



**Péter György**  
**Fifty–six remix**

The Hungarian Right has been using the anniversary of 1956 for political capital; comparisons with the demonstrations that followed Ferenc Gyurcsány's leaked "We lied in the morning..." speech have been lapped up by the international press. But if the Right has made it possible for all those disgruntled with the Gyurcsány government to cast themselves as heroic heirs to the revolution, the Left is guilty of having failed to take '56 seriously enough.

From the moment that citizens gathered in front of Parliament to demand the prime minister's resignation, first in small knots, then, by the evening of Monday 18 September in a larger crowd that went on to seize the Hungarian Television building by dawn the next day, there were always a few people who were toying with the idea that this splendid autumn was nothing less than a replay of the 1956 revolution, the time ripe for a repeat run under different circumstances. That notion prompted as much outrage in leftwing liberal intellectuals, anxious to preserve the dignity of the 1956 tradition, as it did in the President of the Republic, who tersely declared that the events in Szabadság tér [Freedom Square] constituted a criminal act. Yet obviously right as were all those who condemned the morality of exploiting false pretences, the absurdity of putting forward such an analogy, and right as the President of the Republic self–evidently was as to the legality of the events of the Monday and Tuesday evenings, I am uncertain whether the moral and legal condemnation is a basis on which we are capable of discerning and describing the system of cultural correlates that I shall now attempt to reconstruct.

All the demonstrators who in the late evening of 18 September equated themselves with the 1956 revolutionaries heading for the siege of the Radio Building and the toppling of the statue of Stalin were plainly mistaken on the point of historical perspective, though that stricture is not applicable to explaining the feelings they experienced. It should not be forgotten that the indignation that followed the prime minister's address — which more than a few commentators equated with the less than clear–cut category of "moral rebellion" — that is to say the positive loathing of the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSzP) that the protesters were voicing, does not automatically lead to adopting a 1956 role. The revolt is different and the historical cast different, the sudden convenience of part–understood and misunderstood traditions.

I know little about those people in the square — and here I see no sense in likening those citizens who did more than just look on enthusiastically in Szabadság tér but took an active part in the siege to football hooligans — but it is certain that they were not content to stay with the role of "moral rebels" and, in a trice, rigged up a scenario for what was felt to be a creative reprise of cultural models. Mistaken analogies proved adequate for the purpose. Just as

the rebellion had been against the Commies back then, so now; against the Radio Building back then, against the Television Building now. Left in the lurch by Imre Nagy [opposition prime minister in 1956 — ed.] then, by Viktor Orbán [leader of the conservative opposition party Fidesz — ed.] now — or at least according to the news reports that was the opinion of the mass that was demonstrating with Hungarian national flags and the red-and-white-striped House of Árpád [Hungarian dynasty 9–13 century — ed.] flags. More important, it now became clear what the 1956 policy of the past sixteen years has led to; what a heavy burden of responsibility lies on the various factions of the Hungarian Right for the way in which they have helped to make it possible for anyone who is sufficiently disgruntled by the current Left to play the role of an "heir of the revolution".

Everyone in Hungary was a freedom fighter in 1956. Including former theatre director László Romhányi, with his criminal record, or former Smallholder Party leader József Torgyán, the most appalling media clown of the post-1989 period, or theatre director and former Democratic Forum politician Imre Kerényi (no epithets), who was the first to sense what political capital can be drawn from banging on constantly about some kind of revolution. The Left also bears a share of the blame, albeit in a different way, of course, and for reasons that have differed in its various incarnations, but whether led by Gyula Horn, Péter Medgyessy, or now Ferenc Gyurcsány it has been equally incapable of taking the revolution's tradition seriously and not simply regarding it as a painful duty. If 1956 was a revolution that was betrayed, then it has been comprehensively betrayed by Hungary's political class since 1989. We are now commemorating the fiftieth anniversary, and looking back on history up to this point we can understand precisely why all the heroes of the country's sixty-four counties might have thought they were actually the heroes of 1956.

This DIY identity was able to function smoothly from late Monday evening up to the occupation of the Television Building, but after it had achieved its goal it became clear what the difference is between a real revolution and a bloody post-modern carnival in which the populist ideologues of the far-Right, waving their Árpád flags and always blithely happy to play off the country's Arrow Cross [Hungarian fascists, governed 1940–1945 — ed.] past, made use of "Kishipós" and his skinhead mates as shield bearers. (The tee-shirts with the "Lonsdale" logo — much favoured by German neo-Nazis because when worn the right way they prominently display the letters NSDA, which is almost the revered Nazi acronym: NSDAP — have been heavily in evidence in front of Parliament.) By dawn, the loiterers who were left plundering chocolate and mineral water in the Television Building were unable to play their role any further.

In 1956 Free Hungarian Radio went over to the side of the revolutionaries; now Hungarian television, already at a moral low-point, simply ceased broadcasting. At that juncture — sitting in front of the television at home — I read to friends a short story by István Örkény entitled "Sailor's Jig", dating from between 1938 and 1941, in which the city is taken over by lunatics and the watchwords of their revolution are read out to crowds of millions in Kossuth Square: "When Oil stepped onto the podium, the crowd bellowed loud enough to crack windows. Then all of a sudden a silence fell, a heavy, pregnant hush. Oil threw his head back and began to speak... All he said was: "Rumpety-pumpety, sailor's jig..."

Another action replay took place in the same square, in the course of which a few pathetic figures vandalised and despoiled the memorial to the Soviet Union's heroes (i.e. a cemetery) — an act for which no-one has since apologised, while I find it incomprehensible that not even a start has been made on restoring it. By the next day, the revolutionary role-playing had become even more complex and hopeless. For one thing, there was the first sighting — which she strove to maintain throughout the week — of Mária Wittner [celebrated '56 revolutionary imprisoned for fourteen years for her involvement — ed.], who for months on end has been seeking a cause that will give meaning to her difficult and courageous life: re-igniting the revolution.

Loath as I am to criticise the utterances of *one* of the heroines of the Hungarian revolution, I am bound to recall that when Viktor Orbán made the lady a parliamentary representative in his party then he could not have had anything else in mind than what Mária Wittner is doing now. But instrumentalizing our fellow humans in that sort of way is not exactly a Christian act. Quite the reverse, it is a fine custom more at home in the culture of Communist parties. Rather more confusing is the position of Tamás Molnár, who as a member of the "Inconnu" group played a part in placing a headboard on the unmarked grave of Imre Nagy and his associates in Plot 301 of Kerepesi Cemetery. He may now be on the far-Right, but the artist indisputably has the moral collateral needed for a rerun of 1956, so his appearance in the charade that was enacted every evening in Kossuth tér was not as ridiculous as that of Imre Pozsgay [member of the politburo of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (USAP), the one to characterise '56 as a "popular uprising" rather than a "counter-revolution" in January 1989 — ed.] or that of Mátyás Szűrös [first president of the Republic of Hungary 1989–1990 —ed.], who as the then-Speaker of Parliament and provisional President of the Republic ruined 23 October 1989 by proclaiming Hungary a republic.

There was yet another factor that helped make the replay of 1956 not utterly absurd, however, and that was the presence of round-the clock media coverage in our "24/7 society". The square, or rather the increasingly self-confident bit-players who gradually became identifiable leading characters in the group pictures, was surrounded by a dense communications web of TV, internet and mobile telephones. And they had the means to see themselves again in the representative mechanism of the global media space, just as all of us living here had the opportunity to see how much credence can be attached to pictures that we see in Budapest at other times. Only now it is we who are getting it; it is our turn. At other times it is precisely the Hungarian far-Right and far-Left who make a habit of crying wolf on seeing how they are treated by the media in which they could now at last stand out. Just as the young lads of Budapest in 1956 were seduced by the sight of photo-reporters when, as in Imre Kertész's novella,<sup>1</sup> The Union Jack draped on a car's bonnet was seen as a sign of hope. And likewise the revolutionaries in the Bucharest TV studio failed to understand that the Securitate's [Romanian secrete police — ed.] technicians were running the show, that was why they could be seen on TV screens — that is why these people are entranced that the outside broadcast vans are parked up in Kossuth Square, and it's no use their saying "Rumpety-pumpety, sea jig", no use their piling up all the gripes, stupidities and hurt feelings in the world, no use their seeking revenge on everyone for everything all at once, burbling on about the Treaty of Trianon, Admiral Horthy, the Virgin Mary, the Holy Crown of St Stephen — in the eyes of the world's TV audiences they are the revolutionaries. Wretched Hungarians standing in the night air, spouting nonsense, and the cameras of CNN and the BBC making them revolutionaries.

I don't know how this can be brought to a close; how they are going to feel when the vans pack up, the cars with the foreign registration plates vanish, and the mobile phones of newspaper reporters are busy on some other story, while they are still standing around in the freezing wind and the days are getting shorter, fifty years on, ordinary Hungarians left to their own devices who were stirred up by a wind.

On the morning of Sunday 18 September, something else happened that has not been given much notice. It was the announcement of the beatification of Sister Sara Salkaházi, that brave nun who saved the lives of many Jews during the Second World War and, having crossed herself on the banks of the Danube, was gunned into the water by an Arrow Cross patrol. Under the aegis of the Árpád flag.

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<sup>1</sup> Imre Kertész, *The Union Jack*, 1991, translated into English by Tim Wilkinson in: *An Island of Sound*, eds. G Szirtes and M. Vajda. London: The Harvill Press 2004, 112–113.

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