

Review

The Memoirs of János Kádár's Interpreter Vladimir Baikov: A New Source on Soviet Policy in 1956 Hungary¹

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Among the recently published historical sources which add important details to our image of the Soviet policy in Hungary in the weeks of the 1956 revolution and its suppression, the memoirs of Vladimir Baikov are among the most important.

Vladimir Sergeevich Baikov (1916–2001), born in Moscow, worked as journalist and editor of Radio Moscow (*Vsesoyuznii radiokomitet*) news programs in the late 1930s and early 1940s, until the attack of Nazi Germany against the USSR in June 1941. He knew English well and began work on a PhD thesis on Contemporary American Literature. The war between Nazi Germany and the USSR, however, led to significant changes in his career. He became a political instructor in the Red Army and, when World War II had ended in May 1945, he found himself in Hungary, where he stayed on for about two years as an official in the Soviet military administration. It can be assumed that there was a lack of interpreters and translators of Hungarian in the Soviet military in post-war Hungary as well as in the Soviet part of the Allied Control Commission. Hence, Baikov was charged with learning Hungarian and, thanks to his linguistic skills, he quickly succeeded. In the first chapters of his memoirs, he describes the situation in Hungary of 1945-1946, the months of the acute confrontation between the pro-Communist and anti-Communist forces, especially in the days of the parliamentary elections in early November 1945. These were to be the last free elections in Hungary up till the spring of 1990.

Returning to Moscow, Baikov was placed at the High School of Army Interpreters as a teacher of Hungarian. He also worked as an expert on Hungary in one of the

¹ The source in question: Байков В.С. 1956. Венгрия глазами очевидца // Отв. редактор В. Молчанов. Вступительная статья и комментарии, А. Стыкалина. Москва – Санкт-Петербург, «История», 2016. 152 с. [Baikov, V.S.: *The Hungary of 1956. An eyewitness account. The Sight of the Eyewitness*. Ed. by V. Molchanov. Introduction and Comments by A. Stykalin. Moscow – St.Petersburg, 2016, 152 p.]

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propaganda structures of the USSR – the Soviet Information Bureau. By the end of the 1940s he became the interpreter and translator of Hungarian texts and an expert on contemporary Hungarian problems in the Communist Party's international department. He was a member (as interpreter) of Soviet high-level delegations that visited Hungary, and the memoirs describe in detail the visit of a Soviet delegation headed by Marshal Kliment Voroshilov in April 1950, when celebrations were held on the occasion of the 5th anniversary of the liberation from German occupying forces.

On June 13, 1953, Baikov worked as interpreter during the important talks between Soviet and Hungarian high-level delegations in the Moscow Kremlin, where the Hungarian Communist leader Mátyás Rákosi was resolutely criticized by the Soviet leadership for the country's economic performance, and Imre Nagy was recommended by Moscow as the new Hungarian Premier (somewhat later Nagy was to undertake reforms unacceptable for Moscow and lost the confidence of the Soviets).

This was one of the last meetings of the Soviet Party leadership with the participation of Lavrentiy Beria who, only two weeks later, was arrested, and, in December 1953, sentenced to death and executed. Being a good journalist, Baikov gave in his memoirs a colorful description of the Soviet-Hungarian meeting, emphasizing the provocative behavior of Beria, who obviously looked forward to the moment when he would “tear the throat” of everybody who was sitting around the table.

In Spring 1955, Baikov met János Kádár, the main character of his future memoirs. Liberated from Rákosi's prison and rehabilitated in Summer 1954, Kádár (at that time a mid-level Party official) visited the USSR for a three-week study tour as the head of a delegation of Party officials – their program included visits of industrial objects (factories, mines) in Eastern Ukraine. Baikov paid attention to the great authority of Kádár in the lower-level circles of the Hungarian Party.

Later on, in 1956 (before the revolution of October 23), Baikov twice was the interpreter during the talks between Kádár and leading Soviet Party official Mihail Suslov, and describes the details of these talks in his memoirs. The first of these two meetings took place in mid-June when Suslov came to Budapest for an inspection. As documents of Soviet Party Archives (first released in 1990s) show, Ambassador Yuri Andropov expressed in his reports to Moscow of April 1956 the anxiety concerning the plans to bring the influential Kádár into the Hungarian Party's Politbureau, because he allegedly became in the Party leadership a source of attraction for all the “right-wing and dissatisfied elements” in the Party. The reports of Andropov were examined carefully in

Moscow, as we can see from the records of the meeting of the Soviet Communist Party Central Committee Presidium, which took place on May 3. According to the resolution of the Party's Presidium, Suslov was sent to Budapest with the mission of examining the situation. Unlike Andropov, Suslov, as his reports to Moscow (as well as Baikov's testimonies) show, did not see any threat in the political activities of Kádár, because "he was not of anti-Soviet mood" and did not support the plans to weaken the Party. Moreover, being the member of the top Party structure he would be disciplined and "tied in a moral sense".

Later Baikov translated the talks Kádár and Suslov held in a country house near Moscow in early October 1956 – Kádár, who once again was the member of the Hungarian Party top leadership since July 1956, visited Moscow on the way back from Beijing where he headed the Hungarian's Party delegation attending the Chinese Communist Party Congress. Baikov's memoirs highlight that as early as in the beginning of October, less than three weeks before the Uprising, Suslov asked Kádár if he would not reject the idea to become the first secretary of his Party. This meant that Ernő Gerő (who was the successor of Rákosi as the Party leader) was considered in Moscow to be only a transitional figure. Kádár met Suslov in just those days when the funeral of László Rajk (a Communist politician arrested in 1949 and sentenced to death as the result of an anti-Titoist open trial) caused a protest demonstration of half a million people. The Soviet leaders began to realize – in spring and early summer – at that time that the political crisis in Hungary might be deeper than assumed, and that thus more radical steps were necessary for the solution of the most pressing problems. The appointment of Kádár, influential and fairly popular among lower-level party circles, to the highest position in the Party was seen as one of such radical measures even if it implied some risks. Among others, at that time, the Soviet leaders did not know Kádár well and had not full confidence in him. It does not mean that Kádár was the only Hungarian politician taken into consideration by the Kremlin at that time but it is clear that he was seen as one of the actually available options – despite the warnings of the Ambassador Yuri Andropov.

It is well-known that the government of Imre Nagy was overthrown by the Soviets on November 4 and gave its place to the government of János Kádár, formed in the USSR. In the first weeks of November 1956, in the days of the suppression of the Hungarian Revolt by the Soviet Army, it was Baikov who accompanied Kádár all the time (even in the Soviet tank entering Budapest on November 7). Insisting on the permanent presence of the Soviet official by his side, Kádár (as Baikov put it) made it clear to the Kremlin:

“Look, I keep nothing secret from you. I even asked you to send a Soviet official (it does not matter who he is, it is important only that he know Hungarian) to stay at my side all the time. I put all my cards on the table, and I hope that you will do the same.”³ The permanent presence of a Soviet “apparatchik” beside the head of the Government of the formally sovereign country for three or four weeks and even more (up till the first signs of consolidation of the new power) may be explained with the severity of the situation in the country in November–December 1956 and also with the great importance which was attached to the political settlement in Hungary.

The chapter concerning the situation in Hungary in November-December 1956 and the activities of János Kádár and his government aiming at the consolidation of their power with the direct support of the Soviets is the most important part in the memoirs. The role of Baikov as some kind of mediator between Nikita Khrushchev and János Kádár is known from earlier-published documents (see for example the collection of key documents published in post-Soviet Russia: *Sovetskii Soiuz i vengerskii krizis 1956 goda*, Moskva, 1998). But the memoirs of Baikov shed new light on the forms and the methods of the Soviet control over Hungary, on the role of the Soviet military administration in the process of the consolidation of the new power, and also on the general situation in the country in the last months of 1956. The author shows that in November 1956 the head of the Hungarian Government completely lacked control over the situation in the country he was supposed to rule. It was impossible for him even to leave his residence in the Parliament and undertake any trip in the country without the Soviet interpreter’s assistance, because Soviet Army patrols could stop him on the streets of Budapest and he could not even talk with them without his Soviet assistant (Baikov gives us impressive details of Kádár’s trip to the town of Esztergom). The memoirs of Baikov also deepen our knowledge on the forms and the scope of the resistance of the Hungarians to the Soviet occupation. The reader can conclude that political motivated actions of industrial sabotage disturbed the stabilization of the Hungarian economy in late 1956.

As Kádár’s regime strengthened its grip on power it was already unnecessary for Kádár to have a permanent Soviet assistant. Baikov continued his activities in Hungary, but his function was changed. In 1957-1959 he was an adviser in the Soviet Embassy.

Baikov’s memoirs shed new light on the relations between János Kádár and Nikita Khrushchev. On the basis of the earlier-known documents (including the records of the

³ Байков В.С.: *1956. Венгрия глазами очевидца*, p. 71.

sessions of the Soviet Communist Party Presidium in the beginning of November 1956, when Khrushchev defended Kádár who was attacked by V. Molotov and K. Voroshilov), it may be argued that the Soviet leader seriously bet on Kádár at that time, and considered him to be the political figure who was truly capable of achieving the consolidation of the Communist power in Hungary. He even noted with regret that Kádár was underestimated by the Soviet leaders in July, when the problem of Rákosi's successor arose. Nevertheless, the question was finally solved only in March-April 1957 when the decision of the CPSU Party Presidium was adopted in the Kremlin to neutralize Rákosi who opposed Kádár, and was attempting to undermine the consolidation of his power. It is well-known by historians that Kádár in his turn was thankful to Khrushchev for his support, and in October 1964, after he had received the information about Khrushchev's ouster, he publicly expressed displeasure, noting that it was of course an internal affair of the Soviet Communist Party but the Hungarian Communists "knew comrade Khrushchev from a positive side."⁴ This gesture caused temporary tensions in the relations between János Kádár and the Leonid Brezhnev.

As concerns the relations of János Kádár with Yuri Andropov, it may be noted that some of the memoirs of the members of Andropov's team (including G. Arbatov, F. Burlatckii) generated the myth according to which Kádár was almost a "creature" or "protégé" of Andropov. This narrative exists in spite of the above-mentioned fact that in Spring 1956 the Soviet Ambassador in Hungary expressed in his reports to Moscow concern regarding the plans of the "right-wing" János Kádár's co-optation to the highest body of the Hungarian Party, as documents published in the 1990s show. After Kádár became member of the Politbureau in July 1956, Andropov still kept a distance from him, until the day of the Uprising, October 23. Kádár did not belong to the circle of the personalities who constantly communicated with the Soviet Embassy (we may come to this conclusion on the basis of the published reports by Andropov to Moscow from Budapest). Only in November, when Kádár became the leader of the Party (the newly founded Hungarian Socialist Workers Party), were more trusting relations established between him and the Soviet Ambassador.

⁴ See the evidence of Valeriy Musatov, who was an official in the Soviet Foreign Ministry and in the foreign affairs department of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union: Musatov V.L.: *Rossiya I Vostochnaya Evropa: svyazy vremen*. Moscow, 2008, p. 112. See also, in detail [in Hungarian]: Baráth Magdolna: „Kis októberi forradalom. Hruschov leváltása és a magyar pártvezetés.” *Múltunk*, No. 4. (2007), pp. 170-212.

In contrast to some biased testimony in this respect by Baikov, the activities of the Soviet Ambassador in Hungary – who showed, when necessary, vigilance or severity but at the same time managed to co-operate fruitfully with the new Hungarian government – were highly appreciated in the Kremlin. Leaving Hungary in February 1957, Andropov soon headed the new international department of the Soviet Communist Party Central Committee – the department charged with relations with the Communist and Workers parties of the Socialist countries.

The Hungarian tragedy of 1956 became for Andropov the starting point for a great political career but this is the subject for another essay. In conclusion we can say, however, that Kádár and Andropov kept normal, stable relations till Andropov's death in February 1984.