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Eyewitness to the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and its aftermath of freedom



Rebels wave the Hungarian tricolour, with the Kossuth symbol bearing the cross of St. Istvan, from a tank captured in the main square in front of the Houses of Parliament in Budapest, Hungary, Nov. 2, 1956. (AP file photo)

by Edith K. Lauer

Sixty years ago, Hungary played an historic role in the Cold War when it fought for freedom and independence from Soviet communist tyranny.

On Oct. 23, 1956, I was an incredulous 14-year-old, caught up in a peaceful march of a few hundred university students. By the time we found ourselves in front of the Parliament, there were 200,000 of us, euphorically singing, reciting poetry and shouting demands for free elections, and the withdrawal of Soviet troops from the country.

Later, when the demonstrators tried to read 16 points at the Hungarian Radio, the ÁVH (State Secret Police) shot into the crowd, killing and injuring many. The [Hungarian Revolution](#) and Freedom Fight of 1956 had begun.

The excitement we felt was indescribable. Schools and workplaces closed, and within 24 hours, unarmed students and workers organized cells to resist the Soviet tanks that appeared overnight in Budapest.

In the coming days, my sister and I were soon prying up paving stones on the busy nearby intersection to build barricades against the tanks. My mother, a pharmacist, was helping injured freedom fighters and supplying alcohol for Molotov cocktails.



Edith K. Lauer witnessed the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 as a young teen in Budapest.

My father was a member of the Revolutionary Committee of his workplace, the Hungarian National Bank. My grandfather, a realist, feared certain reprisal but still encouraged us to "take part in the miracle around us."

The world soon learned about the extraordinary courage of the Hungarian Freedom Fighters. Although inexperienced, these "lads of Budapest" together with the workers invented Molotov cocktails and other rudimentary implements against the tanks. Alone, they would have had little chance of success, but much of the Hungarian military soon joined them.

We were glued to the radio where we found out the revolution [had rapidly spread](#) from Budapest to the countryside. My sister's classmates reported and took part in intense fighting in Budapest neighborhoods, including our own.

To our great delight, the Soviet forces began to withdraw from Hungary.

On Oct. 28, Imre Nagy, a reform-minded Communist leader, was sworn in to head a new government.

After what appeared to be an unexpected victory, Hungarians began to organize new city and workers' councils, to clean up the debris of battle, and to establish contact with the West. They freed political prisoners; they negotiated for withdrawal of Soviet troops; they announced the country's neutrality and withdrawal from the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact.

Radio Free Europe and the West encouraged Hungary's brave struggle, yet Western countries never seriously considered providing military support or demanding a stop to the brutal actions of the Soviet Union.

The U.N. Security Council met in emergency session, but took no action. The world's attention focused on the [Suez Crisis](#), and [President Dwight D. Eisenhower](#) was preoccupied with his re-election campaign.

When Secretary of State John Foster Dulles stated that the United States would not interfere in the internal affairs of countries in the Soviet sphere of influence, the Soviets knew they had a free hand to reassert control in Hungary.

At dawn on Nov. 4, it all came to a sudden, tragic end.

I will never forget the shock my family and all Hungarians must have felt listening to the prime minister's desperate appeal on the radio for the world's help.

That help never came: The Soviet Army re-entered Hungary and attacked with overwhelming force, quickly defeating the freedom fighters. Although civilian resistance and widespread strikes continued, a Soviet-appointed Hungarian government headed by János Kádár took over.

But Hungary had managed to show the world the terrible face of communism and thereby struck a fatal blow on the worldwide communist movement.

The revolution – a journey that brought a temporary taste of freedom – also brought tragic results. With approximately 3,000 killed and 25,000 wounded, there was widespread destruction in Budapest and elsewhere.

Years of harsh retribution followed: Two hundred twenty-nine persons were executed, 22,000 people imprisoned.

I will never forget the shock of the prime minister's desperate appeal on the radio for the world's help.

My family was among the 200,000 mostly young and well-educated Hungarians – two percent of the population – who left the country in a mass exodus. Of those, 35,000 sought refuge in the United States, and 6,000 to 8,000 settled in Cleveland.

It would take Hungary 33 more years to achieve its freedom in 1989.

During those 33 years when Hungarians were sentenced to silence about the revolution, it was the 1956ers in Cleveland and all over the United States who kept their countrymen's hope for freedom alive.

In this 60th anniversary year, they will pay special homage to that "Legacy of Freedom," and to the memory of family, friends, and all freedom fighters who perished as they showed extraordinary courage six decades ago.

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