

# Understanding and Positioning the 1956 Hungarian Revolution in History, Memory and Politics

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## Background

On 23 October 1956, Hungary descended into turmoil as a political demonstration organised by the students of the Budapest Technical University attracted other segments of the population. The demonstrations were a reaction to the Soviet occupation and the introduction of Stalinist Communism following the Second World War. Since 1949, the Stalinist system had been propagating the failures and effects of the Soviet system with appalling economic and societal consequences. The demonstrators voiced discontent and demanded systemic change. (Cox 2006; Rainer 2006) As the demonstrators were met with resistance by the Communist leadership the situation mutated into street fighting. A situation of confusion emerged between different sectors of the organizing population, the leadership scrambling to regain control and Moscow watching from afar, overwhelmed. Ultimately, the Soviet leadership in Moscow re-invaded Hungary on 4 November 1956 ending the turmoil and re-establishing its control under a reconstituted Communist leadership.

## Introduction

The Hungarian events of 1956 represent a key moment of Hungarian as well as world history. An event that challenged Moscow's domination and dictated the course of the Cold War. In its globality, 1956 represents a sensitive issue for Hungary. Amid the chaos, with the great number of participants and quick escalations, the events unfolded erratically producing contrasting understandings. How 1956 is inscribed and remembered thus became an issue of much controversy. Recognising the political nature of the event, the interest here is to decipher this reality by examining how 1956 has been remembered in successive periods (ie. post-1956, 1989 and post-2010) and what have Hungarians done with the events of 1956. In turn it becomes not only a historiographical problem but a political one as well. The research is also aimed at establishing whether 1956 constitutes an instance of *Geschichtspolitics*, that is 'history politics'.

## Approaches and Material

The discussion first problematizes the different denominations associated with the events of 1956: revolution, insurrection, freedom fighting and counter-revolution. This is done to emphasize that the language used not only reflects on which elements the emphasis is placed but also that the choice is a political one. (Gyáni 2008)

The rest of the analysis is organised according to three periods:

- Post-1956 or the Kádár Era characterised by Soviet repression and collective amnesia;
- 1989 or *Rendszerváltás* Era when Hungary overthrew the Communist system;
- Post-2010 or Orbán Era.

Here, the discussion focuses on addressing the nature and role of 1956, that is the discourse related to 1956, to corroborate the argument that it is a moment of 'history politics'. Particular attention is given to the main identifiable turning points in the dialogue.

The material selected is to give the domestic Hungarian discourse the fore as foreign sources problematize 1956 differently, primarily as a problem of memorialisation.



Imre Nagy statue at Vértanúk tere, Budapest, during a protest to the memorial's removal (the sign reads: "the bridge is temporarily closed due to political reasons") from: Nyugat.hu

## Findings

The conceptualisation of the events, that is the different 'versions', derive from where one places the emphasis. Different groups: intellectuals and students, workers' councils and fighting groups had different experiences. No single identifier is sufficient to encompass all of them. (Kemény 2016)

What 1956 represents is determined by the political intention of the agent invoking it:

- In the Kádár Era, the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (MSZMP) portrayed 1956 as a counter-revolution of fascist elements and criminals. Allowing otherwise would have meant saying that the members of the Communist party, the workers, were overthrowing the Stalinist Communist system. (Rainer 2016).
- During the *Rendszerváltás*, 1956 was embraced as a popular insurrection and freedom fight. Emphasis was both placed on political figures such as Imre Nagy, the reformist Prime Minister, and Cardinal József Mindszenty in addition to groups of armed fighters. This reconnected the achievements of 1989 back to 1956 and used it as justification for change and to provide the values of the new state. (Nyysönen and Metsala 2016)
- Since 2010, the discourse regarding 1956 has been restricted to the mere narrative of the freedom fighters of the nation. By underlying the popular character of the events, the Orbán Government created a narrative in which the middle class supporting it is at the centre. The narrative also portrays FIDESZ as the destined ruler of Hungary. (Nyysönen and Metsala 2016)

1956 has become a historical event which has been used as instrument of politics. Given the analysis conducted of the three periods, 1956 conforms to the definition of history politics given by Edgar Wolfrum, a German historian who contributed heavily to the development of *Geschichtspolitics* in 20<sup>th</sup> century historiography:

"History politics is a field of action and politics in which various actors load history with their specific interests and seek to use it politically. It aims at the public and seeks legitimizing, mobilizing, politicizing, scandalizing, defamatory and other effects in the political debate." (Troebst 2014)

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