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The Democratic Struggle for Power in Hungary: Party Strategies 1945-46

A generation of Western scholars after World War II has taken for granted the policy of the Soviet government to carry out the sovietization of the East European countries. The proof seemed obvious, for in less than three years Communist controlled governments were created in seven states. In Bulgaria the falsified elections of November, 1945, resulted in the victory of the Communist-dominated coalition government; in Romania the pro-Communist Groza regime was installed in March, 1945, through the direct intervention of Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Vyshinskii. In Poland the Russian-supported Lublin government was "enlarged" through the addition of a few members of the Polish government in exile, while in Albania and Yugoslavia the Communist-controlled Liberation Fronts were already in power at the end of the war.1 There were no free elections in these countries; only Hungary and Czechoslovakia had genuine coalition governments and democratic institutions until 1947 and 1948.

Contemporary Hungarian statesmen, however, refused to accept the certainty of Communist victory in post-war Hungary, and even the Soviet government appears to have been unsure of future developments. While Soviet intentions centered around expansion into Eastern Europe, there was no guarantee of success, because cooperation with the Western Allies at the time of the Yalta Conference, held in February, 1945, was imperative for the successful conclusion of military operations in Europe. Since the "spirit of Potsdam" was an important factor in shaping Soviet policy, post-war rivalry was not yet certain.2 Perhaps Stalin too considered control of Albania, Bulgaria, Poland,

2. Several scholars argue that a different policy of the western democracies could have limited Soviet expansion into Eastern Europe and established a relationship between East and West other than confrontation. Consult specifically some revisionist interpretations in Gar Alperovitz, Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam, The Use of the Atomic Bomb and the American Confrontation with Soviet Power (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1965); Cold War Essays (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1969); Walter LaFeber, America, Russia and the Cold War, 1945-1966 (New York: John Wiley, 1967); Gabriel Kolko, The
and Romania, with a friendly Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia to be sufficient
guarantee for future Soviet security. In the absence of documentary evidence
concerning Soviet policy toward Hungary in 1945-46, one can judge Stalin’s
attitude only by his actions, which appear much more uncertain and pragma-
tic than many historians believe.

Although it may seem, in retrospect, that the reduction of Hungary to a
Soviet satellite was part of some grand strategy dictated by the expansionist
elements of Communist ideology, or by the Russian need for security, it is
more likely that Soviet intervention was unplanned and reluctant. Hungarian
domestic developments support this view. Hungary was the last of the Ger-
man satellites to abandon her ties with National Socialist Germany; her anti-
Bolshevik sentiments had been clearly revealed in the rapid overthrow of the
Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919. The authoritarian Horthy regime of the
interwar years collapsed in October, 1944, in the face of the advancing Soviet
armies. The fascist government of Ferenc Szálasi, clearly a puppet of Ger-
many, prolonged Hungarian participation in the war for a few months; between
October, 1944, and April, 1945, Hungary suffered more material damage
than it did throughout the entire war period. Economically devastated, mo-
rally and psychologically moribund, Hungary was ready for fundamental
changes in the spring of 1945.

In 1945-46 genuine democracy prevailed in Hungary. The dissolution of
the bureaucracy and the initial absence of a central government created a
power vacuum which opened the country to democratic forces. On 2 Decem-
ber 1944, representatives of the Communist, Social Democratic, Smallholder,
and Bourgeois Democratic parties, as well as some deputies from the Free
Trade Union Organization, assembled at Szeged to create the Hungarian Na-
tional Independence Front. This motley organization accepted the Commu-
nist-sponsored program for Hungary’s democratic reconstruction, a program
that called for the establishment and protection of democratic principles, a
speedy reconstruction of the country, and a greater centralization of state
power. The plan included punishment for war crimes and the exclusion of
fascist elements and organizations from public life; it also advocated the na-
tionalization of the banking system, basic natural resources, and the execu-
