

EYE-WITNESS IN HUNGARY

**Translated by Amy Schechter from firsthand reports
on Hungary by Sergei Perucchi in *Vie Nuove***

Vie Nuove (New Life) is a noted Italian illustrated weekly, broadly left, with about a quarter of a million circulation, which covers the Italian and foreign scene usually effectively, sometimes brilliantly. To Hungary the magazine sent Sergei Perucchi, with the experience of Poland behind him. He was in Hungary twenty days, crossing the border from Austria on October 29, seeing the country at the height of its disintegration when the play of conflicting forces was nakedly visible. This is frontline reporting, in the midst of battle. Perucchi talked with scores of Hungarians and with Soviet soldiers; with leading figures—Janos Kadar, Georgi Lukacs, noted writer and critic, then Minister of Culture, now reported to be in Rumania with Nagy, and others.

Profoundly shaken by what he saw, which he sums up as "the most shattering tragedy of our time," Perucchi writes about it in terms of human beings, with pity and anger. He writes, also, with political intelligence, especially about the Hungarian Communist Party, and he shows, in vivid detail, the consequences of the shattering and splintering of the power of organized government.

The problem has been to condense his three articles (*Vie Nuove*, November 10, 17, and 24), into less than a third of their wordage. I have tried to keep the writer's balance in doing this.

A. S.

I. First Days of the Struggle

FROM Nickeldorf, a village on the border between Austria and Hungary, we came to the city of Gyor in a truckload of the insurgents; they were soldiers from the Hungarian army, blond youths around 20, evidently of peasant origin. On their berets they wore the national colors—red, white and green—and were armed with mortars.

This was the morning of October 29; a fine rain was falling, drenching the Hungarian flags flying from military as well as civilian trucks, the Red Cross signs protecting the long columns of cars driving in the direction of the frontier. We attempted to form some sort of judgment on

what was happening from our own first impressions, but the things we saw firsthand we found even more confusing than the constantly shifting and always contradictory rumors we had been hearing in Vienna.

In the main square at Gyor a mass meeting was going on. Someone asked if volunteers would be coming from the West. Those standing in the square, shouting, arguing, exchanging all sorts of rumors, obviously were moved by many different interests. The views of those who spoke nostalgically of the Horthy regime certainly did not gibe with those of Szigeti, who represented the city. A young musician from the "Red Star" hotel accused the Jews of being responsible for Hungary's

difficulties and the crimes committed by the security organs. The harsh—and substantially correct—criticism of the Rakosi government was mixed with observations of quite a different nature; from anti-Semitism they passed to running down the university students from the villages who had reached that level of education thanks to the regime.

We reached Budapest after traveling through a country without a legal government able to exercise its proper functions, without an insurgent government, without organized military occupation. The Soviet troops seemed to be in a position of awaiting developments. The old streets of Pest were alive with excited crowds of civilians, armed men, regular soldiers. There were children, women, workers. From the windows of the houses, at the gates of factories, on the roof of Parliament where the Nagy government had its headquarters, alongside the Hungarian flag, black flags hung signaling those who died in the course of the first days. Every so often isolated shots could be heard, the rattle of machine guns. Reports circulated that it was not only agents of the A.V.H. (Security Police) they were shooting but Communists, as such. On the afternoon of October 30, many of them were hanged from trees in Republic Square.

Atrocious scenes were repeated in various parts of the city during the following days. On the night of November first the mutilated bodies of Communists still swung from the trees in Republic Square. I saw their bodies which had been subjected to horrible torture; a cigarette stub was thrust into the mouth of a half

naked corpse of a man around thirty, whose eyes had been gouged out.

On the night of November 2 and the whole day following it, the white terror, the old fascist terror which the Hungarians had known in 1919, began steadily to gain the upper hand. From house to house they hunted down the Party members, dragged them out of their houses by their heels or by their hair, shot them down in the streets before the eyes of their children and their wives.

Despite the appeals of the press, isolated deeds of this sort still continued; and still there existed no authority able to put a stop to them. During these first ten days, no real authority of any kind existed.

Who, in reality, was at the head of the movement in Hungary? What was its character? What were its aims?

One thing is clear—that important strata of the population were taking part in it. The government was itself made up of men who had personally paid the price for the mistakes of the Socialist state and ought to have been the natural leaders of a movement directed towards democracy; but power had been shattered, fragmented, rendered incapable of controlling except to a very minor degree, the great floodtide sweeping aside all restraint.

The force that at the very beginning could have given coherence to this great popular tidal wave seeking its way towards democracy was the membership of the Hungarian Workers' Party. In the rational initial movement for socialist democratization these Party people had been active—workers, peasants, students, intellectuals—but it was not an easy

thing to distinguish them; they participated as citizens—as individuals—in the elections for the Workers' Councils, but the Party, which for many years had been the principal party in the country's leadership, how did it exercise its function?

I put this question to Georgi Lukacs, Minister of Culture in the current government, world famed philosopher and literary critic.

"A party which has estranged itself from the masses is incapable of exercising its function effectively," Lukacs said, "but here something even worse took place: beside this, the sectarian policy of Rakosi broke the bonds that existed between the membership of the Party and the Party leaders."

"All the good decisions came too late," he added, ". . . and what was good Tuesday and Wednesday, by Sunday had become impossible. Unfortunately, it was only on Friday and Saturday that the Rakosi group was forced out. . . . From 1945 to 1948-1949, the popularity of our Party was steadily rising because it interpreted the most profound needs of our country. But after that time sectarianism began growing from day to day"

To a score of persons I put this question: Where, in this grave moment, is the Hungarian Workers' Party? They answered me that the Party had disastrously weakened its position because of measures taken against some of its members the full consequences of which had only now become fully clear.

This internal policy inevitably had repercussions on the whole country's life — even the basic achievements of socialism were compromised.

Stormy student mass meetings began at Szeged, the largest university center, then spread throughout all Hungary. It was a movement similar in character to that of the Polish youth. The writer [of this article] was in Poland during the days following Poznan, at a difficult time for the socialist forces of that country, but the socialist forces appeared alert, intolerant of their own mistakes, determined to remedy them; the harshest critics raised their voices *inside* the United Workers Party. In Budapest the 200,000 who recently [October 6] followed Rajk's coffin and demanded Imre Nagy in the government asked for socialist democratization; but all this was taking place *outside* of the Party. . . . Each one went his own way; the students who organized the October 23rd demonstration were not the real guiding force of the movement.

At 6 o'clock the morning of October 24, after the Soviet troops came in [by request of Hegedus and Gero] Imre Nagy began to exercise his powers as President of the Council. But what powers? The revolutionary councils, the army, the police, the National Front parties, the armed citizens were by now each moving along its own path; anyone at all—whether what he wanted was a socialist democracy or the return of the past or none of this at all could get his hands on a gun during these days. Clubs sprang up, associations of every kind and description, often duplicating one another. Thursday, November 1st, news came to Budapest that in the provinces beyond the Danube they had elected their own separate governments.

Now, in Budapest, calm is far from being restored. The govern-

ment and insurgents are trying to establish a provisional regime, but it is difficult to predict what turn events will take. The sole substantial guarantee for the future of this country is the new social reality that was created here—the nationalization of the factories and the agrarian reform. Bela Kovacs, freed from deportation three months ago, who returned to his post as Secretary of the Smallholders' Party, stated in a meeting of the Pest Council "let neither barons nor counts nor Whites consider returning to Hungary. . . ." But this viewpoint is certainly not shared by some of the other oldtime leaders, nor by the fascist émigrés who are now waiting at Vienna to reenter the country. . . .

II. The Time of Terror

It is difficult to say when things began to "change"; or rather when the people here began to judge what had happened differently. For some days after the Nagy government set up, they still spoke about "the revolution for socialist democracy" and justified what had been happening on the ground of the tendency towards excesses cropping up in every movement involving force, even a just one.

On October 23 the people gathered to demonstrate against the policy of Hegedus and Gero; it was that same evening that the first armed formations launched their attacks; because of this it is extremely difficult to establish to what extent the two movements coincided, and to what extent the second either grew out of, or was a switch from the first.

It is true that the night of the 23rd, side by side with workers calling for socialist democracy there were groups calling for "democracy without adjectives"; but it is also true that little or no note was taken of the fact that the latter were the *only organized groups*, and the only ones which had a definite program already worked out.

In the days that followed, as the manhunt spread out over the city, most people thought: "They're meeting out justice to the agents of the political police"; and appeared not to see that, in reality, they were aiming at physically liquidating the Communist Party, the trade union leaders, the cooperatives, the state apparatus. Individuals began appearing again about whose objectives no doubt at all could be entertained, many of them returned from abroad whence they had fled in 1945. But people thought: "When water is stirred up mud comes to the surface—when things quiet down these characters will crawl back into their holes again. . . ."

In the revolutionary committees, it is true, right-wing elements kept pushing their way into leadership, shoving aside worker and peasant elements; but people thought: "As soon as the government restores order the workers will take over leadership of the movement once again."

The government, it is true, did not restore order, but people thought: "As soon as things are cleared up with the Russians, Nagy will start getting tough with the counter-revolutionaries now raising their heads. . . ."

In short, the people did see the danger of reaction, but did not, most of them, believe the danger serious.

It was, most probably, when Nagy announced he was taking Hungary out of the Warsaw Pact, and when he recast his government for the second time, that things began to get clearer for many people. By November 1 it became clear to a large part of the population that the "... revolution for socialist democracy" was slowly but surely being transformed into counter-revolution. For the sincere democrats, however, by then it was too late to do anything about it. The massacre of Communists had now assumed giant proportions; the trade unions were being swept away; the cooperatives being destroyed; the revolutionary committees were now quite definitely in the hands of fascists of the Dudas type; a central government no longer existed except on paper; the State was in ruins; the only law was the law of the gun—and the counter-revolutionaries were the ones who had the guns. It was then that the Soviet troops came back again, called in by the new emergency government which Kadar had established. They returned not alone to halt the orgy of bloodletting but returned, as well, to save the Hungarian State.

I shall not here insist on describing the massacres that preceded this intervention. I would not have believed so many ways of torturing and slaughtering human beings existed; they are too monstrous for me to find the words to write about them now. But I hope that if not today, then tomorrow the correspondents who were with me will have the courage, and the opportunity, to tell about the spectacles they witnessed, and the number of times they witnessed them.

But I shall speak here of one of

the minor incidents which also can serve to show what was taking place. The first incident I saw took place in a quiet little square on the outskirts of town. A hundred or so women were lined up waiting their turn on the sidewalk in front of a general provision store. Suddenly a truckload of rebels drove up, blocking the door of the store, the armed men got out yelling wildly, and went crashing into the store. They were blind drunk. But with a speed that revealed a technique they were already thoroughly familiar with, in a few minutes they did a complete job of pillaging the store, smashing to bits whatever they were unable to carry away. Oil trickled down the street from the steps of the store; sugar from the sacks they had gutted was scattered all around. Then an explosion—one of them even more hopped up than the rest had bombed the store. This was just one of many similar incidents I saw.

The Nagy government no longer existed: by now it was only a hypocritical mask which the counter-revolutionaries maintained so that it would—under threat of their guns—deal with the Soviets. As in Budapest, so in the provinces. In village after village I was told that bands of rebels invading the countryside were smashing the headquarters of cooperative farms, murdering the managers, rushing out to the fields to plant stakes to mark "their own" property; in many cases restoring to his castle the one-time baron who now returned as victor.

No one is able to say what would have happened if the Soviet intervention had not blocked this madness, this orgy of blood letting. Perhaps at some point the population

would have turned in desperation and rebelling against the rebels, snatched the guns from their hands. In some districts this might have succeeded, in others not. But out of it would have developed the most frightful civil war a country has ever seen—war not between an anti-State movement and a State; not between government and anti-government forces, but war between man and man. By now without principle, without goal except that of conquering in order to survive. Already the last days before the Soviet troops return had this quality in them.

In this utter destruction not the State alone but even the most rudimentary organized forms of a human community of some sort were being destroyed.

III. "It Can't Go On Like This"

The dawn of November 7 was grey, mist rose from the Danube to the Buda hills; the sound of artillery fire came from the hills, directed towards Csepel Island. On Tokoli, for the first time, the Soviet infantry began to advance, accompanied by armored cars; from Ujpest, in the fourth district, came the crackle of light arms. When the sharp sound of firing from Ujpest became audible in the lull when the cannons were silent, young Josef Kovacs [an art student with whom the author had struck up an acquaintance] said: "Magyar . . . Hungarian. . . ." Then he shook his head: "It can't go on like this" . . .

Josef and three student friends were killed that same day in one of the last bloody clashes in the center of the city; and on Friday, November 9, their coffins were carried out

of the Academy of Fine Arts, between the Soviet tanks, meeting on their way the stretchers of the Red Army which was gathering up its dead. The students in the funeral procession and the Soviet soldiers looked at one another without hatred while together they opened up a path through rows of the lamp posts smashed and twisted by the bombs. Without a word they helped one another clear the road.

Thus a gesture of human compassion accompanied four of the last to fall during the Budapest days. Then there descended over Hungary a calm that was not yet peace. Over Radio Budapest the voice of Kadar spoke to youths like Josef, trying again to establish a faith which a monstrous chain of blunders and the bloody events of the past weeks seemed to have destroyed.

Would Kadar succeed in rebuilding the contact and the faith which existed before a crisis without precedent in working-class history dissolved, in only a few days, Communist Party organization in Hungary? Kadar was probably the most popular leader among Hungarian Communists. In Hungary they tell about the moral strength of Kadar which let him stand firm both against fascism and the Rakosi police. After miraculously escaping the Gestapo, Kadar, accused of treason in 1949, resisted the tortures of the Rakosi police. Even his physical appearance, his frank and open way of doing things, inspire confidence, while no shadow of compromise can be found in the past of this man who fought consistently against the degeneration of the socialist State. His judgements on the past are harsh, minimizing nothing.

When we were received in his office, he said, simply: "We are Communists and have no right to renounce our faith, but the regime governing Hungary during the past years represented nothing. It was a police regime which ignored the country's problems." His language pleased the Communists and inspired respect in opponents. Today, however, Kadar is faced by an agonizing problem: is it possible in a short time to break through the wall of distrust, to reconstitute the very framework of the Hungarian state which the insurrection has shattered?

The second Soviet troop action, on the invitation of the new Kadar government, began at 5 in the morning of Sunday, November 4. Only on November 8 did the Red Army establish control over the city. They ask why the Soviet troops took so many days to occupy Budapest in spite of the superior forces at their command. The truth is that the soldiers of the Red Army did not, as a general thing, fire first, but limited themselves to answering attacks. . . . The Soviet troops permitted life to go on in the city streets, even though this made it difficult to distinguish

the men bearing arms from the ordinary citizens. Certainly their guns fired on zones from which firing came; but the truth seemed to be that sometimes they disregarded even elementary measures for their own safety. The rebels transported arms practically under their eyes. If the Hungarians gave proof of their courage, the Soviet troops demonstrated the will to reduce the number of victims and the damage to a minimum, at the risk of slowing down occupation of the city.

The Soviet soldiers had no liking for this battle. We spoke with some of the officers—one was a captain, from Kiev, another, a lieutenant from Odessa. They were members of the Communist Party of the USSR. They told us that the struggle was for them an atrocious thing, but that they saw it as necessary.

The lieutenant, a 23 year old youth who spoke our language, pointed to a large apartment house whose windows were closely shuttered.

"From up there" he said, "may come my death—at the hands of a man whom I think of as a friend. If we live through this . . . I know that we will be friends."

THE DEAN OF CANTERBURY ON HUNGARY

MORALLY, I am no more able to condone these tragic events than our attack upon Egypt from which the events sprang. But politically—and it is always difficult to disentangle the moral from the political—the situation is different. 1) Soviet intervention in Hungary was invited by the Hungarian Government. We were not invited into Egypt. 2) The Soviet troops were in Hungary and had been for many years, both to keep peace for the progressive elements and to strengthen a barrier against fresh fascist trouble. . . . 3) Our actions were attempts to put the clock back to imperialism and colonialism, whereas the Soviet Union's was to prevent it being put back to fascism, that Fascist Hungary which resulted from our action in 1919. The danger of that relapse was imminent. The workers in no Eastern state could tolerate such a relapse."

—from a statement by Dr. Hewlett Johnson, *British-Soviet Friendship*, Dec. '56