Towards a Social History of the 1956 Revolution in Hungary

What follows is a sketch of possible ways of approaching the social history of the Hungarian Revolution. As I will say at the end, it is not in itself that social history – that would be way beyond the scope of this event. I present here a set of arguments, try to suggest how the Hungarian Revolution fits into what came before, and what came after it, and then I will make a few remarks about participation in demonstrations between 23 October and 4 November 1956, and then will aim to draw some conclusions from my analysis.

Beyond Budapest: The Local Dimensions of the 1956 Revolution in Hungary

I choose to begin this lecture with a picture of the local events of the 1956 Revolution in Bázakerrettye, in the Letenye district of Zala county, in the far southwest of Hungary. Around two hundred and fifty kilometres from Budapest, along the border with then Yugoslavia, now closest to the Mura region of Slovenia, it is about as far as one can get from Budapest and still remain within the borders of Trianon Hungary. It shows the destruction of the village’s Soviet war memorial after the opening local demonstration of the revolution on 26 October 1956.

At first sight, the local Revolution in Bázakerrettye – incidentally, the location of the country’s single largest oil-drilling plant at that time – seems to have been one of the localised ripples of the larger Revolution, driven by the dramatic upheaval in Budapest. After the mass demonstrations and the violent clashes between demonstrators, Soviet troops and Hungarian security forces, which convulsed the capital from 23 October, the Zala county party newspaper was able to state a little complacently on 25 October that ‘our county is far from the capital, not only in the sense of distance, but also in attitude’.

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However, on the same day, demonstrations began in the local industrial town of Nagykanizsa, started by oil-industry workers. They marched peacefully, carrying national flags through the town, protesting against the Soviet intervention, when a group of younger workers broke away destroying the monument to the Red Army troops in the centre. As evening set in, the protest grew larger and they were joined by workers in the town's other factories who gathered around the statue of Petőfi in the town centre to demand the withdrawal of Soviet troops, an amnesty for the armed groups, and that the Stalinist party leadership be brought to justice.

26 October was the day on which the Revolution finally broke out across the county. In Nagykanizsa, a demonstration of secondary-school pupils and students was supported by workers and the police. After taking the town council building, demonstrators moved to the army barracks where they demanded weapons – a demand that was refused. Meanwhile, one middle-aged woman was shot dead in the centre by an unknown attacker, which pushed the situation to breaking-point. Demonstrators once again attacked the barracks demanding weapons. The army fired on them, killing one and injuring fourteen. The army only managed to calm the situation by imposing martial law on the town. Demonstrations had by now spread across the county: in Zalaegerszeg, student-led demonstrations occurred. Demonstrators attacked the county party headquarters; the guards fired back and three were killed. The Revolution spread also to the oil-drilling plants, beginning at Lovászi on 26 October. Workers downed tools in the morning and began to demonstrate. Supported by the local ÁVH – mainly border guard troops who policed the border with Yugoslavia – and, copying the events in Nagykanizsa the previous day, demonstrators destroyed the Soviet war memorial in the centre of the village, returning to the drilling plant where they occupied the personnel office, destroying the cadre files. They then returned to the plant and elected a worker’s council to run the plant whose first decision was to remove the plant’s managing director. Similar events also occurred at other oil-drilling plants.

While the events across Zala and the oil fields were triggered by the events in Budapest, the spread of the Revolution to Hungary’s south-western corner cannot be adequately explained by them. Among the rural population, the decisions of the revolutionary crowds to destroy local council records connected with compulsory deliveries of agricultural produce, punitive taxation of local smallholders, and the property of collective farms, was testimony to utter fury over collectivisation drives that had been renewed in 1955 (following their suspension in 1953). Nagykanizsa’s oil workers had agitated for the removal of the piece-rate system of payment and its replacement with one based on hourly wages with a premium, which would have given them greater security.