

Hungary:

The Hope and the Challenge



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FOR THE KREMLIN LEADERS, the decision to send their armies storming back into Hungary on November 4th must have been a hard one. Perhaps it was a measure of their desperation that they thus boldly, with all the world watching, gave the lie to their protestations of international good will and respect for the sovereignty of smaller nations.

This desperation—for such it seems to have been—must now be heightened by the Hungarians' heroic stand against the Soviet armies. No barrage of lies, no stratagem of diplomacy, could cloak the Russian moves with any semblance of legitimacy in the face of so firmly united and so long sustained a resistance, eloquent even in its silence.

The bold exposure of Soviet brutality shocked the world, and brought denunciations of Russia even from her Communist allies and her neutralist friends. But beyond this, the Hungarians' bitter struggle must have given serious pause to the Kremlin; for it proved, without doubt and in defiance of all Marxian ratiocinations, the total failure of Communism in its attempt to conquer the human spirit.

For a decade the Russians used every device they knew to transform an already battered Hungarian people into the living machines that Marx and Lenin and Stalin envisioned. Their secret police brought terror to the night. The Reds rewrote history. They burned books, and sought at whatever cost to stamp out truth and to crush the hope of freedom wherever it might yet live. Those who stood in the way were liquidated. Hungary's national voice was stilled. A whole new generation came along who had never known anything but the Nazi masters and the Russian "deliverers," who had had no experience of freedom and no training except in the Communist idiom.

And yet it was this very generation, the pride and the custom-made product of Communism, who made the ultimate sacrifice to rid their country of Communist rule. It was they who led the marchers, who manned the barricades, who defied the tanks—and whose bodies bear mute witness, even today, to the strength of their defiance. A whole people has risen as one against the Russian army, attacking tanks with stones and fighting with bare fists. And an admiring, incredulous world has found the urge to liberty imprinted so indelibly on the human soul that no brutality can erase it. From this, both we and the Kremlin can learn.

Through all the years of Soviet repression, through the blackout of truth and the Pavlovian indoctrination of the young, the spirit of liberty not only survived in Hungary but grew stronger. Against it, the Russians are like men flailing at a ghost: they can see it, but they can't touch it; they can feel its strength, but their weapons are powerless against it. The longer man's yearning for freedom is repressed, the sharper it becomes.

There are other important lessons in the story of Hungary.

One is that Soviet power is not nearly so great as everyone—including,

Hungary

presumably, the Russians—had supposed. The seventy-five satellite divisions that had been counted as part of Russia's strength have changed suddenly from a net asset to a net liability. To what extent the turmoil in Eastern Europe can be laid to the shattering of the Stalin myth is hard to say, but the Hungarian patriots were goaded by a far stronger force than mere disillusionment. As long as the hearts and will of the satellite peoples remain free they remain a threat to the whole structure of Kremlin power. The weight of Soviet arms could crush the Hungarian uprising. It could not alter the basic mathematics that have inverted a substantial segment of supposed Soviet strength and poised it against her.

Another lesson from the Hungary story is far less reassuring to the West, far less a source of pride and encouragement.

As the Hungarian patriots stood barehanded before the oncoming Soviet tanks they cried, "Give us help!"—and the world turned away in embarrassed silence.

The United States was accused of encouraging the patriots to strike for their freedom and then of standing idly by while the Russians struck back; the American reply was a denial that any more than a passive, spiritual sort of resistance had been meant. This may be technically true. But it still is an empty echo to the pleas of dying men that we keep aloft the banner they have raised.

When an imprisoned people with the courage to die for freedom calls out to the free world for help, is there nothing to be done beyond appointing three minutes of silence to honor their courage—and their memory?

Something beyond the wringing of hands was called for; nothing came.

When the Reds of North Korea swarmed across the 38th parallel, a way was found to help, and the onslaught was repulsed under the flag of the United Nations. Whatever the technical differences of time, place and circumstance, the moral issue raised when Soviet troops crashed into Hungary was the same. But because the outrage was committed by mighty Russia rather than by little North Korea not a finger was raised in all the free world. While Budapest burned, the UN debated—three thousand miles away.

This is not said in reproach, or in recrimination. Any action might have incurred desperate risks to the peace of the world, and in a nuclear age the price of peace comes high. But we should bear in mind that the present threat to the survival of the United Nations does not come alone from the Middle East. Freedom is still indivisible; an assault on freedom and human dignity anywhere is an assault on freedom and human dignity everywhere. Unless the United Nations finds a way to defend the principles on which it is founded—to say "What ye do even unto the least of these my brethren, ye do also unto me"—those principles will become a mockery and the United Nations a forum for idle debate, without respect or purpose.

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