

How History Flows Backward in Hungary

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I SUSPECT THAT there are two histories, and I wonder if this was not always so: one, incalculable, meandering through human nature and the nature of things; the other unfolding as events and meanings are recorded, written, misunderstood, and falsified. I have this impression, not for the first time, as I walk the streets of Hungary, talk with people, witness events—and read the foreign press, listen to CNN, and listen to people abroad, on trips, as they tell me the little and the truncated that they claim to know about the same Hungary to which I return in a few days. I also read interviews given by Hungarian representatives to foreign reporters, and chuckle each time I catch the former telling untruths to the latter; no, not outright lies, only things modified so that they may understand within their own “context”; but they hardly ever do.

For the full truth we must go back 500 years when a truly united Christian Europe, the *Christiana Respublica* with its conflicts and basic accords, was suddenly split by the Turkish thrust into its heart, almost to Vienna, but including Buda. The Europe of the full Renaissance, developing evenly from Spain to Transylvania (printing, splendid courts, poetry, architecture, prosperous burghers, universities, disputations, the gold of America, the trade routes to the

Spice Islands and the silk of China), came apart. The West continued to develop: science, industry, discoveries, brilliant plays, the laws; the East stagnated then fell back under devastation and neglect, crushing taxes, boys and girls abducted by the Sultan’s agents. The aristocrats of Hungary gathered in Vienna, the little people shrank in their endeavors, commerce, community life, and culture.

The situation, with its ups and downs, but marked mostly by despair, continued roughly to the end of the eighteenth century, and according to foreign travelers even beyond, not in Hungary alone, in East Europe generally. Three centuries of quasi-stagnation, relieved by the revolution in France, which opened new channels, and later by English liberal practices, which presented models of industry and organization. Not before 1850 did East rally to West, and then as a poor cousin. Even in the 1920s and 1930s the East was a quasi-colony of the West, with factories, insurance companies, iron works, and oil fields owned by the British, the French, the Italians, the Germans, the Belgians, and the Dutch. The little people did not experience it directly; the nation and its leaders were humiliated, reminded of their secondary, dependent status. In short, imagine Hellas being overrun by Persia at Marathon, and remaining intermittently occu-

pied until Rome takes over the Mediterranean, thereafter a kind of Roman territory.

It would be foolish to imagine that the East has not retained deep resentment and mistrust *vis-à-vis* the West. Clemenceau is still a curse word in Hungarian, on account of Trianon, and so are Wilson, Roosevelt, even Eisenhower and Dulles, with their promises of a "rollback" of Russia. Fifty-thousand Hungarians died under tanks and in gulags because they believed the "Americans are coming!" Mistrust of the entire Western world—remains unchanged since the time of the Turks—of the exploitive commercial ventures which flood the country, of the moral the cultural filth pouring in from Germany, England, America. I do not exaggerate in saying that about one third of the population would gladly change 1994 for 1984: *then*, a fading communist regime was willing to tolerate quite a bit, and the loans it took from the West paid for a reasonable supply of consumer goods; order and security were enforced, the kiosks displayed no pornography. People managed to make ends meet; *this* is what they now remember. Contrast it with *now*: stagnating incomes but soaring prices and unemployment; youth on the street, idle and criminal; sets of luxury villas built for the former potentates who now claim to have always been democrats (the new virtue!) and adepts of the free market. And Kadar's loans, now 23 billion dollars, must be repaid. A never-ending debt.

Thus the population divides into two, rather unequal, parts. Just as several hundred years ago there were those loyal to the emperor in Vienna and those insisting on independent nationhood (in Russia, there were the "Westernizers," say a Turgenev, and the "Populists," say a Dostoevsky), the phenomenon repeats itself. A narrow layer of businessmen and a layer narrower still of intellectuals literally ape the West, primarily

America. A much larger segment—shall we say the "silent majority"?—desperately demands a return, after forty years of nation-bashing, to the nation's historical realities and values. These include a fervent patriotism, perhaps with too much rhetoric, loyalty to church, a rural way of thinking, and a veritable religion of literature, poetry, and folk-art. In East Europe, from Finland to Greece, that is lands occupied during much of their national existences, literature has been the ultimate expression of love of homeland, since poems, songs, religious oratory, home art, etc., could be created, transported from lip to lip, and hidden from the censor or the informer. In America we do not have the slightest notion of this kind of cult which makes or destroys a nation. And behind it all there is the *language*, both the beloved dialect and the language of refined literature—for which innumerable people have sacrificed their lives. When the Ceausescu regime re-carved the gravestones with Rumanian names (in the cemeteries of Transylvania), it made itself more hateful to Magyars than with any other drastic measure. Or when it abolished instruction in Magyar in the schools; or when it took away the right of newspapers to print in Hungarian.

Language is the most protected common possession of fifteen million Hungarians, inside and beyond the borders. But language represented not only literature but also a part of national sentiment, populist programs, and of the constant fear that the nation may one day vanish. Writers still engage in controversy with Herder's thesis that believes Hungarian may not survive in an ocean of Slavs, Germans, and legal Latin, with the court being in Vienna. Now let's appreciate, in the light of the essentiality of language, the past four decades when the Marxist regime did its best to wipe out "Hungaricity," subvert the language through its turgid prose, and let loose a

slogans-cum-bureaucratese variety whose primitiveness and brutality left its stamp on public discourse, conversations, and human relationships. (Remember that Solzhenitsyn's first complaint was the Kremlin had bastardized the Russian language. Its acolytes did the same elsewhere.)

The point for us here is that the "Westernizers" and the "Populists" in Hungary are locked in a potentially mortal combat. The target is not directly the language, but all things connected with it—in the last analysis, the nation's Christian-Magyar integrity as a linguistic island in the Carpathian basin, or its turning into a liberal-cosmopolitan melting pot for which it is not prepared by the structure of its soul. We shall see similar conflicts throughout Eastern Europe, and we expect in vain a restructuring on the Western model. From the Baltic to the Adriatic, the line of European division is so deep that the Western model may, for a moment, impress materially starved populations, but when the price of material contentment (consumer goods) will have to be paid by ethical-spiritual sacrifice, then the old resentments will break out, possibly along the historical lines of hostilities and hatreds.

The naive ones, beginning with 1989, believed that the problem of the communist past may be settled by a democratic future. And indeed, one may count the word "democracy" on pages of newspapers and find it as often and as superficially used as Stalin's name used to appear everywhere, from textbook to poster. But democracy means very little, it is a cultic term in the East like "Michael Jackson" or "McDonald's." Of course, everybody uses it, many times a day, for it has a tremendous snob appeal, together with "pluralism," "united Europe," and "peace." As Talleyrand said of post-Holy Alliance Europe in the 1820s, nothing in politics has changed since the previous century, except the "hypocritic

verbiage." He described exactly the situation after 1945, under the aegis of the United Nations, NATO, or the Common Market. This hypocrisy East Europeans smell out much better than Westerners who are broken on the wheel of media-despotism. This is not to say that East Europe would not like to believe that millions of dollars will pour in from Western treasuries; that they, too, will soon be part of the Western security system; that this system will protect them when needed; and that the West has a policy other than *sacro egoismo*. Deep down, however, every citizen beyond the 1500 line of rupture (from the Baltic to the Adriatic) is aware that the real choice is between national independence or a sell-out to internationally hard-to-define forces who line up from Western bankers to Teachers College pedagogues.

At present the wager would favor the Westernizing liberals, as matters a hundred or more years ago seemed to favor Alexander Herzen, the *chef de file* of liberals, over the Dostoevskys. Unfortunately, no compromise ensued in Russia, but, fifty years later, Bolshevism came. Today matters are possibly more serious. Hungary's liberals (often ex-communists or at least communist bureaucrats, peacepriests, and ideologues of the George Lukacs school) have financial and propaganda resources at their disposal that Herzen and his modest paper, *Kolokol* (*The Bell*), never possessed. These resources run under the name of investments, foundations, universities in charge of "changing the old mentality," that is, from national feelings and loyalties to internationalist business attitudes. The efforts may bring short-term profits—and, after all, that is the objective—but its longrange effects may be devastating, extending beyond the vast region. Some claim that integration with "United Europe" is a more concrete project than an open-ended one would be, embracing the entire West. But, as I have argued

here, there is a line of rupture running through Europe that may never heal, and on one side of which, the western side, there are forces ready to colonize or neo-colonize the eastern side. The Balkans are a superb illustration of Europe's impotence: today *vis-a-vis* Bosnia, tomorrow *vis-a-vis* larger territories.

In an interview at the end of last year, the Pope mentioned a half century's struggle between "proletarian internationalism" and the "national identities" which were ultimately victorious. The tragedy is that today we may speak of a "liberal internationalism" and the same "national identities," locked in a tacit but furious combat, in the course of which the former has all the advantages. These advantages include the granting or withholding of urgently needed funds; the guiding of world opinion through a quasi-monopoly of the world-media which paint liberalism with flattering colors, but which blacken the concept of national identity as a poison blown by Hitlerist projects on the nations of East Europe; and finally, the clamor for consumer goods which, even when not needed, spread their slogans and images on the television screen. All in all, the situation from the East European angle of vision has not changed substantially. Formerly, the Kremlin's interest was to suppress the satellite nations' will to live, in the name of a pseudo-internationalism; it is today the interest of Western-sponsored internationalism to attempt the same because its representatives see the ex-satellites as forming a gigantic market for their products. These products also include "cultural" products, from pornographic cassettes to Disneyland, and their true rival on the market is each nation's culture. As the Pope said, over against Western materialism and washed-away identity, the East possesses still intact religious and home-grown values, clearly, enemies of Western commercial ideology.

This is the real battlefield these days,

although its mere mention, in the Western or Eastern media, brings various charges of writers. Speaking of the media of East Europe as independent entities would anyway be the wrong combination of words. Right after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, German, French, Italian, and American media chiefs invaded East Europe, buying up from 49 to 70% of local newspapers, magazines, intellectual reviews, bookstores, radio and television stations, which ever since have been publishing and broadcasting in the spirit of the owner. There is not a single independent newspaper in Budapest today, and busy press officials perform the necessary self-censorship when an author, naive or honest, would tackle forbidden topics or expressions. For example, a young friend of mine, a geographer and anthropologist by profession, could finally publish an article on the nomadic tribes of Siberia, previously advised against as "touchy" for Soviet interests; now he has a similar difficulty with an article on "Indians in American Reservations," rejected by one editor as "delicate in the present circumstances." The plurality of the media, hence, does not mean press freedom; privatization has taken the press out of the Party's hands and redistributed its organs among the highest bidders. The same can be said of book publishers and bookstores: the new owners concentrate on near-rubbish as reliable money-makers, as serious books retreat to small publishers and bookshops. It is then explained that this is the price to be paid for "freedom." No wonder the glacial air of Soviet presence has not given over to relaxation, but to cynicism, particularly noticeable among the superior students.

The West is lucky that it can claim innocence and blame Soviet plunder for the ills of the ex-satellites. Indeed, the population, except the minority which used to be favored by the Party, puts the heaviest of accusations on the commu-

nists, then as well as now. The charges run like this, and it is natural that in retrospect the gruesome aspects weaken, although enough remains to add up to a grievous history. Starting with the very late sixties, the regime began to moderate its pre- and post-1956 excesses. Money came into the country via foreign loans, and the first beneficiaries, outside of Party lords, were intellectuals: books, concerts, theatre—all practically free, with author's rights and editions running to many thousands. The Party also tried to detach some reliable (read: morally weak) intellectuals from the ranks of the opposition, permitted them to go abroad to lecture, and expected from them some favorable propaganda for the "liberalized" Marxist regime, as well as for some leaders of Party-run industrial plants.

These selfsame leaders easily survived the political change-over of the late 1980s, and they now occupy the highest positions in economic life and in culture. This is a very interesting and important phenomenon in Russia and its ex-satellites. The population does not trust them, and demands a moral and legal X-ray to be directed at them, whether in business or among the clergy, university professors, and parliamentarians. Conversations begin and end with the guessing game: Who was what ten or twenty years ago? Was he an agent of the Party? Did he inform on people, torture them? Did he flatter the powerful? The strange thing is that the ex-Partymen do not even take the trouble to hide, they are now the biggest democrats and free-marketeers. They were the ones after 1990 who bought up the industrial enterprises that they had run on purpose to ruin; they were the most eloquent spokesmen of "privatization," meaning their own profit; they make speeches on television; as parliamentarians, they drive expensive foreign cars and they have the fattest bank accounts, in Zurich and New York. And they or their less busy sons control

half of the cultural life, threatening the "Populists" who do not subscribe to their "value-judgments" and their licking of Western boots. These sons are also those who write, directly in English, editorials for the *New York Times*, when the latter wants to print "reliable" news about Hungary's return to its "reactionary" past.

Under slightly different conditions, that is without less prudence in high places, a civil war could be easily ignited, between the silent majority and militant opportunists grouped in opposition parties. No, there is no moral equivalence here, only two, in every respect unequal, line-up, not in Hungary alone, but in the whole of East Europe flexing and abusing its muscle.

Under slightly different conditions, that is without less prudence in high places such as the premiership of Jozsef Antall (now deceased), a civil war could be easily ignited between some section of the "silent majority" and the opposition which wants to gain the upper hand and goes about its project without regard for national and regional realities. There is a distorted perspective on both sides, and the distortion is not entirely the consequence of forty years of communist rule. One must go back to Magyar mentality as it developed through the ages, a mixture of a somber outlook ("that of the peasant, fearful for his harvest," as Antall once said) and the gentry's arrogance, the panache which ends in a "devil may care" attitude. Add to it the bureaucratic habits, inherited from the Habsburg centuries, and the feeling of encirclement by enemies considered inferior: Romanians, Serbs, Slovaks. This mixture, more than the communist era, may be responsible for the readiness for confrontation, the refusal of compromise, the sharp edge of debate, and the despair that nothing can ever be straightened out.

Inevitably the Western pedagogues and medicine men arrive, recommend-

ing free market and democracy to a collectivity which has hardly ever practiced such things and, deep down, rejects them. Historical instincts—highly developed in the entire area—tell the nation that the “West” has again sold it out, recalling Trianon and Yalta; that “Brussels” is eager for an economic takeover; and that a “fifth column” is active in the country’s institutions and culture. The reality is that none of the nations of East Europe can be governed like those in the West, and that the present transition period, which will last for at least twenty years, would have been much better dealt with by an authoritarian regime. Hungary, Poland, Romania, the successor states of Yugoslavia and Ukraine are much better attuned to a centralized government with which there are accommodations, than to a parliament with innumerable parties and irresponsible little lords. One of the afflictions in Hungary since 1990, an affliction that cannot be cured, is the ill-fitting garb of democracy forced on the country. The present masters of the planet can conceive of nothing but a democratic regime, from Haiti to Mozambique to Bulgaria, a regime which entails unsuitable economic and cultural policies. In underdeveloped countries the unsuitable situation can be enforced for a long time, although tribal and other rebellions also break out at times there. Countries which count themselves as parts of European culture (in spite of the rupture of 1500), respond by various excesses: they return the quasi-communist Left to power; they turn to fire-brand nationalism as a counter-democracy; they engage in civil confrontation between nationals and cosmopolitan liberals. Indeed, Hungary today, with its modicum of well-being, as compared to others in the area, resembles France mostly, with the latter’s hidden and not-so-hidden civil war since 1789.

Is there an exit? Hungary used to be an exporter of agricultural good, with a few

pointed achievements in industry: electrical products, small boats, buses, trucks. The communist regime engaged in a forced industrialization, in mere imitation of Soviet domestic policy. The result was an enormous waste, not quite noticed because the country’s exports were directed eastward, and the eastern trading partners, Russia included, but also Cuba and Vietnam, were used to such a poor and incompetent job that the products of Hungary were luxurious in comparison. With the collapse of the Eastern (forced) partners, Hungary finds its exports practically blocked in that direction, but also in the direction of future, Western partners, now grouped in the Common Market and protective of their own industry and agriculture.

It will take many years for Hungary to find its bearings in the international trade, to redirect traffic. Policies of a wider nature will have to take this period of hesitancy into consideration, since trade policies by the great powers are as aggressively pursued as are their military and diplomatic policies. Who knows at this point Hungary’s future partners, in view of the crisis in the East (Russia and its neighbors) and the question-marks in the West? The East seems to be the immediately vulnerable side. Huge masses of migrants press on Hungary’s eastern and southern borders, mostly Slavs and Romanians, Russians, and Gypsies. A policy of firm rejection may endanger economic relations with the mother countries of these refugees. From the West comes considerable uncertainty whether a “united Europe” will actually come into existence, and whose interests will it serve if it does materialize? Opposition to the Brussels Plan is growing in West Europe, and only thick layers of hypocrisy hide it from the citizens. The betting is that Germany will in the long run organize some sort of European cooperative zone, once it digests the Eastern territories. With such an evolution the

continent's weight will be heavier in the center and in the east, which means that the area we are here considering would be consolidated under some kind of German hegemony, or at least joint Russo-German influence. Hungary's place would be indicated on such a chessboard, again as an island in the sea of Germans and Slavs—counting also with the reflux of American influence as local realities get stabilized. Herder's thesis may then be revived: Can Hungarians, as a language group and as a nation, survive?

These questions must, of course, be formulated in the much wider regional context, in which NATO and Common Market come and go, and nations and their basic interests remain. A half-century's communism compressed the vast area and tried, with some temporary success, to mold all these old nations and semi-nations in the same pattern. Naturally the future will work to undo these artificial similarities and restore the diversities, together with cooperation, jealousies, fear, and alliances. Superficial observers speak of "Balkanization" from the Adriatic to the Urals. But this larger half of Europe, which appears like one solid land-mass compared to the complex configuration of West Europe, can only maintain its extraordinary plurality if it is "broken into pieces," and if a mountain range like the Carpathians separates not just two countries but two worlds, marked by different

memories, family structure, language, art, religion, and profound loyalties. This is true even of the steppe, which on the Russian and the Polish side has seen different civilizations erected; and of the Danube which not only connects seven countries whose trade route and culture-carrier it is, but also creates conflicts, the most recent being the one between Slovakia and Hungary, not to speak of the one caused by the embargo against the Serbs. Brief visits to Prague, Vienna, and Budapest will show that, in spite of their proximity and Germanic/Habsburg general architectural style, these three capitals vastly differ, not only do their churches and public buildings but also their cuisine and the temperament of their inhabitants.

In the long run, there is no place for pessimism. Wars and vandalism will continue to menace these many nations, yet they possess a tremendous power of recovery, partly because history has not granted them the dubious present of decadence and dissolution. For years I have been teaching the students of the University of Budapest. After four decades in the profession, I can unequivocally state that nowhere have I faced young people in classes with such knowledge, philosophical depth, and speculative faculty. When I reflect upon this annually renewed experience, I am led to conclude that a stern history may compensate a nation with accrued intelligence.