



## Eurozine News Item

### Hungary '56: The first time as tragedy...

In the public mind, the fiftieth anniversary celebrations of the Hungarian revolution in 1956 have been inseparable from the angry demonstrations over Hungarian prime minister Ferenc Gyurcsány's leaked "We lied in the morning..." speech. Indeed, the general unease about political stability in Hungary appears not unfounded in the face of a deepening rift between those who loathe the Socialist Party, the Communist Party's successor, and those who disdain and distrust Viktor Orbán's liberal conservative Fidesz and its far-Right allies. The political battle over rightful ownership of the legacy of '56 has dovetailed with a general sense that democratic structures have yet to fully take hold in Hungary.

Needless to say, however, comparisons drawn by the Hungarian Right between the September demonstrations on Budapest's Freedom Square and the revolution in '56, largely taken at face value by international press, are disingenuous. As Peter György [writes](#) in *Élet és Irodalom*, the Right has used the anniversary year of 1956 as political capital, co-opting popular figures of the '56 generation and boycotting commemorative events. But, says György, 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 betrayed the democratic legacy of '56.

"It would be ironic," [writes](#) Stefan Auer in *Osteuropa*, "if the celebration of 1956 imparted more damage on its legacy than the forty years of enforced silence. To avert the narrow instrumentalization of 1956 [...] it is useful to remind oneself of the open-ended nature of all genuinely political projects, including our attempts at understanding revolutions." Hannah Arendt wrote about the 1956 uprising as though it were the first Velvet Revolution in central and eastern Europe, in other words, as if it had been successful. Nevertheless, writes Auer, her insights remain relevant to an understanding of the uprising itself and the role of the memory of it after 1989.

Positioning the events of '56 historically, François Fejtő, the great Hungarian socialist chronicler of eastern European totalitarianism, [writes](#) in *Esprit* about the revolution in the context of Hungarian history and power relations in international communism, while Roger Martelli, [writing](#) in *Le Monde diplomatique* (Berlin), talks of the "corresponding crises" between Hungary and Suez. And in a contemporary reportage originally submitted to *Esprit* in 1956, Jean Magnard [reports](#) from the barricades of Budapest. The journal, suffering pangs of conscience because of its communist connections, wanted to add a commentary; Magnard refused and withdrew the piece. After his death in 1990, his brother Pierre resubmitted it; fifty years later, it appears in the journal.

Not least are two fictional extracts by the generation born at the time of the revolution — in the case of Gábor Németh, on 23 October itself. His sardonic [account](#) of the day of his birth, an extract from the novel *Jewish, are you?* (2004), puts events in a distinctly anti-heroic light. Endre Kukorelly's [fiction](#), an extract from *Ruin: The history of commonism* (2006) is a more bitter meditation on the legacy of the Soviet regime and the impossibility of remembering adequately its brutality. These extracts, by two of the most interesting novelists writing in Hungary today, first appeared in Hungarian in *Magyar Lettre Internationale* and are translated for the first time into English by [Tim Wilkinson](#), translator of Imre Kertész.

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