

French Foreign policy and the 1956 Hungarian revolution

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Abstract

1956 - Budapest: the time and the place are associated in the minds of many Frenchmen. The name of the Hungarian capital became one of the most painful symbols of the last days of the 4th Republic: after Budapest, many Frenchmen were forced to face their own illusions about the socialist countries. Public opinion and the French press became interested in the tragedy with the intensity commensurate to the significance of the Fall of 1956. The topic of the activity of the French government and its motivations in the national and especially the international context has remained obscure for several decades. The opening of the archives in the West as well as in the former Soviet bloc permits us to reconstruct a subtle picture of the Hungarian Revolution's repercussions in France.

Keywords: French foreign policy, Cold War, 1956 Hungarian revolution, 20th century, French-Hungarian relations

First, we briefly present the policy of the French Foreign Ministry – the *Quai d'Orsay* – towards Hungary before the explosion of the revolution, as well during and after the events. Subsequently, we will measure the factors that have exerted an influence on French diplomacy during the process of decision-making related to the Hungarian crisis.

The liberalization in the Soviet Union after the death of Stalin, often described as a “thaw”, which later extended to the other European countries under Soviet influence, was favorably accommodated by Western diplomacy, including by the *Quai d'Orsay*. Nevertheless Western diplomats were perfectly conscious of their narrow room for manoeuvre stemming from the European *status quo* that resulted from the end of the

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Second World War, and the emerging reality of the Cold War: the bipolar international system. They did not want to accelerate the process by hasty steps. This passive and careful policy was continued after the outbreak of the Hungarian revolution on October 23, 1956, an event that surprised Paris – just as it surprised the leaderships in other western countries.

As is known, on July 26, 1956, Gamal Abdel Nasser, president of Egypt, has announced the nationalization of the Suez Canal Company. The meticulous preparation of the military response by France in collaboration with Great Britain and also with Israel, the Israeli attack of October 29 against Egypt, followed by the launching of the Franco-British intervention in the Suez Canal zone limited the number of options available, and was a source of the passivity of the French government whose attention was fixed self-evidently on the Middle East.²

When the representatives of the French government expressed their sympathy towards the revolution and condemned the Soviet policy of repression carried out in Hungary, they attempted to avoid declarations that might cause tensions with the USSR. The UN provided the ideal framework and forum for such a policy. Later, however, the putting into the forefront of the Hungarian case in the United Nations still appeared necessary to the French Foreign Ministry, as well as to the British Foreign Office, who were eager to mitigate the fallout from the near-universal international condemnation of their policy in Suez. The two allies wished to attain that the extraordinary session of the General Assembly of the UN, convened on November 1 to deal with the war of Suez, have on its agenda the Hungarian issue as well. They thus hoped to divide, and partly divert, attention from the crisis in the Middle East. However, with a view to the position of the Third World countries in the matter the government of the United States blocked this project. Consequently the question of the Hungarian revolution was officially discussed on the UN's agenda only after the invasion by the Soviet Army on the 4th of November.

The policy of prudence and non-intervention was also manifest in the fact that French diplomacy did not take any initiative to influence the events within the Soviet bloc. The activities of the Quai d'Orsay were limited to the collection, transmission and interpretation of information. Even though the French diplomats did good work in this

² On October 22-24, 1956 secret Anglo-Franco-Israeli negotiations took place in Sèvres, during which the participants defined the scenario for the war of Suez. On the relations between the Suez campaign and the Hungarian revolution, see Kecskés D., 2001.

respect, their conclusions did not weigh heavily in the balance. The obvious priorities were Suez and the maintenance of the European status quo.

The Hungarian case and French domestic politics

Under the conditions of the Cold War, French foreign policy was inextricably intertwined with internal ideological struggles (Grosser, 1972: 35). Disputes over the principles of communism and the values of the “Free World” had reached a climax exactly over the Hungarian Revolution (Bernard, 1991: 80), thus, contrary to how it may seem, it was an internal rather than an international event for France. The government considered the Algerian War (ongoing since 1954), the Suez Crisis, and the establishment of European integration, to be its foreign policy priorities.

The extremely intense reaction of the population³ and the political establishment can be explained by several factors. In the overly politicized atmosphere of the Cold War, French public opinion watched the freedom fight of the Hungarians living on the “other side” of the Iron Curtain closely. The French media devoted considerable space to the events, and the overwhelming majority of the population were outraged by the brutal actions of the Soviet Union, as well as by the approval of these actions by the French Communist Party.⁴ The Hungarian Revolution represented freedom, i.e. the most important value in a Western mentality (Békés, 1996a: 26), and it revived the French revolutionary tradition which was the constant theme of Republican cult. The mass publication in the French press of the images of combat in Budapest brought up intense memories of the Second World War in the consciousness of a major part of the population.

The crushing of the Hungarian Revolt by the Soviets, on the one hand, and the Suez Crisis, on the other, provided ammunition to both anti-communist and communist political forces whose confrontation lasted for a long time. Although the National

³ Regarding the reactions of the public: Archives nationales (thereafter AN), Paris, Synthèses des rapports mensuels des préfets (ministère de l'Intérieur), F1 C III 1235: 1956, août à décembre, mois de novembre 1956; documentations of the French Institute of Public Opinion (IFOP) see *Sondage*, 1958/1, cf. (Bernard, 1991).

⁴ See the declaration of the Politburo of the French Communist Party, November 4th, 1956 in *L'Humanité*, on November 5, 1956. On the crisis and the tactics of the French Communist Party archival documents are accessible at the archives of the French Communist Party, Paris: II, Archives « papier », Archives de direction, archives du Secrétariat et du Bureau politique (1944-1971): Décisions du Secrétariat (1956-1958); Décisions du Bureau politique (1956-1958); Enregistrements audio des réunions du Comité central du Parti communiste français de 1952 à 1962.

Assembly seldom dealt with questions of foreign policy under the 4th Republic, the Hungarian uprising occupied an important place in the debates of October-November 1956.⁵ The parliamentary instruments were abundantly used: three requests for interpellation and four motions for a resolution were presented. The Committee on Foreign Affairs was also focused on the Hungarian question.

How can we explain this intense interest? The repression of the Hungarian Revolution by the Soviets provided a good opportunity to publicly take a stand against the French Communist Party which openly supported the approach of Moscow. The attitude of the Communist Party was condemned almost unanimously. In the face of these intense attacks, the communist deputies attacked the colonial policies of the government, in particular the Franco-British intervention in Suez. The extreme hostility between the two opposing sides clearly shows the great significance of these questions. On the 7th of November, the President of the National Assembly adjourned the meeting for 15 minutes because of unrest in the chamber. The use of old arguments which did not have any relationship with the question discussed proves that this was a deeper conflict (for example the communist Members of Parliament often referred back to the Second World War: “Hitler”, “collaborator”, “Gestapo”, etc. were terms frequently used by them) .

Nevertheless most deputies attempted to express their solidarity with the Hungarian people through the resolution of November 7th:

“The National Assembly bows before those who sacrificed their lives in Hungary for the independence of their country as well as in defense of freedom and the holy rights of humanity; it expresses its admiration for the unshakeable courage of the martyr Hungarian nation, as it proved its dedication to true political and social democracy, stood up to an oppressor whose actions are against humanity; the Assembly requests that the government do everything possible, [...] in cooperation with other free nations, to help the Hungarians who remained in their country or escaped; and that the government take every step possible so that the free nations do everything to prevent the deportation of Hungarians who took part in the uprising...”⁶

⁵ Sources on the debates regarding the Hungarian Revolution are available at the National Assembly in: *Journal officiel de la République française* (thereafter JORF), Débats parlementaires, Assemblée nationale, compte-rendu *in extenso* des séances, questions écrites et réponses des ministres à ces questions, troisième législature, session ordinaire de 1956-1957. On the activity of the the Foreign Affairs Committee of the National Assembly: AN: la séance du 6 novembre 1956, AN : C//15749, procès-verbaux des séances de la commission des Affaires étrangères (cahiers manuscrits et dactylographiés), 8 février 1956-27 décembre 1956.

⁶ JORF, p. 4525.

The political tensions also translated into protests and solidarity marches in the streets. The resolution of November 7th marked the climax of tensions in Paris. On the initiative of the French Association for the Atlantic Community, a very broad range of political organizations called for a gathering on this day at the Triumphal Arch (*l'Arc de triomphe*) at 6 p.m.⁷ A demonstration of solidarity was held by about 30,000 people with the participation of several members of the Guy Mollet government, many representatives of the National Assembly, and former Prime Ministers. At the end of the demonstration about 5,000 participants, mostly young people, besieged the offices of the French Communist Party and its newspaper *L'Humanité*. Many people were wounded in the *melee* and three were killed (Bernard, 1991: 73-74).

The Hungarian affair provided an excellent opportunity for gaining internal political advantages. The Socialists began a forceful campaign against the Communists who compromised themselves through the Hungarian tragedy and attempted to lure away their voters. They even made serious efforts to win over Communist activists.⁸ We might even suspect that there were political reasons behind the considerable government solidarity efforts (led by the socialists) and the help provided to Hungarian refugees. The cabinet of Guy Mollet thus used the Hungarian question as an instrument of domestic policy.

At the same time it is necessary to see the limits of the repercussions of the Hungarian uprising in France. A few weeks after the Soviet intervention of the 4th of November, at the end of December 1956, the interest of the public in the Hungarian tragedy decreased considerably. The French political establishment had already pulled the Hungarian cause off the agenda. In spite of the extraordinary speed of the reaction, the echoes of the Hungarian crisis in France did not bring any lasting or fundamental changes, neither in the views of the public, nor in the political life of the country. The direction of the PCF (*Partie communiste française*) led by Maurice Thorez managed to overcome its difficulties in a few weeks. The position occupied by the Communist Party in the French political life didn't really change: it kept its deputies and its electoral base.

⁷ For example: Centre des républicains sociaux, Centre national des indépendants, Parti radical socialiste, MRP, Anciens combattants de l'Indochine et de l'Union française, Anciens Évadés français en Hongrie, Campagne européenne de la jeunesse, Comité des réfugiés hongrois, Comité français pour l'Europe libre, Fédération nationale des femmes, Jeunesse fédéraliste de France, Mouvement fédéraliste européen, Union nationale des étudiants de France etc. See in: Archives du ministère des Affaires étrangères (hereafter AMAE): Services des Pactes, carton 210, dossier Pays non signataires du Pactes. Pays Satellites, rapport sur la manifestation du 7 novembre 1956 à l'Arc-de-Triomphe, *Hommage national à la Hongrie*.

⁸ Office universitaire de recherche socialiste, Paris, Archives d'organisations, Parti socialiste SFIO (1944-1969): sténographie des réunions du Comité directeur de la SFIO, t. 13, 1er juillet 1956-21 juin 1957.

We thus showed above how the French Government used the Hungarian Crisis in order to divert the attention from the Suez Crisis, while placing the Hungarian uprising center-stage. With the instrumentalisation of this cause, the Guy Mollet cabinet thus employed the same tactics it had used in domestic affairs. The Government contributed to the mobilization of public opinion against the Communists by using a national commemoration and charity event organized by the Interior Ministry as well as exploiting opportunities presented by the media (especially radio). The largest such event was a “national day” scheduled for November 18th, “for the cause of the Hungarian people”.⁹ We cannot find any traces of the effect of public pressure in the foreign policy decision-making regarding the Hungarian question. The great repercussions in France over the repression of the Hungarian insurrection were used again when the French diplomats cited the events in Hungary in their speeches on various international fora, in particular in the United Nations.¹⁰

French foreign policy and its sources in the international context

The behavior of the French Government in the diplomatic field after the defeat of the Hungarian Revolution fell perfectly in line with the general direction of Western policy at the time. The main effort remained the collection, transmission and interpretation of information. Let us enumerate and illustrate the factors which influenced the attitude of the Quai d’Orsay.

The evident explanation for the French attitude is the position of the country in the international system. Considering the close relations of France to the “Western camp”, it appears normal that the French Government expressed in public its condemnation of the Soviet Union and the Kádár government, which came to power in Hungary as a consequence of crushing the revolution. Such an attitude corresponded with the expectations of the public. French diplomacy showed its disapproval in the course of the debates of resolutions of the UN General Assembly, in its bilateral relationship with the Soviet Union and Hungary by adopting the diplomatic boycott of the NATO countries,

⁹ AN: rapports des préfets 1954-1959, F1 C III 1350: Voeux et motions concernant la Hongrie (extraits de presse, secours à la Hongrie, journée nationale du 18 novembre), 1956, dossier: Secours à la Hongrie, le 10 novembre 1956, télégramme du ministère de l’Intérieur (Affaires politiques) aux préfets de métropole y compris Seine, *journée nationale en faveur de la population hongroise*.

¹⁰ See the speech of Foreign Minister Christian Pineau, delivered in the General Assembly of the United Nations on November 19, 1956. AMAE: Nations unies et organisations internationales, boîte 243, n° 2526 (November 19, 1956), télégramme de V. Broustra, chef de la Mission permanente de la France auprès de l’Organisation des nations unies.

by receiving large numbers of Hungarian refugees, and finally by the support granted to the Hungarian political émigré organizations. However the French decision-makers did not want to go beyond a certain point. In short, they continued to play painstakingly according to the rules of the Cold War, in particular sticking to the inviolable taboo of the spheres of influence. This prudence was translated in the general attitude and approach of the French Foreign Ministry in this area: it did not try to exert its influence on the course of the Hungarian revolutionary events, or in their aftermath. Consequently, the major part of the diplomatic activities of the French Government was carried out outside of the area directly affected by the crisis, in the negotiating rooms and halls of the United Nations and NATO.

In the United Nations where the Hungarian question was on the agenda of the General Assembly for more than six years, until December 1962, the aim set by the French Government became more and more obvious: in collaboration with the Americans, it wished to exert an influence on world public opinion, especially on Third World countries by showing them “the true face” of the Soviet Union. The Atlantic Alliance, in addition to the consultations between the ministries of foreign affairs, was used to harmonize the policies of its member countries. Even if Paris took a zealous part in the diplomatic boycott against Moscow and Budapest, it is characteristic of its behavior that the retaliatory measures of NATO were removed vis-à-vis the USSR, in January 1957, without keeping any account of the Western public opinion.¹¹ However, they held the Kádár government in isolation for much longer, even as they knew that it was only a puppet government. The maintenance of the boycott against the official Hungarian authorities appeared to carry less risk, and cause less harm, for the Quai d’Orsay which could thus satisfy the expectations of French public opinion. In spite of this “reservedness,” the French Government did not intend to break relations completely. It meticulously avoided any action that could have endangered the operations and/or the existence of the French legation in Hungary.¹² Therefore, it should not have come as a surprise that the French diplomatic mission in Budapest used its contacts with resistance groups and the opposition of the Kádár regime merely as sources of information. Isolated

¹¹ AMAE: Service des pactes, carton 210, n° 50.012 (January 9, 1957), télégramme d’Alexandre Parodi, représentant permanent de la France auprès du Conseil de l’Atlantique Nord, Assistance des représentants des pays atlantiques aux réceptions soviétiques.

¹² Note de la sous-direction d’Europe orientale du Ministère des Affaires étrangères, Relations diplomatiques avec la Hongrie (early 1957?), *Documents diplomatiques français* (hereafter *DDF*), 1957, t. I (1^{er} janvier-30 juin), Paris, Ministère des Affaires étrangères, 1990, pp. 2-4.

examples of cooperation occurred in the first few months after the suppression of the revolution.

There was a certain caution in handling the question of political emigration. For example, although the French authorities permitted the Hungarian Revolutionary Council to hold its founding conference in Strasbourg in early January 1957, they declared at the same time unequivocally that they would not allow the refugees to acquire weapons or transport them on French territory.¹³ Such a gesture could have led to an open conflict with the Soviet Union. Finally, the French representative in NATO opposed the idea of publicizing the fact that the Alliance was deliberating on the Hungarian question,¹⁴ not only during the revolution but also in December 1956. Regarding the assistance to the refugee students, the Quai d'Orsay stated that "it would be preferable to avoid any direct action of NATO."¹⁵

In close connection with the previously described factors, a second factor influenced the French diplomatic behavior, which was the intention to coordinate its actions in a tightknit multilateral co-operation, meaning close cooperation with the United States and Great Britain. French diplomats conducted intensive discussions with their allies about the relations with the Kádár Government, the taking in of Hungarian refugees, and the actions intended to provide humanitarian aid to the population of Hungary. If an initiative by the French had not been supported by the NATO allies, the Quai d'Orsay abandoned it; this was the fate of a French proposal for economic aid to Hungary in the first month of 1957.¹⁶

Once the Suez Crisis passed, the influence of this factor decreased gradually on French decision-making and the Algerian problem took a more prominent role, with the war there lasting until 1962. The policy carried out in Algeria reduced to a certain extent the room for manoeuvre of France at the United Nations. All in all, we can say that the bipolar system of international relations did not cease to be a determining factor for French diplomacy towards Hungary during the aftermath of the revolution. It was its

¹³ AMAE: Europe 1944-1960, Hongrie, dossier 97, (December 13, 1956). Note de la Sous-direction d'Europe orientale pour le secrétaire général, *Création en Occident d'un « Comité national révolutionnaire » hongrois*.

¹⁴ AMAE: Nations unies et organisations internationales, boîte 242, n° 50.408 (October 27, 1956), télégramme d'A. Parodi, représentant permanent de France au Conseil de l'OTAN.

¹⁵ Archives du secrétariat international de l'OTAN (thereafter ASIO, Bruxelles): AC/52-R/67 (January 8, 1957), procès-verbal de la réunion du Comité de l'information et des relations culturelles tenue au Palais de Chaillot, Paris, le 18 décembre 1956 à 15 heures.

¹⁶ AMAE: Service des pactes, carton 210, n° 50.132 (March 6, 1957), télégramme d'A. Parodi, représentant permanent de la France auprès du Conseil de l'Atlantique Nord, *Aide à la Hongrie*.

strategic determinant and French interests in the Middle East were the tactical and temporary drivers of French policy.

The division of the world into separate spheres of influence meant a policy of non-intervention, even a passive stance, for the French Government. The policy of the peaceful subversion of the socialist countries, which meant encouraging them to pursue more independent foreign policies from the Soviet Union, and more liberal policies at home, through economic, political and cultural contacts (Békés, 1996: 77) was the line from which France never deviated. More energetic measures were, however, not envisioned. The acceptance of Hungary's neutrality during the revolution or foreign minister Pineau's proposal for Hungary's neutralization presented at the National Assembly¹⁷ on December 18, 1956 cannot be considered as serious political moves. The international weight of France did not allow for such grand initiatives to be effective. In the same way, similar remarks by Jean Paul-Boncour, minister of France in Hungary, addressed to Chou En-laï, president of the Chinese Council of Ministers in January 1957 in Budapest, were in fact only a simple attempt at demonstrating France's "proactive" policy at no great risk.¹⁸

The other factors, namely the impact of the Suez Crisis and later the War in Algeria were not without influence on French foreign policy, in particular in the United Nations. However, these conflicts played only a minor role and were of a tactical nature compared to the European *status quo*. The extremely intense reaction of French society and the French political establishment had only a limited impact on the decision making at the Quai d'Orsay. Admittedly, French diplomats felt towards Hungary a similar compassion to the one expressed by the greater public (Kecskés D., 1999: 155-171), nevertheless, the great emotional reaction and the individual demonstrations of sympathy did not have any impact on the eventual policy.

The Hungarian crisis remained beyond the sphere of French interest. Its representatives acted directly only in the UN, NATO, and in working for the Hungarian refugees. In other words, Paris concentrated its activities in areas where it could act

¹⁷ JORF, *Débats parlementaires, Assemblée nationale*, compte rendu *in extenso* des séances, questions écrites et réponses des ministres à ces questions, troisième législature, session ordinaire de 1956-1957, 1^{ère} séance du 18 décembre 1956, p. 6090.

¹⁸ Télégramme de Jean Paul-Boncour, ministre de France en Hongrie, n° 65 à 69 (January 18, 1957), *DDF*, 1957, t. I, *op. cit.*, pp. 104-105.

without the fear of direct confrontation with the Soviet Union. French diplomacy considered the continuation of disarmament and détente as its primary objective, and it therefore believed that the maintenance of dialogue with the Soviet Union was more important than providing support for the liberation of the peoples of East-Central Europe. This position was stated clearly when Imre Nagy, the former Hungarian Prime Minister, was executed; the two issues would not be linked.

As Étienne de Crouy-Chanel, the French permanent representative in the NATO Council on June 20, 1958 stated:¹⁹

“The dialogue between East and West belongs to a different page, its stake is too high for us to be led solely by our emotion. Public opinion, which would probably understand if we discontinued the dialogue with the Soviet Union today because of the execution of Nagy, in a few months, however, would probably rebuke us for doing so. Therefore, we do not believe in breaking off relations.”

It is evident from the available sources that the government of Guy Mollet did not consider the Hungarian uprising to be of primary concern, neither internally nor diplomatically. During meetings of the Council of Ministers at the time of the Hungarian Revolution, the issue was discussed only once. The first decision concerning the Hungarian Revolution was made on November 7th, when they made a decision on accepting refugees.²⁰

In November-December 1956, during discussions with the most important allies of the French Government, the Hungarian Revolution was rarely mentioned, or was entirely neglected. At a meeting between the German chancellor Konrad Adenauer, and Guy Mollet on November 6th, the major topic of discussion was European integration.²¹ Hervé Alphand, the French ambassador to Washington, when visiting President Eisenhower on November 8th, emphasized that the alliance between the United States, Great Britain, and France, should be strengthened because the Suez Crisis shook the

¹⁹ AMAE: Services des pactes, boîte 241, n° 57 (June 20, 1958), télégramme d'Étienne de Crouy-Chanel, représentant permanent de France au Conseil de l'OTAN.

²⁰ The author did not have an opportunity to study the minutes of the meetings of the Council of Ministers. The article relies here on the remarks made by Patricia Gillet, archivist at the Section of the 20th century of the National Archives (Paris), who communicated certain information to the author, and on the examination of the cartons F60 2766 (Ordre du jour du Conseil des ministres, 1956-1958, dossier: janvier 1956-décembre 1956) and F60 2772 (communiqués de presse des Conseils des ministres, dossier: janvier 1956-décembre 1959).

²¹ AMAE: Secrétariat général (1945-1966), « Entretiens et message », 3 septembre 1956-septembre 1957, procès-verbal de l'entretien du 6 novembre 1956 entre G. Mollet et K. Adenauer (*DDF, 1956, t. III, 24 octobre-31 décembre*, Paris, 1990, pp. 231-238.).

foundations of mutual confidence²². Finally, the British and French negotiations concentrated on the Suez Crisis and its consequences²³. Undoubtedly, the Hungarian Revolution was not of primary importance for either Paris or the other Western capitals. The Council of the Western European Union²⁴ and the ministerial level NATO Council meetings of December 10th and December 11th-14th (both held in Paris) expressed similar attitudes. Beside the Guy Mollet Government other Western governments were also aware of the fact – in contrast to their own public opinions – that their possibilities to influence the revolutionary events in Hungary were indeed limited. More energetic steps, let alone a military intervention in the Soviet Bloc, did not occur as a possibility to them.

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²² AMAE: Secrétariat général (1945-1960), Suez, 82, n° 7028 à 7038 (November 8, 1956), télégramme de Hervé Alphand, ambassadeur de France aux États-Unis (*DDF, 1956*, t. III. *op. cit.*, pp. 251-253).

²³ AMAE: Secrétariat général (1945-1966), « Entretiens et message », 3 septembre 1956-septembre 1957, n° 278/SGL (December 4, 1956), rapport de Jean Chauvel, ambassadeur de France en Grande-Bretagne.

²⁴ Compte-rendu de la séance du Conseil de l'UEO du 10 décembre 1956, *DDF, 1956*, t. III, *op. cit.*, pp. 512-518.

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