

HUNGARY 1956: WHAT REALLY HAPPENED

When Russian tanks invaded Hungary in October 1956 to smash the workers' revolution, the Communist Party of Australia cheered. A statement by the CPA Central Committee Secretariat was published in Tribune on 31 October 1956. This denounced the uprising and concurred with the Hungarian Stalinist slander that the revolutionary workers and students were fascists:

The victory of this frenzied counter-revolutionary mob would not mean liberty and democracy for the Hungarian masses, but a massacre of the working class militants on an appalling scale, outdoing the horrors following the downfall of the Paris Commune and equalling the barbarism of the Nazis.

It would mean a return to fascist dictatorship as ruthless as that of the pre-war Horthy regime or that of the Hitlerites during the second world war.

Nor would it mean national independence but the occupation of the country by the imperialists, a semi-colonial status for the Hungarian people.

The slogans of the counter-revolutionaries are false slogans. They in reality want to restore capitalism, dictatorship over the working masses and imperialist domination. Such is the reality.

That is why this black counter-revolution must be suppressed in the interests of the Hungarian working people and also the cause of world progress.

The Russian intervention was passed-off by the CPA as 'internationalism'. It was alleged that the Hungarian rebels had been 'stirred up, emboldened and organized' by America.

It is well-known that a dozen American and American-financed organisations are working day and night to build such organisations in the People's Democracies and even in the Soviet Union.

Counter-revolutionaries with pockets full of dollars are smuggled over the borders and dropped from aeroplanes, together with arms and other equipment. Tribune has reported this on many occasions.

The same explanation was offered for earlier uprisings in East Germany (1953) and Poland (Sept. 1956).

Today, the CPA would like us to believe it has fundamentally changed. The old Stalinist politics have been discarded, we're told. The party's stand on Czechoslovakia is often cited as evidence of this. The CPA opposed this invasion as harmful to "the Soviet Union and other socialist countries" (Tribune special issue, 22 August, 1968, p.1). Earlier, the CPA had supported Dubcek's programme of moderate peaceful reform, and pointed to Moscow's "basic role in the struggle for world peace and national independence". (Tribune ibid, p.3).

This weekend, the CPA will give its account of what happened in 1956. Maybe they think the passage of 24 years will blur the facts sufficiently to enable them to pull this off to their advantage. Yet far too many questions need answering for this to be done easily. Whether the CPA leaders like it or not, the spectre then began to re-emerge in Prague only 12 years ago this week is now re-emerging throughout the Eastern European nations right now: the spectre of workers' revolution against Stalinist tyranny and bureaucracy. As one Western observer in Warsaw said a few days ago: "The myth of the workers' dictatorship is becoming a reality."

HUNGARY 1956

The years between the Hungarian Revolution and today have shown it to be only one particularly dramatic and tragic episode in the continuing crisis of Stalinism. The revolt of the Czech workers in Spring 1968 and the recent strikes in Poland show many of the same characteristics, although none has yet reached the proportions of an armed uprising. In each case we see the working class demanding not a return to capitalism but an end to bureaucratic tyranny, and that control of social and economic life pass into the hands of the proletariat itself.

THE origins of the Hungarian Stalinist bureaucracy lie in the advance of the Russian army at the end of 1944. The fascist Horthy regime collapsed in the path of the Russian advance. But Stalin had no intention that it should be replaced by working class power. Throughout Eastern Europe the Red Flags raised above the factories were ordered to be lowered, and the managers and owners were restored.

Stalin had decided that the workers and peasants were to be liberated from fascism in order that "ordinary" capitalism might continue. To this end the Russians set up a Provisional Government of social democratic, Communist and peasant parties. Its first proclamation was announced on Radio Moscow in December 1944. It stated that "The Provisional Government declares that it regards private property as the basis of economic life and the social order of the country, and will guarantee its continuity". It was read by General Bela Miklos, Knight Grand Cross of the Iron Cross, and Stalin's choice as new President of Hungary.

Many other fascists were to find amenable positions in the administrative apparatus of the new government — especially in the AVO (the Security Police). It was by tight control of the police that the Communist Party came to dominate the government. The Stalinists used the method later described by Rakosi as 'salami tactics'. Through the Ministry of the Interior the Party brought trumped up charges against leading members of the other parties who were 'removed'. The process was continued until virtually all the other parties had been sliced away, leaving only a rump of intimidated yes-men.

The working class played absolutely no role in this process, and Rakosi later revealed that discussions of it were limited to only the innermost circle of the Party leadership.

Neither did the workers play any role in the nationalisations and land collectivisation of 1948, which followed on the opening of the Cold War. Over the Easter holidays the now CP-dominated government briefly announced that large scale industry had become state property. The nationalisations involved working class direct action even less than in Britain!

The years 1948-56 were the coldest years of the Stalinist deep freeze. The Rakosi regime maintained itself by systematic terror. The AVO played a key role by constructing a pervasive spy network. The so-called trade unions became simply policemen of the draconian labour laws introduced in 1950. Those found guilty of even minor crimes were given long sentences in labour camps.

The Hungarian economy was trans-

formed into a milch-cow for Russia; in 1948 Finance Minister Erno Gero announced that 25% of national expenditure went to pay Russian war 'reparations'. This placed an enormous burden on the Hungarian workers and peasants:

These were also the years of the 'personality cult' of the "Great Stalin" and the "Wise Rakosi". It is recorded that Rakosi admonished a Central Committee member for describing a Party decision as "wise" — that term, he pointed out, was reserved for himself! This mockery of party democracy was enforced by terror. Between 1948 and 1950 almost half a million party members were purged, and a large number paid for even the mildest criticism with their lives.

The most notorious show trial was that of Laszlo Rajk, veteran party leader, who was executed in 1949 after "confessing" that he was a secret "Tito-Trotsky-Fascist". These judicial murders were common to the whole of Eastern Europe. A feature of them was that those Communist leaders who had been exiled in Moscow were used as a battering ram against the 'indigenous' Party leaders of the wartime underground, as Stalin whipped the parties into line.

THROUGHOUT the period leading to the '56 uprising, some resistance was growing. The conditions precluded strikes or demonstrations, but slumping productivity, soaring absenteeism and sickness, and indifference to quality were all symptoms of working class opposition. When the Kremlin announced in March 1953 that Stalin had died, the East European workers began to strike blows against the regime of oppression that had been forced upon them. In Pzen, Czechoslovakia, there were mass demonstrations in June, and two weeks later the workers of East Germany rebelled.

Although the German revolt was crushed by Russian tanks, it led the Kremlin to ease up. In Hungary, there was a slight relaxation as Rakosi was advised to retire as Prime Minister, to be replaced by the more 'liberal' Imre Nagy. However, he remained in complete control of the Party, the real power centre.

From then on for two years there was to be a tug-of-war between the 'liberals' who formed the 'face' of the regime and the Rakosi-ites who had the real power, and frustrated their opponents' efforts at reform.

But whenever tyrants make concessions, they must take care that they are not interpreted as weakness. The Kremlin vacillated. By mid-1955 Nagy was expelled from the Party as an 'incorrigible right deviationist'. Beneath the surface, however, a new mood was developing amongst both the workers and the intellectuals.

When Krushchev made his "revelations" about Stalin at the 20th Congress of the CPSU, the effect was startling. Although he only attacked the 'excesses' of Stalin, and in fact covered up for the bureaucracy as a whole, Krushchev had in effect challenged the authority of a God; panic swept through the bureaucrat-priests of East Europe. But no amount of historical revision could wipe out the past for the workers.

On the morning of June 28th 1956 the workers of the Zispo Locomotive Fact-

ory in Poznan, Poland, struck. A pre-elected committee presented management with demands on pay and conditions. Workers from other plants joined the strike and the demands soon became political: "Out with the Russians", "Freedom & Bread"!

Russian tanks surrounded the city but it was Polish troops who were used to crush the strike. The immediate 'disturbances' were suppressed, but the bureaucrats were worried. Cautiously at first, changes were made; "disgraced" Communists like Gomulka were brought back into the leadership and in September when the trial of the Poznan workers began, defence rights were given for the first time. Sentences were relatively mild and further trials were abandoned.

When in October Krushchev himself suddenly arrived in Poland, accompanied by large-scale troop manoeuvres on the border, armed groups of workers appeared on the streets. Negotiations were carried on between the Polish Party leaders and Krushchev for a tense 24 hours. But at the end, only ritual declarations of friendship were made. It was apparent to all that for the first time a satellite state had refused to toe the Moscow line.

IN HUNGARY the 'problems of de-stalinisation' were slower to develop and initially took a different form. In April '56 a group of young communists formed a literary discussion club called the Petofi Circle. It soon became a centre for critical discussion and demands for literary and intellectual freedom were voiced by it in 'Hirodalmi Ujsag' (Literary Gazette). Thousands began to attend its meetings, and as they did, their political demands grew.

At one meeting Julia Rajk, widow of Laszlo, demanded that those guilty of his execution should be punished. By July there were calls for the resignation of Rakosi. After futile attempts to suppress the Circle, the Government began to bend. Rakosi 'resigned' and Rajk's corpse was re-buried on October 6th. His funeral quickly assumed the character of a political demonstration, as 200,000 marched behind his coffin.

The execution of Rajk had become a symbol of everything the masses hated.

Throughout September and October the Hungarian people had watched events in Poland. As it became apparent that the Poznan rebels were being lightly treated, and that the Polish government had succeeded in defying the Russians, confidence grew.

The Petofi Circle called for a demonstration of solidarity with Poland. In the absence of Erno Gero, Party Secretary, the Government sanctioned the demonstration. Fearing the effects of a ban, they hoped to lead it in a relatively harmless way. When Gero returned on 22nd October, a day before the demonstration was due, he demanded that it be banned. An announcement to this effect only stiffened the determination that it go ahead.

The next day a crowd of 100,000 marched through Budapest to the statue of General Bem, a Pole with an honoured place in the struggles for Hungarian national independence. Here, a resolution from the Writers' Union was read out which called for the removal of the Rakosi clique, for the formation of a new government including Imre Nagy, free elections, control of the factories by workers and specialists and equality of social and economic relations between Hungary and Russia.