

City of Hope and Heartbreak: Budapest 1956

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For a few days in 1956, Budapest became the capital of freedom. The city, which was gutted and nearly destroyed by the ruthless military showdown between Soviet and Nazi troops in World War II, became a city of hope and heartbreak in 1956. The Hungarian nation's patriotic spirit and desire for self-government broke the yoke of the Soviet Empire in Hungary, if only for a few days.

Ruszkik haza!—Russians, go home!—demanded a growing crowd of some 300,000 in the heart of the city, many of them young people, who had everything to lose. Hungarians began to tear off red stars from buildings, they toppled the statue of Stalin in front of the Hungarian Radio Building, and ripped out the Soviet symbol from the middle of the Hungarian flag. Framed portraits of Lenin, Marx and Stalin were gathered on the street and burnt in bonfires. The flames of freedom lit up the nights.

The Soviet military stationed in Hungary was considerably large. It should have been relatively easy to put down what the regime called a fascist “counter-revolution”. But it wasn't. Moscow underestimated the resilience of the people and the determination of Hungarians to fight. For their freedom, for their family, for their life.

From the West, Hungarians received sympathy and prayers. But not much more. And yet, these mostly young patriots succeeded in driving out the Soviet tanks all the way to the outskirts of Budapest. A free and democratic Hungary seemed within grasp.

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But the Communist Politburo in Moscow was not yet ready for a breakup of the Iron Curtain and on November 4, Soviet tanks rolled through the city. Thirty thousand troops and more than a thousand tanks eventually put down the lightly-armed civilians of Budapest.

The Soviets gave Hungary a new leader: János Kádár. He announced over the radio that the “Hungarian Revolutionary Worker-Peasant Government” was being formed to protect Hungary's “socialist achievements”. And people who disagreed, people who took a part in the Freedom Fight had to pay the price. For many the ultimate price. Some were simply shot on the streets like dogs, some disappeared in the middle of the night, some spent years in the prison cells at Andrásy út 60, where the *House of Terror* today commemorates the brutality of the communist secret police.

Although János Kádár's system was dubbed “goulash communism” for its more relaxed policies that allowed some dissent, the one-party system, political censorship, food shortages of a

centrally planned economy, and arbitrary coercion of citizens by state officials remained until the very last days of the regime.

Almost sixty years after the Hungarian revolution, and more than 25 years after the regime change, it is more important than ever for Hungarians and Americans alike to remember that communism was not a beautiful utopia. It was and is an ideology that enables tyranny. Communist regimes everywhere systematically killed a portion of their own people as a matter of policy in peacetime, denied citizens their basic rights, robbed them of their food and of their labor, and tore families apart in maintaining the police state.

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The mass exodus, one of the largest the U.S. had ever seen, of political dissenters from Hungary in the days following the 1956 revolution revealed the true intolerance of the “socialist dream”.

The Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation, through our Witness project tells some of the true stories about life in communist regimes. To understand the depth and scope of the evil of communism we have to listen to those who knew it all too well, those like:

Béla Krasznay who spent nearly eight years in the notorious Reck labor camp during the 1950's as a political prisoner due to his family background (they had been land-owners and military officers).

János Horváth who served as the youngest member of the Hungarian parliament in 1948, was imprisoned for four years by the communist regime because of his political beliefs. He eventually arrived in the United States only to return to the Hungarian Parliament after the Iron Curtain was torn down. He became Hungary's oldest Member of Parliament until his retirement in 2014.

Livia Gyarmathy who as a young girl was ordered by the state to become a chemist, despite wanting to go to medical school. She eventually became a filmmaker, and produced the first ever film about the Reck labor camp—the Hungarian Gulag

Dániel Magay, whose idyllic childhood was wrecked when communist authorities targeted his father, a popular businessman. Though his efforts to escape communism took Dániel to the 1956 Olympic Games and, eventually, to San Francisco, Dániel remains deeply shaped by having grown up under that brutal system.

We must not think that the fall of the Soviet Union meant the “end of history” or even the end of communism. As Charles de Gaulle, the former French president, reportedly said: “Stalin didn't walk away into the past, he dissolved into the future.”

Today, one fifth of the world's population lives in a one-party communist state.

This very summer, new statues of Stalin have been erected in several Russian towns by the Communist Party of the Russian Federation whose leader promised new statues are coming to Irkutsk in Siberia and to Eastern Ukraine.

In Donetsk, where the Soviet Union remains responsible for the death of millions of Ukrainians in the period of forced starvation known as Holodomor, a new cult of Stalin is on the rise with new street posters of the bloody murderer now increasingly on display.

Russia is eager to display the red flag with hammer and sickle as a sign of past glory at sporting events from the Sochi Olympics to the FINA World Championships in Kazan. All this while, Russian authorities have shut down Soviet era archives, revised children's text books, and harassed or jailed historians or journalists who dare to tell the truth about life in the Soviet Union.

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And in our own country, a country that spent more resources on fighting communism than any other country in the world, we see a shocking lack of knowledge from teenagers and young adults who do not know the basics of 20th century history. They don't understand how bankrupt Marxist ideology is and why the struggle we as Americans took against communist imperialism was and is worth it.

The simple lesson of the Cold War is that there is absolutely nothing romantic, cute, or enviable about the communist utopia, nor for that matter the socialist systems that promise to get us there. Few nations know this better than the Hungarians, who's torn red white and green flag became, in 1956, a symbol for a universal desire for freedom. And so it remains still today. Let us work to make sure a new generation understands the sacrifice required to resist tyranny and the hard work needed to maintain our free society.