidation of the cultivated fields that usually involved the expropriation of the lands of peasants who had not joined the collectives. These peasants were compensated with fields elsewhere, similar in size but often inferior in quality — and scattered at greater distances from the settlements. This practice created uncertainties for the producers and undermined the peasantry's sense of the sacredness of private property. Already during the early '50s, these and other measures resulted in the increase of incidents of traditional legal practices being violated. Moreover, in the establishment of the collectives the authorities began resorting increasingly to the use of physical violence. Thousands of peasants, especially the well-to-do ones, the so-called *kulaks*, were deported to internment camps, or were imprisoned — and their property confiscated.

The subjugation of village residents to unprecedented arbitrary measures did not result in open resistance but its negative consequences grew by leaps and bounds: hundreds of thousands abandoned agricultural work, more and more land went uncultivated, agricultural output declined — as did the productivity of the land. In the meantime tension grew throughout the countryside.

The changes that followed Stalin's death in March 1953 served to arouse expectations of better times and resulted in a declining chance of a violent explosion of resentment. In Hungary these changes were associated with the person of Imre Nagy. The "New Course" he announced in July 1953 involved a re-assessment of Stalinist agrarian policies and their partial "correction". The subsequent directives of Nagy's government significantly reduced the peasantry's tax burdens and compulsory deliveries. They also decreased the uncertainty involved in agricultural production. What was even more important, they allowed peasants to leave the collectives.

Hungary's population welcomed these changes, especially in the countryside where their impact was more direct and immediate. Soon it became obvious however that the rejoicing was premature. Hardly two years passed when in the spring of 1955 Nagy was forced from office as Hungary's Stalinist dictator Mátyás Rákosi regained power. He and his supporters returned to the policies that had prevailed before 1953. In the

agrarian sector this meant increase in taxes and deliveries, as well as the resumption of campaigns to drive people into the collectives. The new turn of events caused huge disappointment for the people of the country's villages.

As we mentioned, in the years before 1953 the individual and collective grievances of the peasantry did not lead to open rebellion. Active resistance did not manifest itself after the re-establishment of the old Stalinist order in 1955 either. Instead, the peasants availed themselves of various means of protesting at an individual level.² They made their deliveries late and failed to fulfil them completely. They resisted with renewed determination the demands that they enter the collectives. Even if they signed the declaration of intent to join, they kept postponing the act of joining for months and when they became members, they did everything possible to avoid collective work. In the summer of 1956, furthermore, in Hungary's western counties (especially in Zala, Vas, Baranya, Somogy and Győr-Sopron), where agriculture was traditionally more productive, attempts to leave the collectives multiplied.³ Recent research suggests that during the first half of 1956 despair and hopelessness kept increasing in the villages and a serious crisis was in the making.⁴

The revolution and fight for independence started on October 23rd with student demonstrations and the subsequent armed clashes. The revolution arrived in Hungary's villages after a few days of delay. In just about every settlement in the country, without any coordination from above, revolutionary activity started. This manifested itself in the establishment of new political organizations: national councils, revolutionary committees, national assemblies, etc., and in the election of new leaders. These new forums of authority defined the areas of their concern about which they expected the national government to take action. It speaks to the gravity of the accumulated tension that they did not compile suggestions and requests but presented demands.

It is enlightening to examine the documents that the assemblies of the villages drew up and accepted during the end of October and the beginning of November. If we compare these, the similarity of their contents is striking — despite the fact that these villages were often far from each other and they did not communicate with each other.

The demands of the villages can be divided into two categories. To the first of these belong those demands that coincided with the Revolution's fundamental goals. There are three basic demands that can be found in every document that hails from the villages. Namely, that Soviet

troops leave the country, the strong arm of the communist dictatorship (the hated secret police or Államvédelmi Hatóság) be disbanded, and that political parties be allowed to function freely. Among the second category of demands were those that emanated from the grievances of the peasants. When we examine these, we see that they called for the wholesale rejection of Stalinist agrarian policies. There were differences in emphasis, in the phrasing of these demands, but in essence they were the same. They demanded the end of forced collectivization, the restoration of the expropriated lands, the abolition of compulsory deliveries, and sharp reductions in taxes.⁵

It was this unanimity of demands that the Kádár regime, which had been established with Soviet help in November, had to consider and understand. This was not an easy task. In the rest of this study we plan to outline this process and the increasing inclination toward a compromise with the peasantry in the years after 1956.

The fate of peasant demands after the revolution's defeat

The tragic fate of the 1956 revolution had taught definitive lessons to both society and the regime in Hungary. The Hungarian people realized that they couldn't count on the West to achieve their aspirations and that their country had to remain a part of the Soviet bloc. At the same time Hungary's new leadership realized that they not only had to avoid repeating the excesses of their predecessors but that they had to make fundamental changes. The most important lesson the leaders of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (MSzMP) drew from the revolution was that the "building of socialism" could not come at the expense of the living standards of the country's masses. As János Kádár pointed out at the Dec. 2, 1956 meeting of the Party's Provisional Central Committee, "In connection with the solving of the [country's] economic problems, our policy is that, whenever we face a decision as to where the proceeds from production should go, the first priority should be the gradual increasing of the working people's living standards."

While the authorities from the close of 1956 on dealt with their enemies through the harshest of measures, they also sought the means of compromise with Hungarian society. In this respect the most effective tool proved to be the policies pertaining to the standard of living.⁷ This was in contrast to what prevailed before 1956 when the forced development of

the heavy and military industries was predicated on the low production of consumer goods.

The realization of the new policies regarding living standards in the early years of the new regime — and for some time even after — depended on the supply of foodstuffs, since the population spent much of their income on the buying of food.⁸ This is not surprising as the bulk of Hungarian society subsisted on little and often not very nutritious food not only before 1945 but in the 1950s. As a result, during the early Kádár era, people became interested in improving their nourishment.

The importance of supplying food to the masses made the improvement of agricultural output a significant goal for the regime. This involved giving incentives to the private producers who had the greatest potential for increasing overall agricultural production. To improve the relationship between the authorities and the agrarian sector of society the communist party first had to reduce the tensions that its previous policies had created. In this the regime found an effective tool in the emergency program that had been developed by the Agricultural Department of the Party's central organization. A draft of this program, through a historical coincidence, had come up for discussion with the representatives of the agricultural committees of the party's county leadership, on 22 October 1956, the day before the Revolution broke out.⁹ In this meeting existing agrarian policies were heavily criticized. This is indicated by some of the statements that were voiced: "Unfortunately the majority of the cooperatives produce less than the private peasants, they sell less, make less profit and they have to deal with more bureaucratic obligations."¹⁰ This conclusion was known at the time to statisticians, still its acknowledgement in public was very important. To this had to be added the following radical observation. "In the future we must not follow unthinkingly the experience of the Soviet Union in the establishment of *kolkhoses* but we have to take into consideration our own peculiar conditions... our traditions with cooperatives."¹¹

The participants in this meeting agreed that both the cooperatives and private producers had to be assured that they could carry on with their operations without arbitrary interference and that they would be allowed to profit by them. "In order to assure the producers that their work would be rewarded the present pricing system had to be revamped,... and the regime of compulsory deliveries abandoned."¹²

The Kádár government's very first directive regarding the agrarian sector redressed the greatest grievance of the peasantry by abolishing compulsory deliveries.

The government program announced on the 1st of November had already promised the ending of the deliveries. This momentous decision was brought about by certain circumstances. The government of Imre Nagy, recognizing the most important demand of the peasantry, on the 30th of October had proclaimed the abolition of compulsory deliveries. Kádár's Revolutionary Worker-Peasant Government did not dare to reverse this decision. The peasants were in the midst of gathering the harvest and were in possession of the produce, at a time when industrial production was at a halt because of the general strike in the country. To provoke a conflict with the peasantry under these circumstances could have had grave and unforeseen consequences.

Under these conditions the Kádár government not only did not rescind the decision of the Nagy government, but it wanted to create the impression that it was responsible for the abolition of compulsory deliveries. This is indicated by the fact that the order of the Presidential Council of 12 November, made the abolition of the deliveries retroactive to the 25th of October.¹³

In the fall of 1956, within a time-span of two weeks, the regime of compulsory deliveries was abolished not once but twice. The burden that had been placed on the shoulders of the peasantry during the war, came to an end. This burden had existed for more than a decade. After the war it continued, purportedly to assure the country's food supply and to enable the payment of reparations demanded by the victorious Allies; and, starting in 1949, they became more onerous in accordance with the demands of the newly introduced planned economy. With the abolition of the regime of deliveries ended a state of everyday dependency of the producers on the state. The result was a substantial improvement in the situation of producers.

It has to be pointed out that with this step a component of the planned economy was altered that up to then had been considered unalterable — and Hungary was the first to do this among socialist states.¹⁴ In the interest of consolidating its power, the Kádár regime gave up a mechanism that up to then enabled the communist state to gain possession of produce virtually without cost, and to transfer significant income from agriculture to industry.

With the dismantling of compulsory deliveries a situation emerged in which the state could gain access to agricultural produce only if it offered realistic prices to the producers. From this time on the state, instead relying on compulsion, established new bases for its relations with the producers, both the individual peasants and the collectives. It began to use market mechanisms and tried to make producing profitable for the people of the villages. After 1956 then, in an important sector of the Hungarian economy, the market and production for profit gained some limited legitimacy. Soon it became evident that the new system was more effective in supplying of the country's population with foodstuffs than the previous one had been.¹⁵

The Kádár government seemed ready to remedy the peasantry's grievances in other respects as well. The elements of its new agrarian policies were announced on November 27, 1956, in its proclamation to the peasantry:

The Revolutionary Worker-Peasant Government condemns fully the erroneous agrarian policies of the previous years, the aggressive collectivization, the harassment of potential members, and all the measures that had resulted in the setting-back of Hungary's agriculture by years. These measures had caused material and moral damage not only to the peasantry but also impaired the supply of foodstuffs to the workers and the people of the cities. The government has already abolished forcible collectivization... and the regime of compulsory deliveries.... The government is determined to use every means available to it to support that efforts of the peasantry to improve agricultural production and will provide economic support to both the collectives and individual peasants.¹⁶

This government proclamation promised to support both the private and the collective sector of the agriculture without any discrimination between the two. What is even more important, it left the decision to choose between the two to the peasants. This was strengthened by the directions issued by the Department of Agriculture for the leaving of the collectives and for their dissolution by the members.¹⁷

These promises were repeated in newer and newer directives that lightened the duties of the producers. They revoked the compulsory plans for planting and for the selling of produce according to state regulations. They made the buying of fire and hail insurance optional, abolished the

special "kulak-tax" and permitted, with certain restrictions, the selling and buying of land.¹⁸

As a result of these measures, two-thirds of the existing collectives dissolved themselves and, with that, several hundred thousand private agricultural units started functioning. The general trend was for formerly landed peasants to leave the collectives and those who originally had little or no land, to stay in them.

At the end of 1956 not only those people said no to the regime of *kolkhozes* who left the collectives but also those who, lacking other economic opportunities, had stayed in them. The fact was that the collectives that survived found that their members wanted them to function differently from the way they had functioned before. This amounted to a wholesale abandonment of the Soviet-style model for collectivised agriculture.¹⁹

This aspiration on the part of members of the collectives is not surprising since among the peasants' demands of the fall of 1956 we can find those that insisted on the complete independence of the collectives. They urged the enacting of legislation that enabled the creation of the widest range and variety for producer's collectives and assures their financial and administrative independence.

The Kádár regime supported these aspirations as indicated by the following passage of its November 27 proclamation: "The government deems it necessary that the law regarding the collectives should enable these to determine the conditions of their functioning and the distribution of their profits. The government does not tolerate interference in the affairs of the collectives."²⁰

In this changed atmosphere the collectives that continued functioning began formulating their own destiny in more and more aspects of their existence. They searched out the more effective forms of producing and they regulated their lives according to their local circumstances.²¹ The democratically elected leadership in more and more places took on arguing with the local authorities, especially those of the Party which out of old habit wanted to exercise the principle of Party supremacy.

The greatest ambition of the co-operatives' members was a regular and adequate income. Instead of waiting for being allocated certain work units after the end of the financial year, the cooperatives switched to rewarding the members with shares of the produce. This was done through the traditional means of share-cropping or through related systems of reward.²²

The most important consequence of the above initiatives by the members of the collectives was the fact that they got income throughout the year either in form of cash or through receiving a share of the produce harvested. Through this the needs of the members were met before those of the state or local authorities.

As the Party was reconstructed after 1956, it took a survey of the transformation that had taken place in agriculture. The changes they discovered in the functioning of the collectives that had survived generated a lot of argument among the Party leaders. The conservative elements of the leadership vehemently attacked the initiatives that had been taken in the collectives as they saw in these the implementation of "capitalist means" — and they argued that it was not possible to build socialism by capitalist methods.²³ At the same time another faction of the leadership, those with a reform spirit argued that through the implementation of formulas that allowed the members to profit through their work they would become interested in increasing the collectives' output and efficiency, and all this would serve the interests of the state as well.²⁴

Collectivization through new methods

In the first half of 1957 it seemed that the HSWP expected Hungarian agriculture to come be multi-sectored in the long run.²⁵ The emphasis had been put on the increase of produce rather than the re-establishment of big collective farms. At the end of 1958 however, came a sudden change in the Party's agrarian policies. On pressure from the Soviet Union the Party set out to complete the transformation of Hungarian agriculture into large-scale collectivised agriculture.²⁶ For the peasantry this was the third occasion in a decade that it became obvious that the communists would tolerate the practice of individual farming only on a temporary basis. The disappointment was again great.

The winter of 1958-59 was a difficult time for the Communist Party of Hungary as well. First of all, the acceleration of collectivization meant that the earlier promises made to the peasantry had to be abandoned. Secondly, the Party had to cope with the fact that the memory of the forced collectivization campaigns of the past were still vivid both among the peasants and among the party functionaries. The latter had not forgotten the failures of these campaigns. But the new campaign was

important: the Kádár regime had to prove its ability to rule Hungary in the eyes of the Kremlin.

At the beginning of the new collectivization campaign during the winter of 1958-59 only 13 percent of the country's land was in the hands of the collective farms. By the end of March, 1961, this had increased to 71 percent. Concomitantly the number of collective members had grown in the first three months of 1959 from 200,000 to 500,000, during the winter of 1959-60 from 500,000 to 900,000, and finally, during the following winter from 900,000 to 1,200,000. This meant that from 80 percent of the people being in the private sector of the agrarian economy at the beginning of the campaign, by the time of its completion 75 percent of the peasants were members of collectives.²⁷

Precisely because the transformation was so important, the Kádár regime, in addition to old measures of compulsion, used new, innovative means of achieving success. Unlike in previous campaigns which focused on the poor peasants, the government looked to the more experienced and knowledgeable small and middle elements of the peasantry as their potential base. The men in charge of the campaign first approached the most respected men in the villages and tried to convince them to enter, hoping that the others would follow their example. In this way they expected to accelerate the new transformation of the countryside. This method assured the village elite that it would not be displaced from its place in the social hierarchy. While in the 1950s the regime usually placed politically reliable city dwellers at the head of the collectives, now such positions were often awarded to a local farmer. An important aspect of this process was the fact that entry into the collectives was open also to the peasants who used to be deemed "kulaks" in the 1950s. They could even join the leadership. To gain the support of the peasantry, the land that was brought into the collective remained nominally in the possession of the peasant, who had nevertheless to be paid a fee for such land. It was also proclaimed that every collective member had to be given a certain amount (up to half a *hektar*) of household land for his private use. This land would play an important role in supplying each household with its basic food needs. Also important was the fact that members of the collectives were made eligible for state pensions and the other benefits of the country's social safety net. From 1959 to 1961 relatively more — compared to previous practices — funds as well as technical personnel, were allocated to the agrarian sector of the economy.²⁸

On the surface the new collectivization campaign was successful, but in reality problems arose already during the process of transforming Hungary's agriculture. The defensive strategies that had been used by the peasantry in the first half of the 1950s re-surfaced. The villagers surveyed their chances of existing outside the collectives: if there was a chance of getting a job in industry, the most productive member of the family took that chance and the others, usually the wife and elder members, joined the collective. The person who represented the family in the collective often worked just enough to maintain the family's entitlement to the private household plot of land. Wherever the head of the household was unable to get a job in industry, he tried to get temporary work outside the collective. He would work illegally in construction, or undertook contract work in a nearby state farm. For such work pay was immediate.

The situation regarding labour in the village of Dúzs in Tolna County was not uncharacteristic of the general situation. Here according to a contemporary press report "... even the members of the Party left, at the time of peak demand for labour, for the neighbouring village of Szakály, to do some hoeing of corn for private producers..." At the same time in the collective the corn remained uncultivated to the end of the growing season. According to the report someone added to this story information on what the wife of the party secretary was doing all this time: "She spent the entire summer in their family's summer residence on Lake Balaton where she cooked for and did the laundry of house guests and brought home the proceeds to her husband."²⁹

The tendencies revealed by such anecdotal evidence are corroborated by national statistics.³⁰ As a result of the transformation of agriculture the number of people gainfully employed in agriculture declined by 350,000. Their proportion among the wage-earners declined from the 1959 figure of 42.5 percent to 35 percent by the end of 1962. The membership of the collectives also declined from the point of view of age and sex composition. In 1958 half the members were under 40, while at the end of 1961 two-thirds of the members were over 40, in fact 36 percent of them were made up of members over 60. The average age of a collective member in 1958 was 41, while in 1961 it was 52. Since most of the members who had left the agricultural sector had been men, the proportion of women engaged in agriculture increased also: from the 1958 figure of 26 percent to 38 percent in 1961.³¹

In addition to this the problems of work discipline worsened — especially in the newly established collectives. A good portion of the members (varying from 25 to 60 percent) took no part or took an inadequate part in the work of the collectives. Furthermore, the amount of work the members performed on the average kept declining from one year to the next. The number of work units performed by the average family in 1958 was 390, in 1959 it was 301, and in 1960 it was 169.³² Family members became less and less involved in the collectives' activities. It took years for the peasants to become accustomed to the new, collective work organization of the agricultural cooperatives.

To understand the labour problems of the collectives we have realize that the mechanization of production did not ante-date the exodus of manual labour but followed it with a considerable time-lag.³³ As a result of this in the majority of collectives detrimental co-relations developed between the available machinery and manual labour. Even though, when compared to previous collectivization campaigns, after 1959 the actual amount and the proportion of funding increased significantly, the provision of machinery could not keep up with the rapid increase in both the number a size of collectives.³⁴

Dialogue between the Collectives and the Authorities

Despite the success and quick conclusion of the collectivization campaign the Communist Party was faced with the issue of being able to force the peasants into a communal form of agriculture but not being able to ensure that they performed their duties diligently and conscientiously. On top of this it proved impossible to compensate within a short while for the departure of the thousands who had left the agricultural sector with the increased mechanization of the collectives.³⁵ The vast majority of these faced the problems of scarcity of machinery, shortages of labour, and an unenthusiastic and even disgruntled membership, and for years could not prove the superiority of large-scale production.³⁶ Under these circumstances the Kádár regime, that had promised to improve the food supply of the country, had to rely on food imports. This in a country that before 1945 had been a significant exporter of food. Between 1959 and 1962 Hungary had to import 227,000 tons of grains a year on average.³⁷

Early in 1960, on his return from a trip to Moscow, Kádár said the following about this problem:

The situation in connection with the production of grain is that in our [socialist] camp... is that... not only can we make no impact on world markets... but we can supply our own internal needs only with difficulties.... In this connection the opinion was expressed [in Moscow] ... that the first duty of every member of the socialist camp is to assure its own grain supplies. In this regard Comrade Khrushchev, speaking in the name of the Soviet delegation, announced in an unmistakably clear manner, that [the Soviet Union] could not assume in the long term the role of producing all the cereal needed and having everyone come to [it] for grain.³⁸

By 1961 it had become obvious: for the newly established collective farms to become true large-scale enterprises they had to overcome their problems. For the regime to achieve its food production objectives it would have to rely on the traditional strengths of the country's agriculture. These included the Hungarian peasant's eagerness for work, his diligence, as well as the capacity of his private household plot for production. We have to keep in mind that, until as late as the middle of the '60s, agricultural co-operatives were based on a traditional, handcraft-based production.³⁹

The regime was in a difficult situation. Because of its experiences in 1956 and its promises regarding a higher standard of living, it was compelled to make newer and newer compromises. What concessions it had given after 1956 to the collectives that had survived — concessions that many in the Party considered temporary — had to be extended to the newly re-established collectives as well, including share-cropping and premiums in kind made to the members. Through this "dialogue" with the regime, the members of the collectives gained the right to keep more livestock than the regime had originally intended. It has to be kept in mind that for the private farmers much of their income had traditionally derived from such sources. Such demands contradicted the Soviet, in particular the Stalinist model — as well as theory — of collective agriculture. Since the Kádár regime did not want to turn formally against these tenets, it tolerated the practices established in the collectives for the motivation of the members to produce more, but for many years did not sanction them formally through legislation.⁴⁰

According to official ideology, the essential elements of socialist agriculture were such things as work units, organization into brigades, work teams, etc., and anyone who wanted something else in their place —

as has been mentioned above — was an opponent of socialism. The acceptance of the contradiction between ideology and practice, and the institutionalization of the practices that had been developed, took place in stages. Instrumental in the development of policies that facilitated this process was an increasingly organized and vociferous agrarian lobby. Among those who played significant roles in it were Lajos Fehér, Ferenc Erdei, János Keserű, Ernő Csizmadia and János Hont.⁴¹

The resolution of this problem had started with the 16 February 1960 decision of the Party's Political Bureau that, on an interim basis, allowed the collectives to deviate from the use of the work unit system. With this decree the regime accepted those locally-produced solutions that were designed to take advantage of the membership's interest in material profit. "The Political Bureau considers it necessary that the remuneration of the workers according to the locally proven methods receive the widest possible dissemination.... What constitutes the best way of doing this has to be decided by the general meeting of the cooperatives in every case."⁴²

The Bureau's decision was closely connected to the change that had been implemented in the leadership of the Ministry of Agriculture where the dogmatically oriented Imre Dögei was replaced by the practically minded Pál Losonczi, the president of a cooperative. This decision signalled an important change in the Party's policies regarding the cooperatives. In the implementation of the new policy the greatest problem was caused by the fact that everything that provided incentives for the membership remained illegal as it conflicted with the laws governing the cooperatives.⁴³ To counteract this situation, a specific dialogue ensued between the cooperatives and the authorities.

Early in 1961 the Minister of Agriculture announced his proposals for the means of distributing the profits of the cooperatives and for the remuneration of the work of its members.⁴⁴ He proposed to accept those methods of rewarding and organizing work that had been practiced hitherto even though they had not been sanctioned legally. The Department of Cooperatives of the Ministry of Agriculture suggested in the spring of 1961 the following:

The cooperatives must receive further substantial assistance so that they can make the most of the work of their members, that they can use methods that had proven effective and though this they can implement the formulas for profit distribution and remuneration. The regular payment of advances have to be introduced everywhere. The way profits are distributed has to

be systematically monitored. Making use of the lessons learned, the proven methods have to be disseminated in ever widening circles.⁴⁵

In the dissemination of the profit-sharing and remuneration practices that had proved themselves effective an important role was played by the press. At the same time the members of the Party's Agitation and Propaganda Department organized local seminars for party and government functionaries to familiarize themselves with these practices.⁴⁶ That this was very necessary was revealed by the speech Lajos Fehér made on Dec. 20, 1961, before one of the Party's organs known as the Political Academy:

The initiatives of the cooperatives in regard to the distribution of proceeds deserve to be noticed and studied by the various organs of our Party. You should see to it that in every cooperative the methods of distributing the profits that are more conducive to interesting [the membership] in more effective production are propagated as fast as possible.... We must combat... those tendencies that try to protect the [traditional way of remunerating work through work units] against the [new] methods of providing incentives....⁴⁷

In the course of my research, I managed to discover the true dynamics of the dialogue between the state and the agricultural cooperatives. In particular, I found that from 1961 on, the formulation of the directives by the Ministry of Agriculture was always preceded by an analysis of the experiences of the cooperatives in the preceding year.⁴⁸ The directives for the new year were issued on the basis of these. For example for the year 1961 it was suggested that premiums be paid to members only in cases where such premium was due only in the case of the fulfilment of production plans. During the year it turned out however that this policy did not contain enough incentives for the membership and as a result for 1962 a more practical policy for the paying of premiums was introduced.⁴⁹

Parallel to these developments the Party's and the State's opinion of share-cropping also changed. In 1961 this practice had gone from being illegal to being tolerated — at least for the time being. From 1962 on its spread became legal, when the Party acknowledged that this practice too, served the interest of both the cooperatives' members and the

state.⁵⁰ By doing so in effect an old tradition that had its origins in feudal times gained acceptance. Interestingly this practice better served the interests of both the peasants and the practice of large-scale production than did previously employed routines.

One of the developments of 1962 was that the practice of cash payments to members became universal. With this a means of remuneration became accepted, one that had little to do with the system of work units. The Stalinist dogma, according to which the cooperatives could distribute their profits only through the principle of work units, was abandoned.⁵¹

The plans for the members' remuneration in 1962 was influenced by the fact that in that year the three-year ban of 1959 on withdrawal from the collectives was coming to an end. It could be expected that many of the people who entered then — since they did so under duress — would use this opportunity to leave. The new system of remuneration, as well as more widespread practice of share-cropping was expected to decrease the number of departures — and this is what happened.

The dialogue between the cooperatives and the authorities over the years resulted in the fact that practices introduced locally went from the illegal but tolerated category into the accepted and even state-supported one. Through this the collectives gained greater room for manoeuvre. The resourcefulness of the peasants thereby alleviated the impact of the system based on work-units as a result of which in more and more places the old dogmas of remuneration were circumvented. At the same time, because the management of the cooperatives from above adhered to the Soviet model, the return of the old ways was not an impossibility.

The knowledge of this fact, and the pressure exerted by the reformers grouped around Lajos Fehér, resulted in the undertaking by the Party's leadership of a comprehensive reform effort during the winter of 1961-62.⁵² The reform focused on three areas: the working out of new pricing, taxation and financing policies for agriculture, the review of the system of managing agrarian policies, and the formulation of new laws for the collectives.⁵³

The program of reform was worked out by 1963.⁵⁴ Its implementation was delayed beyond the winter of 1963-64 because the economic problems Hungary faced at the time both at the local and the national level. Nevertheless the mere existence of these plans had an energizing effect in the emergence of a movement for the reform of the country's agriculture. This movement resulted in the revamping of Hungary's

agrarian policies starting with 1966, two years before introduction of the famous New Economic Mechanism, a major revision of national economic policies that was introduced on 1 January 1968.

Conclusions

In the relationship between Hungary's communist regime and the peasantry 1956 brought new departures. While during the first half of the 1950s the country's Communist Party pursued aggressive, strife-inducing agrarian policies, the post-1956 Kádár regime tried to minimize and even resolve the many conflicts it encountered in its dealings with Hungary's agricultural producers.

This trend manifested itself already in November of 1956. The new government was compelled to realize that confrontation with the producers of the country's food supply, just when a general strike was paralyzing industrial production, could have disastrous consequences. This fact explains the new regime's apparent readiness to remedy the peasantry's most conspicuous grievances. Furthermore, the government even made promises that in the future it would respect the peasantry's tradition of the private farming and its right to the ownership of land on a small scale.

This approach to resolving the problems of the countryside existed, to a varying degree, not only during the period that followed the crushing of the Revolution but also during subsequent years. The leadership of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party had learned that the abuses that had led to the revolution of 1956 had to be avoided. Boosting the living standard in Hungary became a priority for János Kádár's government. Accordingly, increasing agricultural output and, in this connection with this, the providing of incentives to the producers, became crucial to the government. Because of the regime's commitment to improve living standards, the country's agrarian sector, and thereby the peasantry, attained greater strategic importance.

The relationship between the regime and the peasantry came under stress again when collectivization, as result of pressure from Moscow, reemerged as a policy at the end of 1958. The Party's leaders were faced with a dilemma and in order to make sure that agricultural production not suffer as a result of collectivization, they had to make concessions to the peasantry. This pragmatic approach was not the result of

conscious planning but was implemented as a byproduct of random decisions made in response to the developments in the countryside. The political decision-makers did play a role in it, as did the initiatives of the cooperatives and their membership. The policy came about as an interaction of pressures from above and below. As a result of the dialogue between the country's leaders and its agrarian society we can observe in Hungarian agriculture, from the early 1960s on, a cautious and gradual deviation from the Soviet model.

We have to emphasize however, that this departure from the Soviet-style *kolkhoz* pattern was never openly admitted by the Hungarian leadership. Kádár and his associates did not want to get into an ideological dispute with the leadership of the Soviet Communist Party; they satisfied themselves with implementing procedures that were at variance with Soviet agrarian practices. The result of this pragmatic approach to the solution of agricultural problems was the beginning of the development of a unique Hungarian model of collective agriculture. Yet the above-outlined duality of Kádarian agricultural policies continued into the late 1960s and beyond, and often caused strife between the regime and village society.

NOTES

¹ On the subject of the agrarian policies of the Rákosi era see Gyula Erdmann, *Begyűjtés, beszolgáltatás Magyarországon 1945-1956* [Compulsory collections and deliveries in Hungary, 1945-1956] (Békéscsaba: Tevan, 1993); Martha Lampland, *The object of labour. Commodification in socialist Hungary* (Chicago-London, 1995), 144-160; József Nagy, "A kulákkérdés és megoldása az 1948-1953-as években" [The "kulak question and its solution, 1948-1953], *Múltunk*, 1999, no 3. 41-97; József Nagy, "A szántóföldi művelés állami irányítása és a paraszti gazdálkodás feltételei az 1950-es években (1949-1956)" [The state management of production on the fields and the conditions of peasant husbandry in the 1950s] *Századok*, 2001, 5, pp. 1075-1124; József Nádasdi, "Tagosítások és birtokrendezések Magyarországon, 1949-1956," *Agrártörténeti Szemle*, 1992, 1-4, pp. 154-218; Sándor Szakács: From Land Reform to Collectivization (1945-1956), in: *Hungarian Agrarian Society from the Emancipation of Serfs (1848) to the Re-privatization of Land (1998)*, ed. Péter Gunst (New York, 1998), 257-298; Pál Závada, *Kulákprés. Család- és falutörténeti szociográfia Tótkomlós, 1945-1956* (Budapest: Szépirodalmi – Széphalom, 1991).

² About the special value systems and traditions of the peasants see Edit Fél and Tamás Hofer, *Arányok és mértékek a paraszti gazdálkodásban* [Ratios

and scales in peasant husbandry] (Budapest, 1997); Samuel L. Popkin, *A racionalis paraszt* [The rational peasant] (Budapest, 1986).

³ The crisis of the collectives became so serious that the Party's top leadership was obliged to ponder the problem. Magyar Országos Levéltár (hereafter: MOL) [National Archives of Hungary] M-KS-276.f. 53/298. őrzési egység (unit of records for keeping, hereafter ő.e.), Jegyzőkönyv a Politikai Bizottság 1956. augusztus 9-én tartott üléséről.; 276.f. 53/304, ő.e., I. kötet: Jegyzőkönyv a Politikai Bizottság 1956. szeptember 28-án tartott üléséről.

⁴ On the situation of the agricultural section during the spring and summer of 1956 see Iván Pető and Sándor Szakács, *A hazai gazdaság négy évtizedének története 1945-1985* [The history of four decades of the national economy] vol. I (Budapest: Közgazdasági és Jogi Könyvkiadó, 1985), 273-280; László Szántó, "A Somogyi összegzés kaposvári vitája," *Agrártörténeti Szemle*, 1995, 1-4, pp. 353-437; Varga Zsuzsanna, "A falusi társadalom feszültségócai az 1950-es évek közepén," *Múltunk*, 2006, 4 (in print).

⁵ Belényi Gyula, "Párhuzamos falurajzok. Kistelek és Mórahalom 1956-ban," in: '56 vidéken (Zalaegerszegen 1991. november 13-án rendezett Levéltári Napon elhangzott előadások), manuscript, Zalaegerszeg, Zala Megyei Levéltár, 1992. 12-22.; Béres Katalin, "Egy zalai kistalu a forradalom idején – Ozmánbük 1956. In: '56 Zalában (A forradalom eseményeinek Zala megyei dokumentumai 1956-1958) Zalai Gyűjtemény 40., Zalaegerszeg, 1996. 7-17.; Rainer M. János, "1956 és a magyar falu," *Medvetánc*, 2-3 (1988): 207-212.; Rainer M. János, "Budapest és vidék 1956-ban," *A vidék forradalma* (Az 1991. október 22-én Debrecenben rendezett konferencia előadásai) Debrecen, 1992, 37-48.; Tyekvicska Árpád, "Helyi forradalom. Önszerveződés Nógrád községben, 1956-ban," in: '56 vidéken, Zalaegerszeg, 1992.; Valuch Tibor, "Agrárkérdések és a magyar falu 1956-57-ben," *Évkönyv VIII.* 2000, Budapest, 1956-os Intézet, 286-302.; Attila Szakolczai and László Á. Varga, eds., *A vidék forradalma, 1956* vol. I (Budapest, 2003); Attila Szakolczai, ed., *A vidék forradalma, 1956* vol. II (Budapest, 2006).

⁶ *A Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt ideiglenes vezető testületeinek jegyzőkönyvei. I.* (1956. november 11–1957. január 14) (Budapest: Intera Rt., 1993), 151.

⁷ György Földes, *Hatalom és mozgalom, 1956-1989* (Budapest: Reform Könyvkiadó–Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1989), 49-73.; Péter Kende, *A párizsi toronyból (Válogatott politikai írások, 1957-1989)* (Budapest: Cserépfalvi, 1991), 79-95.

⁸ Valuch Tibor, "A bőséges ínségtől az ínséges bőségig – a fogyasztás változásai Magyarországon az 1956 utáni évtizedekben," *Magyarország a jelenkorban – Évkönyv 2003* (Budapest: 1956-os Intézet, 2003), 51-78.

⁹ MOL M-KS-288. f. 28/1957/5. ő.e., A KV Mezőgazdasági Osztályának előterjesztése a Politikai Bizottsághoz a mezőgazdasági politikában szükséges főbb változásokra. 1956. október 22.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Törvények és rendeletek hivatalos gyűjteménye, 1956 (Budapest, 1957), 62.

¹⁴ K-Eu. Wädekin, *Agrarian Policies in Communist Europe* (The Hague/London, Allanheld, Osmun Publishers; Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1982), 65.

¹⁵ MOL M-KS-288. f. 28/1957/13. ő.e., Az Élelmezésügyi Minisztérium előterjesztése az MSZMP Politikai Bizottságához az új felvásárlási rendszer eredményeiről és tapasztalatairól (19 November 1957).

¹⁶ *Magyar Közlöny*, 27 November 1956, 579-580. A Magyar Forradalmi Munkás-Paraszt Kormány felhívása a parasztsághoz!

¹⁷ *Törvények és rendeletek hivatalos gyűjteménye*, 1956, p. 263.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 68-69, 263-265.

¹⁹ This is supported by the documents related to the cooperatives of the Communist Party's Department of Villages (later, the Department of Agriculture). MOL M-KS-M-KS-288. f. 28/1957/1. ő.e., Feljegyzés a tsz-ek helyzetéről és legfontosabb problémáiról (10 January 1957); Jelentés a mezőgazdaság helyzetéről (26 January 1957); Jelentés a parasztság különböző rétegeinek problémáiról és a falusi pártmunkáról (18 February 1957).

²⁰ *Magyar Közlöny*, 27 November 1956, 580. This position was supported by the order of the Minister of Agriculture no. 65/1956 which concluded that only the membership of the cooperatives had the right to organize production and the sale of produce as well as the management of the co-ops. See the *Magyar Közlöny*, 27 November 1956, 580-581.

²¹ MOL M-KS-288. f. 28/1958/14. ő.e., A tsz-ek törvényes és alapszabályszerű működésének vizsgálata. (A Legfőbb Ügyészség összefoglaló jelentése).

²² MOL M-KS-288. f. 28/1957/2. ő.e., Jelentés az Intéző Bizottság számára a termelőszövetkezeti mozgalom helyzetéről (29 May 1957), 28/1957/17; ő.e., Megyei jelentések a termelőszövetkezeti mozgalom helyzetéről.

²³ MOL M-KS-288. f. 17/2. ő.e., Dögei Imre feljegyzése a mezőgazdaság szocialista átszervezésének néhány problémájáról. 16 April 1957.

²⁴ The advocates of the hard line in agrarian politics came not from the Party's Agricultural Department (headed by Lajos Fehér), but from the leadership of the Ministry of Agriculture, lead by Imre Dögei. On the debates between the two factions see Levente Sipos, "Reform és megtorpanás: Viták az MSZMP agrárpolitikájáról (1956-1958)," *Múltunk*, nos. 2-3 (1991): 188-197; Zsuzsanna Varga, *Politika, paraszti érdekérvényesítés és szövetkezetek Magyarországon 1956-1967* (Budapest: Napvilág Kiadó, 2001), 43-51.

²⁵ This was revealed in the document "Agrárpolitikai Tézisek" [Agrarian Theses] published in July 1957. See, *A Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt határozatai és dokumentumai 1956-1962* (Budapest: Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1973), 102-122.

²⁶ Ferenc Donáth, *Reform és forradalom* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1977), 166-175; Sándor Orbán, *Két agrárforradalom Magyarországon* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1972), 217-258; Iván Pető and Sándor Szakács, *A hazai*

gazdaság négy évtizedének története 1945-1985, vol. I (Budapest: Közgazdasági és Jogi Könyvkiadó, 1985), 440-454.

²⁷ Béla Fazekas, *A mezőgazdasági termelőségvetkezeti mozgalom Magyarországon* (Budapest: Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1976), 129, 137.

²⁸ Pető and Szakács, *A hazai gazdaság*, 441-454.

²⁹ *Népszabadság*, 26 Feb. 1961, Dúzsos sem más az igazság.

³⁰ MOL M-KS-288. f. 17/5. ő.e., A Központi Statisztikai Hivatal (KSH) feljegyzése a paraszti családok és a paraszti népesség számának alakulásáról.

³¹ *Mezőgazdaságunk a szocialista átszervezés idején, 1958-1962* (Budapest: KSH, 1963), 147.

³² *Mezőgazdasági Statisztikai Zsebkönyv* (Budapest: KSH, 1964), 272f.

³³ According to contemporary propaganda the process happened exactly the opposite way. In the daily *Népszabadság* the following picture was painted about the situation of labour shortage as late as the spring of 1963: "The decrease in the agrarian labour force was made possible by the increased mechanization of agriculture," *Népszabadság*, no. 83, 1963.

³⁴ While during the early 1950s the investment in agriculture amounted to between 10.5 and 13.3 percent of the investment in the economy, from 1959 to 1964 this ratio increased to between 18 and 21 percent. The real difference becomes obvious only when we add the fact that between 1958 and 1964 the actual amount of investment doubled, while from 1951 to 1953 the increase was much slower. *Mezőgazdasági Statisztikai Zsebkönyv* (Budapest: KSH, 1962), 135; and the same source for 1965, page 17.

³⁵ The decline in the opportunities for investment on the eve of the second five-year-plan affected also the agricultural sector by three billion *forints*. At the same time the sudden completion of collectivization in many areas — such as the mechanization of the cultivation of the soil, of transportation, etc. — should have required, as early as 1961 and 1962, the fulfilment of the plans for 1965. MOL M-KS-288. f. 28/1961/29. ő.e., A mezőgazdaság második ötéves tervének néhány főbb irányelve és megvalósításának fő feltételei. Manuscript.

³⁶ During the first five years of the reorganization of agriculture (1960-1965) production hardly reached the yearly averages attained during 1958-1959. For years the country's livestock, excepting sheep, continued to decline, as did the livestock's quality. On this see Pető and Szakács, *A hazai gazdaság*, 466-474.

³⁷ MOL M-KS-288. f. 5/354. ő.e., Jelentés az MSZMP Politikai Bizottsága részére a magyar-szovjet gazdasági tárgyalásokról (15 Dec. 1964).

³⁸ A Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt Központi Bizottságának 1959-1960. évi jegyzőkönyvei (Budapest: Magyar Országos Levéltár, 1999), 420.

³⁹ Fazekas, *A mezőgazdasági termelőségvetkezeti mozgalom Magyarországon*, p. 187.

⁴⁰ Zsuzsanna Varga, *Politika, paraszti érdekérvényesítés és szövetkezetek Magyarországon, 1956-1967* (Budapest: Napvilág Kiadó, 2001), 82-103.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 58-66.

⁴² MOL M-KS-288. f. 5/170. ő.e., Jegyzőkönyv a Politikai Bizottság 1960. február 16-ai üléséről.

⁴³ A Népköztársaság Elnöki Tanácsának 1959. évi 7. számú törvényerejű rendelete a mezőgazdasági termelőszövetkezetekről és a termelőszövetkezeti csoportokról. Törvények és rendeletek hivatalos gyűjteménye. 1960. 95-104.

⁴⁴ The Minister published such a document for the first time in 1961. See: "Javaslatok a jövedelemelosztás és munkadíjazás formáira a termelőszövetkezetekben," *Mezőgazdasági Értesítő*, 11 Jan. 1961, pp. 9-14.

⁴⁵ MOL M-KS-288. f. 28/1961/ 5. ő.e., Jelentés az FM Kollégiumához a termelőszövetkezeti mozgalom és megszilárdítás helyzetéről (1961. március 10.)

⁴⁶ In addition to the *Népszabadság* the periodical *Pártélet* is also worthy of attention.

⁴⁷ Lajos Fehér, "Erősítsük termelőszövetkezeteink szocialista jellegét," *Társadalmi Szemle*, 1961, no. 2., pp. 18-31.

⁴⁸ MOL M-KS-288. f. 28/1962/9. ő.e., Megyénkénti jelentések a termelőszövetkezetek anyagi ösztönzése és vezetése területén történt változások hatásairól.; 288. f. 28/1963/13. ő.e., Jelentés a Földművelésügyi Minisztérium Kollégiumához a termelőszövetkezetek jövedelemrészesedési és munkadíjazási tapasztalatairól.

⁴⁹ Javaslatok a jövedelemelosztás és munkadíjazás formáira a termelőszövetkezetekben. Az FM kiadása, 1962.

⁵⁰ MOL M-KS-288. f. 28/1963/5. ő.e., Feljegyzés a termelőszövetkezeteknél alkalmazott részesművelési és százalékos eredményességi részesedési rendszerről.

⁵¹ MOL M-KS-288. f. 17/6. ő.e., A Földművelésügyi Minisztérium Szövetkezetpolitikai Főosztályának feljegyzése a pénzbeni díjazást alkalmazó termelőszövetkezetek vezetőinek értekezletéről.

⁵² MOL M-KS-288. f. 5/245. ő.e., Jegyzőkönyv a Politikai Bizottság 1961. szeptember 26-ai üléséről; 288. f. 4/45. ő.e., Jegyzőkönyv a Központi Bizottság 1962. február 9-ei üléséről; 288. f. 4/47-48. ő.e., Jegyzőkönyv a Központi Bizottság 1962. március 28-30-ai üléséről.

⁵³ For further details see: Zsuzsanna Varga, "Mezőgazdasági reformmunkálatok (1961-1964)," *Múltunk*, 2000, no. 2., pp. 253-282.

⁵⁴ MOL M-KS-288. f. 5/322. ő.e., Jegyzőkönyv a Politikai Bizottság 1963. december 10-ei üléséről. Napirend: 1. Előterjesztés a mezőgazdaság állami irányító szervezetéről. 2. Előterjesztés a mezőgazdasági ár-, adó- és pénzügyi rendszer továbbfejlesztésének irányelveiről. 3. Előterjesztés mezőgazdasági politikánk kérdéseiről.

⁵⁵ MOL M-KS-288. f. 5/326. ő.e., Jegyzőkönyv a Politikai Bizottság 1964. február 4-én megtartott üléséről. Napirend: 1. Mezőgazdasági politikánk kérdései.; 288. f. 4/66-67. ő.e., Jegyzőkönyv a Központi Bizottság 1964. február 20-22-i üléséről. Napirend: 2. Mezőgazdasági politikánk kérdései.; in the same collection: 68. ő.e., Jelentés a Központi Bizottság számára a mezőgazdaság helyzetéről.