CHAPTER 5

Retreat from Collective Protest: Household, Gender, Work and Popular Opposition in Stalinist Hungary

Introduction

In mid-December 1951, in an attempt to prevent absenteeism on the days immediately after Christmas, the government announced that it would end the practice of paying wages before the holiday. Instead, workers would receive their wages on 27 December. This resulted in considerable discontent. In the Ikarus bus plant in Budapest, both the union and the party organisation were deluged with complaints. Management and the factory organisation received assurances from the ministry that wages could be paid on 23 December despite the decision. The factory party-committee immediately issued a statement to that effect to the discontented workforce. On 23 December, payment of wages commenced to workers on the morning shift. However, at 11am the ministry intervened to prevent the payments to those scheduled to receive their wages at 1:30pm. Management objected, resulting in a dispute between enterprise and the ministry. Ernő Gerő, second in the Stalinist party leadership and its economic policy supremo, was called in to arbitrate. He ruled that no more of the wages should be paid. By this time it was 3.30pm and some fifteen hundred workers were waiting impatiently. As the decision was announced, the fifteen hundred staged an angry demonstration, occupying the offices of management and the factory party organisation. It was only broken up with the use of force. The ÁVH – the Stalinist secret police – took 156 people into custody for their role in the demonstration.¹

This demonstration was the largest single act of collective protest by industrial workers in Hungary during much of the period. It was an exceptional event during the Stalinist years in Hungary, unlike its neighbours; there were

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no major instances of open popular unrest prior to 1956 – whether strikes, political protest or bread riots. This apparent lack of open collective protest existed alongside considerable poverty, declining standards of living, extreme repression and increasing work intensity across industry. Despite this, even open attacks on workers’ incomes met with only sporadic opposition.

As collective protest became more sporadic, members of ‘working-class’ households began to centre their activities increasingly on the private sphere. There was a considerable desire on the part of many to seek a relative degree of household self-sufficiency in the production of foodstuffs, rather than depend on the unreliable state sector. In mining areas, the state began to sponsor a programme of subsidised private house building. This proved to be highly popular, simply because a house with a garden offered ‘working-class’ households greater opportunities for producing food independently of the state sector.

In other words, as collective protest declined, industrial workers increasingly began to centre on the private sphere. Why was this so? The seemingly obvious answer is that it was as a result of a high degree of political repression. This undoubtedly played a partial role. Yet this seems to ignore the fact that collective protest was more prevalent in the rest of Eastern Europe than in Hungary, while the populations of these other states were subject to a similar degree of political repression. The severe poverty of the Stalinist years provides another plausible explanation. It might be said that this fails to account for the precise dynamics of the retreat from open collective protest that occurred. While poverty and political repression provide part of the solution to our

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2 On protest elsewhere in the socialist states during this period, there was substantial working-class protest in the GDR in 1951, see Port 1998, pp. 145–73. In Yugoslavia, the Tito regime’s attempts to collectivise agriculture met with substantial and violent peasant opposition; see Bokovoy 1998, pp. 134–40. The death of Stalin in 1953 led to substantial open protest in many states, but not in Hungary. In May, tobacco workers in Plovdiv rioted; see Crampton 1987, p. 176. In Czechoslovakia, there were riots in Plzeň; see Ulc 1965, pp. 46–9. The best-known disturbances that followed Stalin’s death were those of 17 June 1953 in the GDR. The best English language account is in Fulbrook 1995, pp. 177–87.

3 For some examples of sporadic opposition, see Szakszervezetek Központi Levéltára (Central Archive of the Trade Unions, hereafter SZKL), Szakszervezetek Országos Tanácsa (National Council of Trade Unions, hereafter SZOT), Közgazdasági Osztály (Economics Department, hereafter Közgazdaság), 13d./1952.

4 For the general point, see Pittaway 1998, pp. 305–9. For my exploration of the meanings that the state and mineworkers’ families attached to the limited private house building campaigns of the early 1950s, see Pittaway 2000.