

Imre Nagy

Some people may think that it is hardly worth arguing about the guilt or innocence of Imre Nagy. The orthodox Communists, with untroubled consciences, presumably feel no qualms at the execution of the architect of a conspiracy to subvert the revolution and restore Hungarian fascism. The cold war warriors of the West see nothing in the Hungarian uprising but a movement of unexampled nobility to restore Hungarian democracy and independence. In reality the Hungarian uprising was not a black and white affair; the official Communist versions of the 'counter-revolution' are transparently dishonest, but so too are the versions provided by those self-appointed friends of Hungary for whom democracy and independence are only flags of convenience raised to cover the struggle against communism, and against socialism too.

The purpose of this review is to examine the charges made against Imre Nagy by the Hungarian Government, and by the entire Communist propagandist apparatus. The Communist Party leaders hoped by the trial and execution of Nagy not only to frighten revisionists and would-be revisionists (whatever that word may mean), into silence and inactivity, but

also to prove that revisionism was bound to end in alliance with imperialism and counter-revolution. The communique issued by the Hungarian Ministry of Justice said so: 'The evidence submitted during the legal proceedings demonstrated and proved that Imre Nagy and his associates had by virtue of their earlier revisionist, bourgeois-nationalist political attitude, *inevitably* (my italics), arrived at an alliance with the most reactionary forces of the imperialist bourgeoisie and had betrayed the workers' power, the people's democratic order, the Hungarian working people and the socialist fatherland.' It would be wrong to dismiss as inherently absurd the view that 'revisionism' could arrive at an alliance with reaction. The fact that many Communist leaders were falsely accused in the trials of the 1930s of having treasonable relations with the capitalists should not blind us to the fact that the history of the Communist and Social-Democratic parties is studded with examples of politicians who, departing from their Socialist principles, have 'sold out', and have passed over to the other side, very often without abandoning their 'Socialist' labels or catch-phrases. Ramsay MacDonald and Mollet are obvious examples, while the present Labour Movement in Britain provides examples which we can all name for ourselves. Was Nagy one of these, or was he one of the victims of a frame-up, or is it impossible to fit him into either category? Has the trial proved that Nagy was a revisionist whose ideas did in fact carry him into an alliance with imperialism?

One would have supposed, if the evidence against Nagy was so overwhelming, that the best way to have exposed him and the revisionists would have been to have confronted him with the proofs of treason at a public trial. I do not myself believe that the reason for holding a secret trial was that Nagy and his fellow-accused had been so badly tortured that it was impossible to produce them publicly. I would be surprised to know that they were tortured at all, although obviously they were subject to pressure. The fact that the three accused who denied their guilt (Nagy, Pal Maleter and Jozsef Szilagyi), were sentenced to death, while all those who confessed their guilt were sentenced to imprisonment, speaks volumes about the reasons for the confessions.

The reason why the trial was held in secret emerges very clearly from the Hungarian Government White Book.¹ It is not a report of the trial, but a summary of the case for the prosecution, a collection of documents and excerpts from the evidence, selected to prove Nagy's guilt. Had the trial been public, of course, publication could not have been confined to the prosecution's case. The case for the defence would have had to be published as well; Nagy would have been able to expound his views, which lie at the very heart of the prosecution's case, and to expose their flagrant misrepresentation. Two of the most glaring omissions from the White Book would have become only too obvious: the failure of Kadar (who was a member of all of Nagy's cabinets, except perhaps the last one, on which there is a divergence of testimony), to give any evidence, and the failure of the prosecution to present any evidence on the circum-

¹ *The Counter-Revolutionary Conspiracy of Imre Nagy and his Accomplices* (Hungarian Government Information Bureau).

stances in which the Soviet Army intervened on October 23rd and November 4th, 1956.

One of the charges made against Nagy is that he smuggled his writings out to the West. From this one can infer that the translation published under the title *Nagy on Communism*² is an accurate version of Nagy's essays written at the end of 1955 and the beginning of 1956. This was after the more liberal New Course policy that he initiated in 1953, after Stalin's death, had been liquidated, and Nagy himself removed from office and expelled from the Party. If the prosecution does not dispute the accuracy of the translations published abroad, then the entire foundation for the case against Nagy disappears. Their importance can be seen from two quotations from the White Book. First, from the Preface:—

'The material published here proves beyond all doubt that long before the outbreak of the counter-revolution a secret underground organisation was set up under the leadership of Imre Nagy for the purpose of overthrowing the existing order. Imre Nagy and his confederates formed an underground, anti-state group. In his writings, distributed through underground channels, Imre Nagy elaborated the political platform aimed at overthrowing the Hungarian People's Republic. This platform bore the earmarks of the guiding principles put forward by outstanding propagandists of Western imperialist circles (Walter Lippman, Sulzberger, etc.), concerning the tactics of overthrowing the people's democratic order. Imre Nagy and his confederates set up their organization on the basis of this political platform and built their ties with their foreign backers on this foundation. They thoroughly prepared, during their underground organizational activity, for the overthrow of the Hungarian People's Republic, an alliance with the forces of the underworld and resurgent fascism, and took up arms to destroy constitutional order in Hungary.'

There is not, in fact, a scrap of evidence in the White Book to support this charge.

Second, from the Communique of the Ministry of Justice:—

'Imre Nagy in a document elaborated in December, 1955, and entitled "Morals and Ethics" termed the state system of the People's Democracy a "degenerate Bonapartist power" and called for its overthrow by force. In another document, entitled "Some Topical Questions" which he wrote in January, 1956, he set the task of forming an alliance with the forces opposed to the People's Democracy, and called for the restoration of the multiparty system, thus renouncing working-class power. In another paper, entitled "The Five Principles of International Relations", also dated January, 1956, he set the adventurist group the task, under the pretext of ending the policy of blocs, of renouncing the country's defence alliance, the Warsaw Treaty, and of playing the country into the hands of the imperialists.'

An open trial would have exposed the monstrous falsehoods contained in this indictment. The Hungarian people have had no access to Nagy's writings and cannot know what Nagy's views really were. These essays were written at a time of acute and deepening crisis in Hungary, when the Rakosi group was again tightening the screws and provoking the catastrophe that ultimately occurred in October, 1956. They were written, it should be noted, before the 20th Congress; they even bear a certain similarity to Khrushchov's secret speech indicting the horrors of Stalinist rule, but they

2 *Imre Nagy on Communism* (Thames and Hudson).

probed much deeper than Khrushchov ever tried to do, and did not stop at the paralysing formula that all the mistakes and crimes were due to the 'cult of the individual'. These essays were clearly written for publication, and Nagy states in his preface that he wrote them for discussion within the Party, in the belief that the only way to settle the differences between himself and the Rakosi group was by debates on principles and a free exchange of views.

The first chapter, 'A Few Timely Questions Regarding the Application of Marxism-Leninism' is presumably the essay referred to in the indictment as 'Some Topical Questions'. It contains, quite literally, none of the statements attributed to it. Nagy contends that since Lenin's death a rigid dogmatism has been the rule, and that the Stalinist monopoly over the science of Marxism-Leninism resulted in the belief that the only 'proper' way to build socialism was to copy the methods practised in the Soviet Union. The method of solving difficulties and differences of opinion by branding people, by terrorism, and enforced autocratic rule had replaced solutions through scientific debates and exchange of views. The failure to clarify the theory of People's Democracy as a democratic type of proletarian dictatorship had resulted in the loss of the essence of its people's democratic character. Socialist society should be built, Nagy argued, not by large-scale use of force, but by systematically decreasing the use of force and utilizing democratic forms and methods, in close co-operation with the masses of working people.

With an insight all too rare in Eastern Europe he pointed out that Soviet methods of building socialism, and their mechanical application to various countries, had caused great difficulties to the Communist Parties of Western Europe. The People's Democracies, in his view, should use such methods and find such forms as would make socialism acceptable and desirable to the popular masses in the capitalist countries, and thus extend immeasurable aid to the Communist Parties in those countries in their attempts to gain the support of the workers for socialism.

Nagy's ideas on foreign policy, outlined in the essay 'The Five Basic Principles of International Relations' do not support the allegation that he set his group the task of 'playing the country into the hands of the imperialists'. The five principles referred to are the five Bandung principles, first included in the Indian-Chinese agreement in Tibet, and later adopted by Tito and Khrushchov at Belgrade in 1955 as appropriate for Soviet-Yugoslav (i.e. for inter-socialist) relations. These principles are : (1) Mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty; (2) mutual non-aggression; (3) mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs; (4) equality and mutual benefit; and (5) peaceful co-existence. *Pravda*, in a leader on the five principles on July 28th, 1954, said 'the Soviet people hold the only correct view that every nation must decide the question of the character of the social and state system of its country, and no one from outside has the right to impose on it any other system, whatever it may be, whether good or bad'. Taking *Pravda* at its word Nagy demanded the liquidation of the Stalinist autocratic rule within the Socialist camp (how right he was, the threatened Soviet intervention in Poland, and the subsequent admission of Soviet 'mistakes', proved) and accused the

Rakosi group of bringing Hungary to the brink of catastrophe by ignoring Hungarian national interests. He recognised that the Socialist nations, headed by the Soviet Union, constituted the basis of the anti-war group in the world, but he also believed (and again, how right he was proved to be), that Soviet policy had fostered counter-revolutionary and nationalist trends in Hungary, made Hungary a weak member of the Socialist camp, and made it an obstacle to good relations both between East and West and between Communist and Socialist parties. He suggested that to remedy this situation Hungary should withdraw from the Soviet block, while still aligning itself with countries and peoples that were fighting for peace. In place of Hungary's participation in 'power blocks' that could only lead to war, he urged 'active co-existence' which would, he said, create a firmer basis for good Hungarian-Soviet relations, and thus dispel doubts in other countries which feared that closer association with the Soviet Union would endanger their independence or result in their submission to a single political ideology.

These views may have been wrong: it may be that it is impossible for a People's Democracy to slip from participation in the Soviet alliance into a position of benevolent neutrality. There are obvious dangers in a country such as Hungary, where democracy had such feeble roots before 1945, and where it had been given no chance by the Rakosi clique to develop subsequently.

Nagy's pleas could only have been successful if the Soviet Union had been prepared to apply *Pravda's* principles, and allow Hungary to determine its position for itself. In the teeth of Soviet intervention, and (as happened) Soviet armed intervention, the danger of Hungary being thrown into the arms of the counter-revolution would obviously have greatly increased. But Nagy's ideas, while debatable were not treasonable, and do not even remotely support the indictment. Roumania, incidentally, has recognised the legal weakness of the indictment against Nagy by applying the death penalty to the advocacy of neutrality.

In the third essay relied on by the Hungarian prosecutor, 'Ethics and Morals in Hungarian Public Life,' Nagy did not say that the state system of People's Democracy was a 'degenerate Bonapartist power'. After warning that the Rakosi leadership was heading for disaster by ignoring the growing hostility of public opinion, thereby strengthening the forces of reaction and counter-revolution, he said that the Party members did not want a return to capitalism. They want, he said 'a people's democratic system in which the ideals of socialism become a reality, in which public life is based on higher morals and ethics, they want a system which is actually ruled not by a degenerate Bonapartist authority and dictator, but by the working people through legality and self-created law and order'. There is not a syllable in which he calls for the overthrow of the People's Democracy by force. But he did declare that Rakosi's clique had come into power on the basis of false charges, intrigues and crimes, and established a dictatorship that was incompatible with the constitution of People's Democracy. A struggle was inevitable between Bonapartism and People's Democracy for Rakosi, by taking the road of Bonapartism, had plunged socialist construction into an abyss.

One reason why Kadar's evidence would be very interesting, to put it mildly, is that after the uprising of October 23rd he embraced many of Nagy's criticisms of the Rakosi regime, adopted much of Nagy's policy, and endorsed the democratic character of the original uprising of October 23rd. The relevant documents are to be found in *National Communism and Popular Revolt in Eastern Europe*,³ the authenticity of which has not been disputed. In his broadcast on the formation of a new Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party, on November 1st, 1956, Kadar said:

'In a fateful hour we appeal to those who, inspired by loyalty to the people and the pure ideals of socialism were led to a party which later degenerated to a medium of national slavery through the blind and criminal policy of the Hungarian representatives of Stalinism - Rakosi and his clique ... Rakosi and his gang gravely violated our national decency and pride ... in a glorious uprising our people have shaken off the Rakosi regime ...'

The evidence of the White Book merely shows (assuming it, for purposes of discussion, to be true), that Nagy, Losonczy and other anti-Stalinists formed a group for the popularization of Nagy's ideas, used the Petofi Circle debates and such newspapers as they could influence for the same purpose, and were responsible for calling the popular demonstrations of October 23rd. There is not a shred of evidence to connect them with any preparations for an *armed* uprising. There is evidence that they hoped to change the government, and that Nagy was prepared to become Prime Minister. That, however, is far from being treasonable. It is alleged that Nagy concealed his real views and intentions from the Party when he accepted office as Premier, but this is one of the many questions on which one would like to have heard Nagy's evidence. The circumstances in which Nagy accepted office, and of the Soviet intervention, remain as obscure as ever. The prosecution tried to prove, and (if the White Book is to be believed), got Nagy to admit that he was responsible for the imposition of martial law, which he had denied. But one can only presume that the prosecution failed to get him to admit any responsibility for the Soviet military intervention, that precipitated the disaster and caused the increasingly rapid drift to the right. Kadar himself, in the broadcast already quoted, congratulated the Communist writers, journalists and students, including 'the youth of the Petofi circle', on their responsibility for the organizational and ideological preparation of the uprising. And even on November 4th, when Kadar had formed the Soviet-sponsored Worker-Peasant Government, his first announcement said that the movement of October 23rd had the 'noble aims of remedying anti-Party and anti-democratic crimes committed by Rakosi and his associates and defending national independence and sovereignty', though he then added that both socialism and independence had been endangered by the weakness of the Nagy government and the increased influence of counter-revolutionary elements.

What evidence does the White Book produce that, before October 23rd, Nagy had built an alliance with 'resurgent fascism' and with foreign backers? The answer is, none whatever. The only attempt made by the

³ *National Communism and Popular Revolt in Eastern Europe* (Columbia University).

prosecution to prove anything of the kind, is the allegation that Nagy, pursuing the aim of a multi-party system and a coalition government, contacted Anna Kethly, about the re-organization of the Socialist-Democratic Party, and Erdei, a former Social-Democrat M.P., in September, 1956. According to this evidence Nagy was prepared to permit the legal existence of the Social Democrat Party. It was certainly in keeping with Nagy's views that he should have made some preparations for restoring the Social-Democratic Party - which is described in the White Book as 'relinquishing the Party's leading role, breaking working-class unity - creating and giving power to other parties, thereby liquidating the people's regime.' Already in January, 1956, Nagy considered that unless the Party reversed Rakosi's policies, and reverted to his new course, it would have to make even bigger retreats if the situation was to be saved. By October, 1956, there were only two alternatives: either the Soviet Union and its armed forces could be called in to reimpose the Communist Party's monopoly of power, or the Communists themselves could try to broaden their base, and retreat to the broader democratic coalition of 1945-1947. Nor was Nagy alone in this view. When, in the course of the uprising, the Social Democratic Party was legalized Kadar broadcast an appeal to the 'newly-formed democratic parties, and first of all to the others workers' party, the Social Democratic Party, with the request to overcome the danger of a menacing counter-revolution'. Moreover, when Kadar formed his own government he left several portfolios unfilled, to be filled after the restoration of order, by representatives of other parties and non-Party persons. The fact that he was unable to secure the co-operation of any other Party, and probably did not intend to, does not alter the fact that his own government was in origin a multi-party coalition. To equate coalition government with treason is certainly bad law, and bad politics too.

Nagy's behaviour after he became Prime Minister on October 24th is more open to criticism. The White Book presents him as a deliberate traitor, taking office without informing the Party of his views, arming fascist counter-revolutionaries, releasing the scum of the earth from the jails, preventing the suppression of the revolt by loyal forces by ordering a cease-fire, appointing Horthy officers to responsible positions, restoring not only the Social Democratic Party but all manner of fascist parties, remaining silent while Communists were being lynched, repudiating the Warsaw Pact, rehabilitating Mihdszenty, handing power over to fascism, and finally on November 4th appealing for armed intervention from the West. This final accusation is patently untrue: The White Book does not give the text of his broadcast which merely announced the renewed Soviet intervention.

Two things must be said in general about this indictment. The first is that Nagy's side of the story has not been heard, and now cannot be. There are isolated snippets from his evidence in the White Book, but no coherent picture emerges of the line of his defence. The second is that everything Nagy did or said is presented against a grotesquely distorted picture of events in Budapest. For example, how could Nagy have prevented the crushing of the counter-revolution by 'loyal forces' when loyal Hungarian forces hardly existed, almost the entire nation (even Janos

Kadar!) was supporting the 'glorious uprising' against Rakosi, and the Soviet troops alone were fighting the rebels! The White Book hardly refers to the Soviet intervention, or to the effect it had on the course of the uprising, and keeps a strict security curtain drawn over the feverish negotiations and discussions that must have preceded the Soviet announcement, on October 30th, that the Soviet Government had made mistakes in its national policy, and would both withdraw its troops from Budapest if asked to do so, and negotiate their withdrawal from Hungary. The next day Kadar, announcing the new Party's programme, said it would 'defend the honour and independence of our country against anyone', promised fraternal relations with 'any progressive party or movement in the world', and concluded: 'Our people have proved with their blood their intention to support unflinchingly the Government's efforts for the complete withdrawal of the Soviet forces. We do not want to be dependent any longer.' If all this did not amount to a declaration of neutrality, and imply withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact, what did it mean?

Did Nagy conceal his views from the Party? On this one would require to have Nagy's evidence, and Kadar's too. Did he indiscriminately arm the counter-revolutionaries? Here, too, one would like to see Nagy's evidence: but the question implies that Nagy had full control of the situation, and was able in the midst of all the difficulties of the situation, to keep a firm control on all appointments and activities. One of the main charges against him is that he appointed Bela Kiraly, a Horthy fascist, to be chief of the special police. Nagy denied that he knew anything about him, and claimed that he appointed him on the recommendation of others, whom he had asked for the name of 'an experienced, well-trained military man, possibly among the persons recently rehabilitated'. In short, he was looking for an honest man, but was given a dishonest one.

Nagy was accused of releasing prisoners indiscriminately. It seems improbable that Nagy had much control over what was happening in the jails, but the White Book nowhere admits that any innocent people were released from the jails. Yet, if the innocent and the guilty were indiscriminately jailed by Rakosi, it was inevitable that the mob would release them indiscriminately too. According to the White Book 17,000 political and common-law criminals were released: but it does not say how many of them were people like Edith Bone. As for the restoration of the fascist parties, no evidence is produced to show that Nagy officially approved or permitted this. But the method of the White Book is to print a picture of a Communist hanging from a tree, and then to charge Imre Nagy with responsibility for his murder: everything evil that happened in the uprising is laid at his door, when in fact the Nagy Government had little or no control over what was happening, and was 'government' only in name.

Gomulka was able to avert the ultimate calamity of Soviet armed intervention in Poland by a hairsbreadth, because he was recalled to office in the nick of time, and acted with determination on a wave of popular support. It was Nagy's misfortune to take office when the situation had already got out of hand. The irony of the situation lay in the fact that he had already warned nine months earlier that this would happen if the Government continued to ignore the way in which Rakosi's crimes were

destroying the working-class basis of People's Democracy, and alienating public opinion. He warned that if the Party did not return in good time to his New Course (of July 1953), it might have to make even bigger retreats. The alternatives, therefore, must have seemed to Nagy to be; either the restoration of Communist Party rule (which by October 23 could only be accomplished by Soviet intervention, as the Party was bankrupt, and had to be reorganized under another name; or a retreat to a broad-based democratic coalition in which the Party relinquished the monopoly of power. The latter course might conceivably have proved successful had it not been for the intervention. But Nagy was hopelessly compromised by his position as Prime Minister of a government that was supposed to be suppressing a popular movement that he himself had helped to call into existence. Of course Nagy was less than whole-hearted in his efforts to suppress the revolt that Kadar supported. His attempt to stabilise the situation by arranging a cease-fire and rapidly broadening his cabinets could not have succeeded, because the Soviet Union only went through the motions of negotiation and withdrawal from Budapest in order that it might, when reinforced, complete the job it had started. It is doubtful, in any case, if it had any secure basis. Nagy, who displayed heroic qualities in producing his critique of Rakosi's system before the 20th Congress, and in preferring martyrdom to an ignoble confession, wavered in the crisis, was unable to produce a coherent policy, to rally organized support, or to recognize the dangerous forces that were emerging.

Nobody else, it should be added, could have done much better. He was overwhelmed by events, the victim of the crisis that he tried to avert. He was hanged, not for weaknesses, mistakes or even high treason (the White Book's case for this will not stand examination), but simply for his revisionist ideas, to discourage others. He was a convenient scapegoat for the real criminals, the Rakosis and Geros who created the situation in which, after 11 years of Communist rule, the nation was in revolt against the Communist Party. His murder has deepened the gulf between the Communist Parties and the working-class in the capitalist world - a gulf that Nagy had (and how ironical it is) hoped to close by making the People's Democracies a model that western workers would admire.

Yet Nagy, though dead, may have the last word. His essay on morals and ethics is one of the most inspiring works of Socialism. It provides the only foundation on which true Socialism can be built, or on which the unity of the Communist and Socialist parties can be achieved.

Malcolm MacEwen