

The 1956 Hungarian Revolution: István Bibó's analysis

István Bibó – a scientist in struggle with inhumanity

1. It is the Hungarian People's duty «[...] to honor and safeguard – against slander, forgetting and fading – the banner of their Revolution, which is also the banner of a freer future for mankind.»¹

By the time these words were printed in Vienna, their author – a member of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution's government – had been imprisoned for more than three months in Budapest. István Bibó's eloquent admonishment, written in February-March 1957, appeared in the September 8, 1957 issue of Vienna's *Die Presse*.² A neutral country's diplomat delivered it there with the author's request: it should be published without any regard for the writer's personal situation. The Soviet-quisling Hungarian government's political police arrested Bibó on May 23, 1957. (This was his second time in jail. His first time was in an SS prison, fortunately only for a few days, during Hungary's German occupation in 1944, for illegally issuing – as a municipal court clerk – life-saving marriage certificates for Jewish Hungarians.) He was not tried until July-August of 1958. On August 2, he was sentenced to life imprisonment for «crimes committed by leading an organized attempt to overthrow the state order of the people's democracy, and other crimes».³ The indictment cited, as the most serious of his «crimes», that Bibó gave three of his writings about the Revolution to the embassies of NATO countries and that those texts were subsequently published in the West. One of those writings was *Magyarország helyzete és a világhelyzet* [The Situation of Hungary and the World],⁴ which ends with the testament cited above.

Life-term for words... tragically typical of the program with which the Kádár-

¹ The Hungarian Revolution of 1956 – Scandal and Hope. In: Bibó István: Democracy, Revolution, Self-Determination. Ed. Károly Nagy; translated by András Boros-Kazai, a postscript on Bibó's life and works by Sándor Szilágyi. New York 1989. The original Hungarian text of István Bibó's essay *Magyarország helyzete és a világhelyzet* [The situation of Hungary and the World] was first published by the Európai Petőfi Kör in: *Az igazság a Nagy Imre ügyben* [The Truth about the Imre Nagy Case]. Bruxelles 1959, pp. 168-178.

² Die Lage Ungarns und die Lage der Welt – Vorschlag zur Lösung der Ungarn-Frage. In: *Die Presse*. Wien, September 8. 1957, pp. 5-6, 39-30.

³ KENEDI János: Bibó István életrajzi adatai [István Bibó's Biographic Data]. In: *BIBÓ EMLÉKKÖNYV* [Festschrift for István Bibó]. Ed. Ferenc Donáth, János Kenedi et. al. Budapest 1980, p. 968.

⁴ Published in German translation by Vienna's *Die Presse* on September 8, 1957.

regime began its reign: waging years of vengeful terror of mass executions, mass imprisonments, purges and even deportation to the Soviet Union against those who participated in the 1956 October-November Hungarian Revolution.

In 1963 an amnesty was declared for most political prisoners and Bibó was released on March 27. But, working in a library, he was not allowed to publish or to travel abroad and was not politically rehabilitated until July 25, 1978. He died, at the age of 68, on May 10, 1979.

2. István Bibó, a Professor of Political Science, was one of the most profound social-political thinkers of Central Europe's recent history. Writing his brilliant studies amidst adverse and dangerous conditions torn by wars, foreign occupations, revolutions and dictatorships, he was a painstakingly objective humanist. In his studies, he undertook an interdisciplinary, sociological-historical-psychological-economic method of analysis. His ideal was a «third road» synthesis encompassing the most humane and democratic practices of both individualism and collectivism, without their anti-democratic extremes; democratic, national self-determination for collectivities and institutionalized rights and freedoms for individuals. He was also a committed and courageous pragmatist. He wrote: «nothing is more dangerous than to keep quiet about the actual problems and to disguise cowardly silence as 'realpolitik' – it obstructs solutions», and: «To be democratic means, above all, not to be afraid.»⁵

Re-thinking the past, he wrote significant studies about Europe's social development,⁶ the historic causes of the emergence of Fascism in Germany,⁷ the causes of the distress of the small Eastern European states⁸ and the separation of the state's powers⁹.

Considering the present, his essays analyze the situation of Jewish Hungarians and anti-Semitism,¹⁰ *The Paralysis of International Institutions and the Remedies*,¹¹ the crisis of Hungarian democracy after the Second World War¹² and the meaning of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution for Hungary and for the world.¹³

⁵ See note 1.

⁶ Az európai társadalomfejlődés értelme [Reflections on the Social Development of Europe]. In: BIBÓ.

⁷ A német hisztéria okai és története [The History and Causes of German Hysteria]. In: BIBÓ ISTVÁN ÖSSZEGYŰJTÖTT MUNKÁI [The Collected Works of István Bibó]. I-IV. Bem 1981-1984. It was published in French: Les raisons et l'histoire de l'hystérie allemande. In: Misère des petits états d'Europe de l'Ést. Paris 1986, pp. 7-129.

⁸ A kelet-európai kis államok nyomorúsága [The Distress of the Eastern European small states]. In: BIBÓ.

⁹ Az államhatalmak elválasztása egykor és most [Separation of the State's Powers, Past and present]. In: BIBÓ ISTVÁN ÖSSZEGYŰJTÖTT MUNKÁI, pp. 541-560.

¹⁰ Zsidókérdés Magyarországon 1944 után [The Jewish Question in Hungary after 1944]. In: BIBÓ.

¹¹ London – New York 1976. In Hungarian: A nemzetközi államközösség bénultsága. In: BIBÓ ISTVÁN ÖSSZEGYŰJTÖTT MUNKÁI, pp. 967-1203.

¹² A magyar demokrácia válsága [The Crisis of the Hungarian Democracy]. In: BIBÓ.

¹³ Magyarország helyzete és a világhelyzet [The Situation of Hungary and the World]. In: BIBÓ.

Looking towards the world's future, influenced by the super-powers, Bibó wrote in 1972: «The common deficiency of capitalism and communism is the cult of mammoth ownership, whether it be mammoth private or mammoth public ownership.» «In the West the technocrats, in the East the one-party bureaucrats are trying to assert a kind of intellectual class power and, at times: tyranny, which right now presents a danger to social development»,¹⁴ and he examined future practical possibilities for international political arbitration.¹⁵

3. Bibó's writings had been prohibited from the Hungarian public since the 1950's, only licenced researchers could read his previously printed works in the «closed sections» of some libraries. His studies have been published – the new ones for the first time – in London, Bern and Paris by Hungarians living in Western countries.¹⁶ In spite of official censorship, Bibó's thoughts have been recently re-discovered by Hungarian – mainly young – intellectuals. The Western Bibó-books, smuggled past the border-guards and undiscovered by the Post Office's censors, were passed from hand to hand and eagerly read by college students. In 1980, a 993 pp. Festschrift appeared in typed and re-typed form in Budapest, in which seventy-six young and old, urban and populist writers, scientists, students and workers payed tribute to Bibó and his legacy.¹⁷ Risking – and, at times enduring – political police persecutions: search, seizure, fines and arrest, independent «samizdat» publishers have distributed three collections of and about István Bibó's works in 1983-1985.¹⁸ Since 1980, the state-controlled press also began – was permitted to begin – to publish some writings of and about Bibó.¹⁹ The modern literary-sociological monthly *Mozgó Világ* was, however, altogether dissolved when it planned to publish one of Bibó's major studies about the social development of Europe in its number 1983/12. The Bibó-issue was banned – it was published by ABC in 1985 in «samizdat» form²⁰ and the entire editorial board of the periodical was fired by the central state publishing agency.

In 1986 the Magvető state publishing company released a three-volume collection of István Bibó's selected works in Budapest.²¹ This was a significantly li-

¹⁴ See note 6.

¹⁵ In: *The Paralysis of International Institutions and the Remedies*. London – New York 1976, pp. 125-144.

¹⁶ BIBÓ István: *A harmadik út [The Third Road]*. London 1960; BIBÓ ISTVÁN ÖSSZGYŰJTÖTT MUNKAI; Bibó István, 1911-1979. Paris 1979.

¹⁷ BIBÓ EMLÉKKÖNYV.

¹⁸ BIBÓ ISTVÁN 1956-OS IRÁSAI [István Bibó's 1956 Writings]. Ed. Sándor Szilágyi. Budapest 1983; BIBÓ ISTVÁN A MAGYAR FORRADALOMRÓL [István Bibó about the Hungarian Revolution]. Ed. György Krassó. Budapest 1984; SZILÁGYI Sándor: *A szellemi ellenállás jelképe [The Symbol of the Spiritual Resistance]*. Budapest 1985.

¹⁹ Among others in the periodicals: *Történelmi Szemle* 1980/2; *Kritika* 1983/12, 1984/9; *Valóság* 1980/9, 1984/9, 1985/12; *Kortárs* 1985/9; *Egyetemi Lapok* 1987/9; *Alföld* 1988/5.

²⁰ BIBÓ István: *Az európai társadalom fejlődése [The Development of the European Society]*. Budapest 1985.

²¹ BIBÓ István: *Válogatott tanulmányok [Selected Studies]*. I-III. Budapest 1986.

beral act on the part of the present Hungarian regime – with significantly major flaws, however: Bibó's 1956-57 writings, i.e. some of his very important political analyses and constructive, pragmatic proposals are missing from these volumes. Writings which not only reflected upon, but shaped the Revolution's historic events.

Up to now, Bibó's works were not generally available to the international public either, save for the 1976 English language publication of his study on *The Paralysis of International Institutions*, which, by now, is out of print. This gap is now beginning to be filled. Four of Bibó's most important essays have been published in French²², and a representative selection of his major studies is being prepared for English language publication by Atlantic Research and Publications, New York.²³

«The Hungarian Revolution of 1956 – Scandal and Hope»

How did Bibó analyze *The Situation of Hungary and the World* in 1956-57?²⁴ He viewed the 1956 Hungarian Revolution as both: scandal and hope. Scandal of – and hope for – the Western world, the Communist camp, the «third road» alternative and world peace. His essay is both a «j'accuse» indictment and a call for efforts of good will to develop the potentials created by the Revolution toward realizing freedom, self-determination and democracy for the oppressed.

1. The 1956 Hungarian Revolution is a scandal, while it also represents hope for the Western world – writes Bibó. Scandal, because the West has reneged on an implied promise. It insisted for ten years after the Second World War, that the Eastern European countries live under one-party governments not of their choice, imposed upon them by the Soviet Union. The West had not promised these countries that it will start a nuclear war for their liberation, neither did it urge them to take up arms. But it did hold out the hope, that if these people take a serious stand, the Western world would apply its full economic, political and moral influence to help them. The Revolution, which overthrew Hungary's dictatorship, established a multi-party parliamentary democracy and declared neutrality, provided impeccable political, legal and moral grounds for the West to force a summit conference and to negotiate with the Soviet Union for the independence and freedom of Hungary. Instead, it offered solemn and ineffective resolutions in the United Nations. With this demonstrated lack of purpose, ten years of allegedly principled and moral political stance had lost its credibility.

The hope that the Revolution means for the West is that the Hungarian, Polish and other liberation movements of the area demonstrated a very real and vivid desire of the people for freedom and for the most modern techniques of democracy. This disproves the thesis of some Western thinkers and politicians, that

²² See note 7.

²³ BIBÓ: Democracy.

²⁴ See note 1. Subsequent quotes are from this volume.

Western type democratic institutions cannot work in the East and in the South, and that even liberation movements will result in merely restoring older autocratic structures. Based on the evidences of 1956, the West can count on peoples' demand for democracy and, therefore can and should pursue a non-aggressive, but active policy towards establishing Western techniques of freedom in East Europe.

2. The case of Hungary revealed a devastating scandal for the entire Communist camp – writes István Bibó. With the death of Stalin and the beginnings of destalinization at the 20th Party Congress in Moscow, hope started to rise amongst Communists for forces in the movement and the Party which could return it to the better ways of building socialism. These hopes were shattered on November 4 in Hungary. «The Soviet tanks destroyed the start of one of the most exciting socialist experiments of this century.» This experiment was not counterrevolutionary and did not attempt to restore an «ancien regime» – argues Bibó. Most of the revolutionary forces: the youth, the workers, the soldiers were socialists in outlook and in education. Before the November 4 Soviet surprise attack the country began to be consolidated, a basically centrist and leftist national government was in place, prestigious voices spoke assertively for the preservation of the socialist achievements. What followed the aggression of November 4 was the re-establishment of brutal dictatorship by a minority. Writes Bibó: «as the fire and smoke of the defeated Hungarian Revolution dissipated [...] a ghastly spectre emerged: a Communist party made up largely of bureaucrats and an policemen, standing *against* the entire working class [...] held in power by nothing except the help received from outside the borders», i.e. from the Soviet Union. «There has never been a communist party anywhere with as few blue-collar workers among its members as this one.»

«Strange as it may sound – continues Bibó – the Hungarian Revolution implies hope for the world communist movement.» In both the Polish and the Hungarian movements a decisive factor was the increasing disappointment of young communist intellectuals with the unscrupulous means, which stood at variance with the liberating ends of the ideology. These contradictions began to manifest themselves especially in three areas: increasing demands for community autonomy as against centralized, autocratic state power, for freedom of truth instead of the propaganda of the centralized power, and for greater economic autonomy instead of the totally state-controlled economy which resulted in the constantly low standard of living. There are definite signs, that some of these manifestations have surfaced in the Soviet Union as well. The hope that the Hungarian Revolution may represent for the Communist world – according to Bibó – is that, since the Soviet Union may feel that re-shutting all valves tightly may result in explosions, therefore it may re-route its development to the stage from where it was diverted by the fatal decisions of intervention in Hungary. (After 31 years, at last, we are beginning to witness some signs of development in the Soviet Union which seem to show progress in the direction of Bibó's 1957 hopes.)

3. The possibility of a dreadful conclusion stands before us – writes Bibó – that there can be no third road, no third alternative. That not only the world's great powers, but the world's moral consciousness will be broken into two camps and

that this complete bi-polarization is an inevitable necessity. This is why Bibó thinks that the Hungarian Revolution and its downfall represents a scandal for third-road powers and ideals. India and some other Asian states as well as many socialist and social democrat groups and parties throughout the world profess that only orthodox prejudice on both sides believes in the inevitability of dividing the world into uniform capitalist and communist countries and that it is not possible to develop exploitation-free socialism without dispensing, for extended periods, with Western democratic methods, rights and freedoms. Thinkers and forces of a third road alternative hold that developing exploitation-free socialism is, or should be, synonymous with developing democracy: division of the powers of the state, multi-party free elections, guaranteed freedoms, independent judiciary systems. This is the synthesis that Bibó believes in and this is – according to his analysis – what the 1956 Hungarian Revolution attempted to achieve. «If ever, anywhere, then certainly in the Hungarian Revolution this third road alternative wanted to come to life constructively.» «The active forces of the Revolution had no intents to liquidate the genuine achievements of socialism and they had the power to thwart any such attempts.» During the Revolution «a broad and quite definite public consensus emerged without any difficulty regarding the methods for maintaining a socialist society combined with the Western techniques of freedom, through a multi-party system limited to parties which accept socialism as a common platform. What is more, when it comes to the workers' councils, these ideas would have meant the strengthening of democracy and socialism with new techniques.» (A year later Hannah Arendt came to the same conclusions about the significance of the Hungarian Revolution's Workers' Councils.)²⁵ This is the democratic development that the Soviet Union crushed with full military force.

The third road experiment suffered a defeat in 1956, but the Hungarian example may serve as a hope for future attempts at such third alternative syntheses according to Bibó. «No elimination of exploitation has a realistic chance of succeeding without functioning institutionalized freedoms. However, the reverse is also true: no institutionalized freedoms have a realistic chance of succeeding without radical land-reform, the expropriation of mammoth wealth and the establishment of new legal structures which effectively protect against exploitation.» The Hungarian third road experiment will, therefore «offer valuable lessons for the West, the communist world as well as the peoples of the colonies, former colonies and semi-colonies alike.»

4. The greatest scandal that the crushing of the Hungarian Revolution may mean is for world peace, making its very possibility doubtful – argues Bibó. Why? It cornered the contending powers into a deadlock situation. «A sizeable segment of the Western world summed up the lessons of the Hungarian Revolution with the observation that Stalinism has been revived, or in fact never really disappeared, and in the final analysis it is the only possible and natural form of com-

²⁵ ARENDT Hannah: *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Cleveland 1958. Cf. also *THE FIRST WAR BETWEEN SOCIALIST STATES: The Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and its Impact*. Ed. By Béla KIRÁLY et. al. Brooklyn College and Columbia University Press. New York 1984, pp. 145-159.

munism; while much of the communist world derived the same lesson from the opposite premise, saying that Stalin was basically correct, after all, and the unity of the communist camp can only be preserved by using his methods.» If this be the case, than the danger of world war will increase. For the Stalinist political practice had not only liquidated the Popular Front coalition alliances in the countries it occupied in Central and Eastern Europe – often «liquidating» the allies themselves as well – but had also made international alliance impossible between East and West, undermining its very base by substituting the power of cunning force for the ethics of international cooperation for peace and for developing the freedom of man. Says Bibó: «It is possible for the most divergent political, social and economic systems to co-exist in peace, but this is not possible if the partners do not believe in certain common basic principles of morality.» «Stalin's policies made both him and his opponents incapable of realistically calculating each other's motives and intentions.» «Thus, sooner or later, a concrete situation will unavoidably arise in which, owing to their mutual and complete miscomprehension of each other's intentions, the two partners would stumble into a global, possibly even nuclear, war, no matter how both may dread it.»

«If it is true that Hungary's situation cannot be remedied, then there are organic barriers for the world's powers to communicate in a common language of mutual understanding.»

An yet, argues Bibó, the Hungarian Revolution also represents a potentially hopeful event towards securing peace for the world. To realize this hope, however, both the Soviet Union and the Western Powers have to yield. The West has to provide international guarantees, that it will not attempt to coerce Hungary to become an anti-Soviet political or military base. The Soviet Union has to guarantee that it allows Hungary to continue developing socialism and democracy as an independent nation. What hope, what assurances does the Revolution represent for the basis of such compromises? Bibó offers three considerations. First: the forcible maintenance of Hungary's subdued position and of its discredited minority communist government is more of a burden, a liability than an advantage for the Soviet Union. Second: there are no significant forces in Hungary which could possibly turn the country towards the restoration of capitalism. On the contrary, it is most likely – and this likelihood could be made a certainty by formal agreements – that Hungary will remain one of the socialist type countries. Third: There exists yet a Hungarian political program with a nation-wide support base – as long as it will not be crumbled – which is committed to freedom together with socialism, which opposes any restoration, which plans to gradually eliminate the all-pervading bureaucracy, which is not anti-Soviet and which is not only far from letting the country become an anti-Soviet base but which is intimately familiar with the concerns and problems of the Soviet leadership.»

Bibó's conclusions sound prophetic thirty years later in the light of Hungary's current experimentation – timid and inadequate, but tolerated by the Soviet Union – with some Western economic and, even some socio-political techniques. «This possibility for compromise means that in Hungary the West and the Soviet Union could jointly guarantee the creation of a socio-political system which, while

not preferred by either, could offer the only solution under the circumstances. If they dare to undertake this experiment, it could be soon revealed that, far from being dangerous, it offers valuable lessons for other unsolved issues and contains such hidden channels for *rapprochement* that are condemned to remain hopelessly un-utilized and ignored in the present state of total polarization.

Bibó is still censored in Hungary

As mentioned previously, a three-volume collection of István Bibó's works has been published in 1986 in Budapest – without his history-making 1956-57 writings.

In an attempt, perhaps, to justify the omissions and to minimize Bibó's role in the Revolution, Tibor Huszár – whose lengthy study reviews Bibó's life and works in the Budapest volumes – writes, that «although [Bibó, during the days of the 'October explosion'] did walk about on the streets of Budapest, the informations he obtained about the events were very sporadic», and «his opportunities for orientation were very limited», and that after the suppression of the Revolution Bibó «completely disregarded the new realities».²⁶

These allegations are simply not true.

Let us cite just one evidence of Bibó's opportunities for and methods of obtaining the most accurate informations about the revolutionary situation. Professor Béla Király – in 1956 a major general, during the Revolution Commander-in-Chief of the National Guard and Chairman of the Revolutionary Council of National Defense – described a meeting between himself and István Bibó:²⁷

[On November 3, 1956], around six in the afternoon, Márta Sárközi came into my office. «István Bibó would like to talk with you. Do you have the time?» ... «Of course. Where can we meet?» «He and his wife are at Gyula Illyés.» «All right, let's go!»

...Bibó asked: «Will the Soviet Union attack us again? What is your assessment, as the military commander?» [Hereafter Király describes the detailed report he gave Bibó about the up-to-the-hour situation of the Hungarian and the Soviet military forces in Hungary and about the current state of the negotiations between their representatives.] «Suppose the Soviets attack us again: how long can we resist?» – asked Bibó next. «One or two days at best» – [I answered, describing the possible roles of our regular military defence forces, the civilian freedom fighter groups and our government's stance].

Bibó was, indeed, as thoroughly informed about revolutionary Hungary's up-to-the-minute situation as anybody could possibly be at the time.

As to «disregarding the realities», as Huszár alleges, let us quote a few lines

²⁶ BIBÓ: *Tanulmányok*, pp. 464, 466, 463.

²⁷ KIRÁLY Béla: *Az első háború szocialista országok között. Személyes visszaemlékezés az 1956-os magyar forradalomra* [The First War Between Socialist Countries. Personal Recollections about the 1956 Hungarian Revolution]. New Brunswick, N. J. 1981, pp. 57-61.

from the «Message to the President of the U.S.» which István Bibó, as a member of the Hungarian government wrote and personally delivered to the Budapest U.S. Legation on Sunday, November 4, around 7 a.m., on the morning of the all-out Soviet military attack. The message was hastily translated by the Legation's personnel and transmitted 1:30 a.m. EST to the White House.²⁸

Bibó:²⁹ «Altho the people of Hungary are determined to resist with desperation the attack upon them, there is no doubt that in this unequal struggle it will be defeated if it does not receive help. In this moment the most necessary kind of help is political, not military. [...] The subjugation of Hungary, however would not only signify renewal of oppression in this country but it would also stop the liberation trends which have started so hopefully in the other East European countries; it would also bankrupt the ten year old American liberation policy. [...] The next few critical days will determine whether we enter on a path of peace and liberation or whether we shall increase the appetite of aggression and proceed to a certain world catastrophe.»

Scandal or Hope?

Bibó's assessments in his message to President Eisenhower and in his «The Situation of Hungary and the World» were, indeed, very realistic.

Neither the Western, nor the «Third» world which Bibó attempted to mobilize, acted resolutely, forcefully, effectively, to halt the horrors. The «appetite of aggression», which Bibó wrote about, was whetted. The 1956 Hungarian Revolution was revenged with approximately 21,700 people – including Bibó – jailed, an unknown amount deported to the Soviet Union, and executed about 320-360³⁰. And then came Czechoslovakia, where the Prague Spring was sniped in the bud, Poland, where a military junta outlawed Solidarity and still to this day: Afghanistan.

Wrote Albert Camus about the execution, on June 16, 1958, of three members of the 1956 Hungarian revolutionary government: Imre Nagy, Pál Maléter and Miklós Gyimes: «If anyone's eyes were not opened for good and all by the events of October, then nothing will ever open them except one day, perhaps, and even then it is not certain, the martyrdom of his own country.»³¹

Scandal or hope? Which shall it be – under the no longer symbolic nuclear cloud?

²⁸ The Department of State document was published in facsimile form in Béla KIRÁLY's above-cited book, pp.85-86.

²⁹ Grammatic errors in the original Department of State Memorandum.

³⁰ FÉNYES Elek: Adatok az 1956-os forradalmat követő megtorláshoz [Data of the Retaliations Following the 1956 Revolution]. Beszélő 19 (1987), pp. 43-63.

³¹ THE TRUTH ABOUT THE NAGY AFFAIR. London – New York 1959.