Perhaps more clearly than anyone else, George Orwell understood the pivotal role that language plays in mass politics. In order to win the contest for public approval, it is imperative, he knew, to establish a vocabulary that makes it difficult, if not impossible, to think oppositional thoughts. That is why propagandists choose their words with such care; they employ those that have a sympathetic ring to describe their party's plans and actions and those to which a stigma attaches to characterize their adversaries' record and program. Since 1789, for example, almost all partisans have sought to appropriate the word "revolution" because it evokes a vision of radical and progressive change, of a future loosed from the bonds of the past, of a cause for which to die and hence to live. By the same token, they have tagged their enemies as "counterrevolutionaries" who, like Horthy after World War I or Franco in the late 1930s, slowed the march of history by attempting to resurrect the ancien régime.

It is not surprising, then, that when János Kádár formed a Soviet-backed Hungarian government in November 1956, he was quick to label the existing government of Imre Nagy "counterrevolutionary." And throughout the long years of his rule he made certain that, at least in public, no one used the word "revolution" when speaking of the violent upheaval that for thirteen days shook the Soviet Union's East European empire. To do so, he recognized, would have the effect of delegitimizing his regime. Only in 1989, after the Party forced Kádár to relinquish power, did the reform Communist Imre Pozsgay dare to declare openly that 1956 was not, after all, a counterrevolution but a "popular uprising." In that way he announced the "rehabilitation" of the martyred Nagy and the rebellion he reluctantly led.

A year later, in 1990, Hungarians elected a non-Communist government, and veterans of the "uprising" hastened to create a research Institute on 1956, entrusting its direction to György Lítván, a distinguished historian whom Kádár had imprisoned in the late 1950s. Lítván and some of his Institute colleagues are among the contributors to this useful and wide-ranging collection of essays. András B. Hegedűs (not to be confused with the Stalinist politician turned dissident, András Hegedűs) writes with insider's knowledge about the Petőfi Circle, the discussion forum (1955-56) that, by sponsoring open debate on public affairs, helped pave the way for armed resistance. Although neither he nor Gábor Tánzos, the Circle's guiding spirits, maintained personal contact with Nagy, they were, he affirms, committed to the "New Course" that the reform-minded Communist charted during his first ministry, 1953-55.

Nagy was, of course, 1956's most important figure, and János Rainer, a fine young historian and Institute member, provides here a brief but authoritative sketch of his life. He paints a portrait of a flawed but courageous man whose vision of Communism with a human face promised too little to an aroused populace and risked too much for a Soviet authority to which he had
solemnly and irrevocably pledged his life. With respect to charges that Nagy cooperated with the NKVD during his years in the Soviet Union (1930-44), Rainer arrives at a melancholy conclusion:

Undoubtedly, Imre Nagy, in common with virtually all communist exiles, kept contacts with the state security services. To begin with, if so asked, this was something he could not refuse, but during the great purges of 1936-38, he would, no doubt, have regarded it as his communist duty to supply information about the "enemy."

Obviously, Nagy’s behavior prior to his heroic stand in 1956 matters to Rainer. But is it — or the uprising itself — a live issue for members of a still younger generation of Hungarians? Not according to Júlia Szalai, a member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences’ Institute of Sociology. On the basis of questionnaires she designed for Budapest teenagers, she concludes that they are largely indifferent to the past, even to one of their country's most tragic hours. One student, for example, gave this typical response: "The events of 1956 do not touch me emotionally. . . . I would rather live in the present." Living in the present — “postmodern” — era, they also inclined to the view that there exist many "truths" and that it is impossible to choose one above the rest.

György Litván, himself a former Communist, would not agree, for he discovered long ago the truth about Marxism-Leninism. Nevertheless, he concedes that the legacy of 1956, contradictory as it is, divides more than it unites Hungarians. His lucid essay brings us back to the matter of labels. Although he is co-author of a reliable English-language history entitled The Hungarian Revolution of 1956, his reflections reveal an ironic truth, namely that the Stalinists were right when they characterized "the events of 1956" as a counter-revolution. Máté Rákosi and his chief henchman (in reality, as we now know, his superior) Ernő Gerő, were soldiers of the revolution that began in 1917 and that viewed itself as the end point in the journey to utopia that had begun in 1789.

In 1956, Hungarians united to expel a foreign oppressor and to turn the clock back to a previous era. To be sure, the counter-revolutionaries differed with respect to the past they wished to resurrect. Some, like the renowned Marxist philosopher György Lukács, wanted to reclaim the Leninist heritage, believing its “purity” to have been stained by Stalin; he accepted a cabinet post in Nagy’s government. Others, like the writers Gyula Hány and Tibor Déri, hoped to remove the “Leninism” from Marxism-Leninism. Some sided with István Bibó, a left-liberal thinker and Nagy loyalist who looked back with longing to the brief period of democracy, 1945-47. Those on the political right who took their marching orders from József Cardinal Mindszenty rejected the entire postwar era and lobbied for a return to a more traditional Hungary. But whatever past they chose, Hungarians were as one in their rejection of the “real existing” revolution. In that sense they took their place in the history of