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HISTORICAL FAILURE OR POLITICAL REALISM? THE 1956 HUNGARIAN REVOLUTION'S (MIS)HANDLING BY THE UNITED NATIONS

ABSTRACT

After nearly 65 years of the Hungarian 1956 Revolution, several questions remained unanswered, mainly concerning the international responses to the Revolution and the brutal suppression of the revolt. The article examines the possibilities and the limitations of the international organization when two member states violate the Charter of the very organization, they are members of. Based on current archival research concerning recently declassified documents, the (mainly behind the scenes) activity and the (mainly demonstrative) passivity of the UN are analyzed and explained, without offering any excuse for the political pragmatism of the organization that was once built on moral principles.

KEYWORDS: Revolution, International organization, Resolution, Documents Cold War, Investigation, Witnesses

The longer time passes after the Hungarian Revolution and the more we learn about its international responses by access to files closed for 60+ years, the more we understand that the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 was a unique moment in Cold War history and probably a unique possibility as well. It serves as a long-standing example of how the international community may and can react when a nation resolves to determine its own destiny in historical moments by breaking the “geopolitical” consent, the very basis of the Cold War.¹

The United Nations (UN) was founded in 1945 by those powers that united against fascism, other nations could also join that had supported them during WWII. They hoped that even if the internal politics of the member states differed greatly, the principles underlying their external relations would be commonly based upon the UN Charter. Paradoxically enough, at the same time, several countries were fighting against some of the UN founders to reclaim their pre-colonial independence, and this dynamism deeply influenced the United Nation's ability to act during and after the critical days of the Hungarian Revolution.

¹ The article is based on my research conducted from 1992 on and resulted in several publications (see bibliography), particularly on my study *Shattered Hopes and Broken Promises* which serves as a basis for presenting the research results obtained in the last years.

Hungary and other nations who had fought on the side of the Nazis in WWII were rejected as founding members, while subsequent requests to join were frozen due to the Cold War conflict. Nonetheless, Stalin's death and the détente of the mid-1950s resulted in the approval of Hungary's membership as part of a Cold War trade-off.

Recent archival revelations suggest that Hungary's accession to the United Nations was not based solely on foreign policy considerations. The strategies developed by the Hungarian intelligence services were also a critical factor.² Correspondence between the Hungarian intelligence agency in Budapest and the Hungarian Embassy's "rezidentura" in Washington, DC, reveals the process of Hungary's preparations to become a UN member. These documents detail all stages of the intelligence services' participation to obtain advantageous positions inside the international organization. Detailed plans were developed, discussed, modified, approved, and finally forwarded to and accepted by the Budapest intelligence centre. These plans included contact information and contact methods, focusing on potentially persuading the sources to collaborate. The prospective advantages for the intelligence services afforded by Hungary's UN membership were analyzed in several confidential and secret documents.³ Such advantages—in addition to the prospect of obtaining prominent positions in different UN committees, offices, and hopefully the UN Secretariat—were among the benefits of "build[ing] a rezidentura within Hungary's permanent delegation to the UN."⁴ Disadvantages reported by the agents included lack of diplomatic immunity, as well as issues related to intelligence personnel, for instance, few had skills to offer to the UN as international civil servants, and most lacked English language fluency.

The task of preparing the Hungarian UN Mission's creation was assigned to the intelligence agents who had temporarily transferred from Washington.⁵ These documents reveal that the motivations of Hungary's UN Mission deviated significantly from the ideals upon which the UN was based and even farther from the new role the organization came to serve under the direction of Dag Hammarskjöld.

In Hungary, the long-anticipated attainment of UN membership further contributed to the ferment of social and political life that had once led to the

2 The Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security (HAHSS) (Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltára, ÁBTTL) provided relevant documents 3.2.G. OL-8-011/VIII and 3.2.G. OL-8-011/XII. Regarding the process of preparations for the UN membership in the Foreign Ministry (FM), see the National Archives of Hungary (NAH) (Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár-Országos Levéltár, MNL-MOL) XIX-J-1-u, Box GG.

3 See HAHSS (ÁBTTL) 3.2.G. OL-8-011/VIII and XII.

4 See HAHSS (ÁBTTL) 3.2.G. OL-8-011/VIII.

5 See HAHSS (ÁBTTL) 3.2.G. OL-8-011/XII.

Revolution. This is crucial to understanding that for those revolutionary participants, the demands of the Revolution of 1956—however dubious they may have seemed to later observers—could have once appeared within reach.

The Revolution of October 1956, though originally a domestic matter was in a few hours transformed into an international crisis as one superpower, the USSR intervened by its army, on October 24th. The international community was divided: the Soviet Bloc states demonstrated overt support, while in the Western democracies, forceful condemnation of this violation of the UN Charter and the right of nations to self-determination spread widely.

The Hungarian Revolution emerged on the UN agenda soon after the first Soviet invasion, when the Soviet delegate protested its inclusion on the agenda. Peter Kós, the Hungarian diplomat representing the Revolutionary Government, also objected to its inclusion on the UN agenda. The uproar and subsequent protest inside Hungary and beyond demanded Kós' removal, yet recent archival evidence reveals that Kós had obeyed the instructions he had received from Budapest, as that time negotiations with the Soviets were in the process and withdrawing the Hungarian issue from the UN agenda as a condition for agreement. Fueled by the ambiguity of Soviet decision-making and the Kremlin's commitment to introducing new norms between "fraternal countries," (Rainer, 1995, Kramer, 1996-97.) the hope of freedom had given rise to general rejoicing in Budapest. However, such hopes would be eradicated once Soviet policy changed with the outbreak of the Suez crisis and the decision in the Kremlin resulted in the military suppression of the Revolution.

Hungary's plea on November 1 and 2 to the UN resulted from their fear of Soviet military operations. Prime Minister Imre Nagy had attempted to avoid such a dramatic situation by mobilizing the international community. The declaration of Hungary's neutrality, the renunciation of the Warsaw Pact membership, and the request to include Hungary on the UN agenda were the Prime Minister's final attempts to counteract what was happening (Békés, 1994). When the United Nations did not respond to his telegram, Nagy sent another the following day, requesting that the United Nations "instruct" the Hungarian and Soviet governments to start "negotiations immediately." By then, the UN's agenda had been overwhelmed by the Suez Crisis, which ruptured the consent of the Western powers.

At that time the members of the United Nations did not propose a resolution regarding Hungary, while Kós was replaced by number two in the Hungarian Mission, János Szabó. He did not follow his predecessor's lead in obeying instructions from Revolutionary Budapest, as archival evidence revealed that Szabó was an agent of the Hungarian State Security Authority receiving instructions from the Soviets. When informed about a new government being formed, Szabó was eager to represent the new, Moscow-installed regime.

However, participants of the events in Budapest hoped that the final word would not be that of brutal force, but of those UN Charter principles officially shared by the USSR and Hungary. Others trusted in the interference of the UN even militarily, like the leader of the National Guard, Béla Király, stopped in the outskirts of Buda at the U.S. Ambassador's residence to inquire about chances of deploying an international police force to Hungary.⁶ István Bibó, Minister of State for the national government, asserted that UN troops were needed only if the Soviets did not withdraw as agreed (Korányi, 1989. 127.). Meanwhile, Anna Kéthly — veteran Social Democrat leader, Minister of State of the Revolutionary Government, and the only of its members outside Hungary — arrived in New York the day after the Soviet invasion to represent free Hungary. However, Ms. Kéthly's hopes were futile, she even did not have a chance to address the General Assembly, Hammarskjöld did not receive her, and she could follow the debate on Hungary from the gallery, while communist secret agents were "representing" her homeland. She was wrong assuming that the United Nations had a standing army (Bujdosó, 2003.), while on 5 November the UN voted to establish an Emergency International Force for Suez. The outbreak of the Suez Crisis transformed the focus and efforts of the UN and its Secretary-General, Dag Hammarskjöld, who interpreted the twin crises as an either-or situation. In the Middle East, the two great powers could achieve conclusive consensus, while the prospect of working on behalf of the Hungarian people would jeopardize Soviet cooperation. Western unity was also publicly fractured now that the U.S. had sided with the USSR instead of two key American allies, the UK and France, both being involved in the Suez crises. Hopeful illusions about the UN had only partly diminished during the critical days of the 1956 Revolution. The Soviet veto in the Security Council prevented any kind of urgent action by the Security Council,⁷ and the tactics of the Western powers were also not properly coordinated. Although Hammarskjöld was absent from Security Council meetings on 3 and 4 November, he was represented by one of his key deputies, the Yugoslav exile Dragoslav Protitch, who stayed silent throughout both meetings.

Hammarskjöld's absence could potentially be explained by the information he received from the Secretariat staff. While the international press provided extensive coverage of the events in Hungary, the analysis Protitch sent to Hammarskjöld on 2 November 1956 appeared to echo and sympathize with some of the Soviet positions.⁸ The text described the central power as unstable and the

⁶ See NAH, XX-5-h Vizsgálati iratok XXVII, Kötet V-150/000.G1.

⁷ As the Soviet veto was exercised in the Security Council, "uniting for peace" was the procedural solution to move the issue to the General Assembly agenda where no veto was possible.

⁸ "Note on Recent Political Developments," 2 November 1956, in United Nations Archive and Record Management (UNARM) S-0188.

events as chaotic underscored the notion that the revolt had undercut Mátyás Rákosi's beneficial efforts. It criticized Imre Nagy and finally, the report made mention of "fascistic elements" being involved. This last point helps to identify the source of the report, as only Soviet propaganda described the revolutionaries as fascists.

Help from the United Nations had to mean something different. The United Nations was instrumental in humanitarian assistance for Hungarian refugees abroad. Over 200,000 refugees left Hungary during and after the Revolution. Furthermore, UN efforts assisted in shipping food and other supplies to war-torn Hungary (Kecskés, 2021., Nagy 2020.). Access to declassified documents revealed that Hammarskjöld soon realized that this is the only moving space that was left for him, however, he can do it only under the cover of the Red Cross, neither having a network of distributing capacity in Hungary nor could count on the cooperation of the Hungarian government until the "Hungarian Question" remained on the UN agenda. The UN's relief efforts were successful and significant, yet mainly unknown for the Hungarian population, who realized that in clear contradiction of the UN Charter, no meaningful action concerning the military and political developments was taken. The limitations of UN efforts quickly became apparent and sobering. While the UN Headquarters attempted to remedy the lasting consequences of inaction, the violation of UN principles had to be addressed as well. Direct political interference proved unsuccessful and even undesired by Western powers: some were faced similar political situations in their colonies.

Hammarskjöld did not meet with Anna Kéthly nor acknowledged her as the representative of Imre Nagy's government.⁹ However, when Imre Horváth, Foreign Minister of the Soviet-installed Kádár government arrived in New York, the UN effectively legitimized his government by allowing him to address the General Assembly and was contacted by the UN leaders concerning the relief efforts.

Popular expectations that the UN Secretary-General would promptly travel to Hungary and confront those in power with the principles of the UN hardly proved realistic. When Hammarskjöld finally indicated a desire to visit Budapest, the Kádár government responded that they would be unable to "guarantee his safety," as his presence could encourage "counter-revolutionaries" to rise again.¹⁰ Hammarskjöld easily gave up the plan or rather the mission of his visit to Hungary (meanwhile his deputy dealing with humanitarian issues, Philip de Seynes secretly visited Budapest to discuss relief actions with Kádár's staff). Then the Secretary-

⁹ The credentials of Szabó were originally from the Nagy government, while Kéthly's accreditation was scheduled for the meeting of the Council of Ministers on November 4th.

¹⁰ See UNARM S/0442-0138

General appointed a committee to observe and report the events taking place inside Hungary. Formed on 1G November 195G, the committee was comprised of three internationally renowned experts from countries not directly involved in the conflict.¹¹ The Hungarian authorities declared the presence of the experts in Hungary undesirable and also contradicted the UN Charter. Diplomats from India could and did enter Hungary at that time, bearing witness to the general strike in factories, hearing of pockets of resistance in Budapest and the countryside, observing the Soviet modes of terror and witnessing the mass exodus of refugees to the West. Nonetheless, they failed to persuade Kádár to admit the three UN observers (Rahman, 200G. 51-57., Bethlenfalvy, 200G.). About two weeks later, the committee resigned and returned its mandate, indicating that they couldn't complete their mission. On 5 January 1957, Hammarskjöld concluded that the creation of a larger and more formalized group was necessary.

General Assembly Resolution 1132 (XI) of 10 January 1957 established a Special Committee (SpecCom) composed of senior diplomats from five UN member nations "to investigate and to establish and maintain direct observation in Hungary and elsewhere, taking testimony, collecting evidence and receiving information, as appropriate, to report its findings to the General Assembly at the eleventh session, and thereafter from time to time prepare additional reports." 12 This change was of major significance. No longer a crisis for immediate resolution, the situation became a subject to investigate and describe. The formation of the SpecCom afforded the Soviets and the Kádár government valuable time to continue their brutal "Consolidation." This opportunity rose from the fact that the preparations for SpecCom's work, the process of the investigation, and the ensuing production of the Report were all very time-consuming. Archival evidence shows that General Assembly XI, still in session in early 1957, was expecting to receive the Report.¹³ Nonetheless, the Report was not published until June 1957 and was only formally presented to General Assembly XII in September 1957. The Soviet and Hungarian authorities had thus gained nine months to consolidate their rule in Hungary without fear of reaction from the UN General Assembly.

UN relief efforts went unimpeded by the Kádár government as not only the Hungarian people but also the Hungarian government benefited from it. Thus, while the Hungarian UN Membership remained intact, the suspension of Hungary's credentials enacted by the committee in charge of UN accreditation¹⁴

11 Alberto Lleras Camargo (Columbia), Oscar Gundersen (Norway), and Arthur Lall (India).

12 The members of the SpecCom were Alsing Andersen (Danish MP, elected as Chairman), K.C.O. Shann (Australian Ambassador to the Philippines, elected as Rapporteur), and three ambassadors to the UN—R.S.S. Gunewardene (Ceylon), Mongi Slim (Tunisia), and Enrique Rodriguez Fabregat (Uruguay).

13 This was also known to the Hungarian UN Mission. See NAH, XIX-J-24-a, Box 1.

14 On 12 February 1957, the Credentials Committee of the UN suspended the credentials of the Hungarian UN delegation. NAH, XIX-J—1-n, Box 53d.

remained in effect for six years. Nevertheless, Communist Hungarian diplomats could and did use all the UN facilities—including the podium of the UN Assembly Hall—to try to promote their legitimacy. The UN membership fee was also collected, and receptions given by the Hungarian UN Mission, boycotted by most democratic nations, were regularly attended by top UN officials.¹⁵

The group of diplomats forming the SpecCom amassed political weight and significant experience. However, they were also involved in representing their own respective countries, three-headed their country's UN missions at the same time, that they served as their country's ambassador in Washington, DC. Some were also simultaneously assigned to other UN committees, their multiple hats resulted in scheduling conflicts. Consequently, appointed SpecCom members often had to be replaced at a meeting or hearing by a junior diplomat from the same country. Not only did this practice break continuity, but the deputies also lacked the experience, background knowledge, and authority of the senior diplomats who had been involved from the investigation's inception.

However, in a relatively short time and with limited resources, the SpecCom's members and supporting Secretariat staff were able to create a masterful account of the 195G Hungarian Revolution. The SpecCom decided to glean all available documents concerning the 195G Hungarian Revolution through media reports, official statements, administrative regulations, leaflets and manifestos, and secondary sources and set out to gather the testimonies of an intentionally diverse group of witnesses who had participated in the 195G events. Since only those who had left Hungary could be interviewed, the SpecCom gathered testimonies in New York, Geneva, Rome, Vienna, and London. Several participants also submitted their contribution in writing to the SpecCom's Secretariat staff, headed by Secretary William Jordan and Deputy Secretary Povl Bang-Jensen. Complex administrative support had to be arranged as interpreters, typists, and assistants were needed, however the group did not have a security officer in spite of the obvious challenges.¹⁶

Communist intelligence agencies fixated upon SpecCom's activities from its very beginning. They were particularly interested in obtaining documents, to identify the witnesses. Most witnesses requested to testify anonymously to avoid risking their lives or retribution on their families, friends, and fellow revolutionaries still in Hungary. Of the 111 Hungarian witnesses, 81 requested to

¹⁵ The reception of the Hungarian UN Mission on 14 October 1957 was attended by Hammarskjöld. See NAH, XIX-J-1-j, Box 209.

¹⁶ See the report of the Hungarian Political Investigation Department II, 12 March 1957 and G April 1957, HAHSS (ÁBTL) 3.2.3., Mt 499/1-3. and the report of Hungarian Ambassador to Vienna: NAH, XIX-J-3G, Box 13. Some of the transcripts of Verbatim Records were obtained by the intelligence services. See also HAHSS (ÁBTL) 3.1.9. V-150352/2,

testify anonymously. For many, anonymity was a precondition in appearing before SpecCom.

Only the Danish diplomat Povl Bang-Jensen kept a list of the actual identities of those testifying to the UN, he was also responsible for the pre-selection of witnesses, the documentation of the nature of the information to be provided by the witness, travel arrangements, and the *per diem* to cover their expenses. He was unconditionally trusted by the Hungarians, including those who had been disappointed by the UN. Because of his connection to hundreds of potential witnesses during the pre-selection process, Bang-Jensen was acutely aware of and concerned about the enormous risk for those testifying before SpecCom.¹⁷ In the eyes of the Communist authorities, providing testimony to the United Nations was synonymous with “spying for a foreign power” and engaging in “intelligence activity against Hungary.” Such acts of high treason were to be met with commensurate consequences.¹⁸

While the UN investigation was underway, the Budapest Communist authorities were conducting an ongoing investigation as part of the “Reprisal” that also involved witness testimony. To satisfy the demands of the Communist judicial system, all sources of information—statements of arrested revolutionaries, recollections of political police personnel, documents from the UN, and records obtained by the intelligence services—were used.

The witnesses of the SpecCom believed that the more detail that they could relay the more help the UN could supply to the Hungarian people. However, when the Communist intelligence services obtained UN documents, these sources often served as the basis of investigation for resultant court cases. In spite of Kádár’s efforts to dissolve the feared State Security Authority, the same officers—whose training and experience originated during the Stalinist era—were often involved in the investigations.

While the SpecCom chairman, Andersen was the “master of ceremonies,” the Rapporteur Shann played a decisive role in directing the investigation. On 20 February Shann was already drafting an Interim Report¹⁹ that summarized the events in Hungary and outlined the concept of the future investigation. First, the logic and structure of the Report were decided and agreed upon. Next, individual chapters were assigned and drafted by members of the Secretariat working with

17 Bang-Jensen’s concerns originated from an allegation put forth by three Eastern bloc UN diplomats during the autumn of 1956 that the 38th floor (the offices of the UN Secretary-General and his deputies) was under Soviet control. On the role of Bang-Jensen, his convictions, and his later conflicts with the UN, see Copp-Peck, 19G1; U.S. Senate 19G1; Lidegaard, 1998, Nagy, 2005.

18 See: NAH, IM 1959 00/4/1959.

19 See: Hedervary Collection, National Széchenyi Library (NSL) Manuscript Collection (MC), Fond 523. 1. Tk /1. and 2. Tk / 14.

SpecCom. Once the first draft of a chapter was completed, another member of the Secretariat staff would review it before circulating it between the members of the SpecCom. The entire process—from the distribution of drafts and documents to the typing and retyping of the drafts, through to the completion of the final version—was supervised by Jordan.

Overseeing the process was the UN Under-Secretary-General, Dragoslav Protitch. The Hungarian UN Mission attempted to maintain a vigilant eye on the whole process. The reports the Mission sent back to Hungary prove that they had obtained surprisingly detailed information about the different phases of the work,²⁰ including disagreements between SpecCom members. Rejecting all official UN requests for cooperation, they collected whatever information they could, immediately forwarding it to Budapest. As the intelligence services possessed a very effective network in the Hungarian expatriate community with several agents working undercover there well before 195G (with many more arriving after the Revolution)²¹ several agents had access to certain documents, others stole sensitive material or took photographs of “borrowed” documents. The Hungarian Minister of the Interior, Béla Biszku—in charge of the intelligence services, and orchestrating the post-195G “Reprisal”—subsequently reported during a Politburo meeting²² that they’d obtained a great amount of information and “kn[ew] the names of witnesses” what was luckily untrue.

At the same time, additional information was arriving at the UN about the Kádár regime’s brutal “Consolidation.” These materials were catalogued, registered, and preserved by the SpecCom’s Secretariat staff. A summary list of the documents, entitled “Communication Received” was subsequently published at regular intervals. It named the communication source, date, and subject, to be circulated among the SpecCom members. Although the list was a timesaver as a selection and filtering device, its contents were often so concise that the members had difficulty determining the relevance or significance of its items.

The publication of the SpecCom Report was a great achievement.²³ Regarded as a comprehensive chronicle of the 195G Hungarian Revolution, the Report was translated into several languages, prefaced by important politicians, and distributed in hundreds of thousands of copies. Some of the most attentive readers and analysts of the Report were the Hungarian Communist authorities—particularly those in the FM and intelligence services.²⁴ Once the Report was

²⁰ NAH, XIX-J-1-o. and XIX-J-1-j, Boxes 209-211.

²¹ HAHSS (ÁBTL) 3.2.3. Mt. 499-103.

²² NAH, Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party (HSWP) papers M-KS 288f. 5/37 6.e.

²³ United Nations, *Report of the Special Committee on the Problem of Hungary*, General Assembly Official Records: Eleventh Session, Supplement No. 18 (A/3952) (New York: United Nations, September 1957).

²⁴ See: NAH XIX-J-1-k, Box 94. The secret services’ analysis: Volume III HAHSS (ÁBTL) 3.1.9. V-150352/2.

published, the full document was immediately translated into Hungarian and printed for exclusive distribution among senior members of the *nomenklatura*. Individual chapters of the Report were assigned to different ministries or the relevant authorities. The intelligence services condemned what they deemed the “espionage executed by the UN Committee,” aiming to unmask and denounce the “criminals and traitors” who by their “false testimonies were misguiding the international community.”²⁵ At the same time, a team of international law experts began to collate legal justifications for rejecting the Report, asserting its “propagandist character.”

The magnitude and complexity of the efforts to discredit the Report were enormous. The endeavour proved—even if indirectly—the amount of importance the Kádár government attached to the UN. Kádár’s regime had continually disputed the UN’s authority and prevented its representatives from entering Hungary. Yet once an official document like the SpecCom Report had been published, it was taken extremely seriously. Prime Minister János Kádár himself oversaw the response effort—a process that became the subject of extensive debate at the highest level of the Politburo.²⁶ As for the legal basis upon which the UN investigation would be challenged, international law experts referred to UN precedents and interpreted the Charter to suit their own purposes. Their arguments also focused on the laws of the relevant member countries that had prepared the Report and they attacked the legal practices of Western democracies that held colonies.

Hungary’s right to its autonomy—now paradoxically threatened by the UN Report—was defended with severe wording. In addition to rejecting the right of the UN to interfere with Hungary’s internal matters, their main objection was that SpecCom had employed unusual methods by questioning “criminals” about their “crimes.”²⁷ Indeed, according to the Hungarian propaganda, all SpecCom witnesses had engaged in high treason by offering testimony, participating in the Revolution, or illegally crossing borders. Witnesses who had revealed their names, or were later identified by the Hungarian authorities, were accused of other crimes such as looting, murder, war atrocities, and undermining constitutional order.²⁸ The SpecCom members themselves also became targets as partisan and prejudiced enemies of the People’s Republic.²⁹ Once the responses from each bureau were received, summarized, carefully edited, and stylistically reviewed, they were

25 NAH XIX-J-3G.

26 HSWP Papers, in NAH M-KS 288f. 41. ö.e. in NAH XIX-J-1-o. Kádár’s handwritten comments and corrections: “Magyar kormánynyilatkozat-tervezet,” n.d., in NAH XIX-J-1-j, Box 5G.

27 NAH XIX-J-1-k, Box 94.

28 NAH XX-J-10-k.

29 See: HSWP Papers, NAH M-KS 288f. 41. ö.e.

approved at the highest levels both of the Party and the Government. However, the Hungarian government's reply was only made public after the Soviet government had already issued its harsh rejection of the Report.

There were indeed several errors in the SpecCom Report from which Communist propaganda could profit. However, these mistakes were infrequently referenced. The primary target of Communist action was not only the Report but the overall behaviour of the UN. Bang-Jensen also alerted the UN Rapporteur to several inaccuracies. Errors included the alleged legality of the Revolutionary government and the legal basis of the invitation extended to the Soviet troops. Bang-Jensen supplied a list of corrections numerous times, as he—having been involved from the interview and pre-selection of potential witnesses to the review of the Report's final drafts—possessed a broad knowledge of the testimonies. But his reservations and suggestions went unanswered and often unnoticed. There is reason to suspect that this may not have been purely accidental.³⁰

Having effectively consolidated control over the country with the support of the Soviet Army, the Communist authorities seriously feared that the Report might be of catastrophic consequence for the Hungarian political leadership. They tried to avoid this scenario through several manoeuvres. The foreign ministry formulated an extensive campaign to convince other countries—mainly Third World non-aligned nations—that the Hungarian turmoil had been orchestrated by the imperialists. Furthermore, Hungary suggested that non-aligned nations could receive economic assistance from the Soviets, conditional upon their future vote at the UN.³¹ Embassies in the Western democracies—often with the support of the local Communist parties who, financially backed by the USSR, launched propaganda campaigns on behalf of the Hungarian government—were also ordered to condemn the Report.

In addition to the diplomatic efforts and legal objections launched against the Report, the Hungarian government also initiated a full-scale, meticulously organized "spontaneous" initiative. Bishops and rabbis, peasants, and workers, intellectuals, teachers and writers, scientists, sportsmen, and women's federation representatives were put under serious pressure to provide a "broad" demonstration against the Report. Nonetheless, utter cynicism prevailed. As Kádár himself mentioned, the Hungarian general public did not have access to the text

30 Bang-Jensen's suggestions were kept in the SpecCom Secretariat's files. See: Hedervary Collection, NSL MC Fond 523. 2. tk / 28. See also Bang-Jensen's "List of Corrections," 23 May 1957, in NSL MC Bang-Jensen Archive (BJA) Fond 413, Box 1G. His concerns were rejected and his participation in the work later suspended. The conflicts between Bang-Jensen and the organization significantly accelerated in the months to come. The action culminated in Bang-Jensen's firing from the UN in 1958, following three highly dubious disciplinary procedures.

31 See: NAH XIX-J-24-a., Box 1. and NAH XIX-J-1-j, Box 11G.

of the Report, the protesters had little idea about what they were protesting against.

In the summer of 1957, when the UN efforts concerning Hungary seemed to bear little fruit, the decision was made at the UN's highest level to let the Hungarian affair "peter out."³² Preparations had initially been made to discuss the Report at the UN General Assembly and to vote for resolutions that would be even harsher as a result of the systematic investigation—especially since international interest in the situation in Hungary had ignited after the Report's publication. Yet the 38th floor decided that the issue should be closed, and the president of the General Assembly was politely discouraged to hold an emergency session on Hungary. Hammarskjöld's behaviour might be explained by the fact that a new Secretary-General was due to be elected at the September 1957 UN General Assembly meeting.

Archival evidence reveals that the majority of the SpecCom members wanted to continue their work following the original conditions of the GA resolution.³³ As details of the "Reprisal" surfaced, the SpecCom believed that the UN was capable, of extending help to the Hungarian people—particularly those who were being arrested, tried, imprisoned, or condemned to execution. Nonetheless, confidential correspondence and unpublicized instructions from the UN Secretariat precluded further meetings and the creation of additional Reports. Protitch—notified by the Under-Secretary-General Cordier of their decision— informed the SpecCom Secretary Jordan of these views. Cordier had obtained that the consent of the Secretary-General to discourage the SpecCom members from producing additional reports. Regardless, the decision was obeyed and executed by Jordan and Rapporteur Shann.

As information about the domestic situation in Hungary continued to arrive in New York, where elaborate preparations were being made for the upcoming General Assembly session. The number of court cases began to grow as the intensity of the "Reprisal" accelerated. Before the UN commenced its GA session, a total police alert was ordered in Hungary.³⁴ The Foreign Ministry in Budapest, fearing that the building could become a target for protesters,³⁵ installed two machine-gun units and removed all classified documents from the premises.

Despite all these preparations, rumours were spreading in Hungary that the Soviet troops were already "packing up" (Poór-Cseh, 1995.) as unable to disregard the UN' resolutions any longer, would leave Hungary after 10 September. In this

32 See: Hedervary Collection, NSL MC Fond 413, Fond 413 1. Tk / 1.

33 See: BJA, NSL MC Fond 523. Box GG.

34 See NAH XIX-B-1, Box 31.

35 See NAH XIX-J-1-n, Box 72.

atmosphere of total terror, some optimism—even hope—was burgeoning. The UN would finally help.

The Report served as a renewed occasion for the General Assembly to adopt a resolution censuring the USSR and Hungary, ³⁶ however, they disregarded the resolution as they had the previous ones. Instead, they proceeded to attack both the UN and the SpecCom in even harsher terms than before. The General Assembly requested that Prince Wan Waithayakon, President of the Eleventh Session of the UN General Assembly and Thailand's Permanent Representative to the UN, serving as a Special Representative for the Hungarian Problem. It took less than two months for the Prince to realize that he was unable to achieve any progress with the Hungarian authorities. However, he promised that he would do his best despite the circumstances, but documents do not refer to any serious activity concerning his promise.³⁷

The Hungarian “problem” remained on the agenda at the UN, and also an official document listed all the broken promises and unlawful measures that had transpired. The Western rhetoric stating Hungary would not be abandoned after the bitter experiences of October fostered the expectation that the UN would, at the very least, not overlook or forget the Hungarian people. The magnitude of these hopes resulted in the large amount of “Communication Received” by the SpecCom, collected, and internally circulated as before.

From these documents, a comprehensive picture can now be constructed concerning the frequency and nature of the information the UN acquired. Special emphasis was given to the consequences of the Revolution: arrests, trials, sentences, imprisonments, and executions, which were carefully listed. Yet no action was considered by the UN, much less taken, as these reports were filed away.³⁸

Although collecting and smuggling information out of the country was extremely risky, informants attempted to subvert government repression by sending information to the UN. Such documents included one masterful description of the Hungarian press in the aftermath of the Revolution, as well as a reliable assessment of the military’s “purification.”³⁹

³⁶ The Report was approved by the UN General Assembly on 14 September 1957. The resolution condemned the Soviet interference and requested those involved to observe the UN Charter 1133 (XI). The SpecCom was permitted to continue its activity. See NAH XIX-J-1-j, Box 55.

See: “A magyar ENSZ-misszió jelentése” Folder in NAH XIX-J-1-j, Box 5G.

³⁸ The U.S. Embassy reports were also sent to Washington (see cables of 17, 21, 25 June 1957, in the United States National Archive and Records Administration (NARA) 7G4.00/7-1757, -2157, -2557.), submitted to the SpecCom; later a 72-page report gave exact details of pending court cases, as well as a summary of the sentences between 9 September 1957 and 31 January 1958.

³⁹ See Hedervary Collection, NSL MC Fond 523. 4. Tk / G2.

But upon receipt, these items were simply catalogued and filed away. The lack of notice paid to the items named on the “List of Communications Received by the Committee” would prove tragic. The intelligence services, both in Hungary and in the UN, focused their energies trying to stop information from escaping the country or obtaining as much of it as they could. Unfortunately, they were quite successful, three death sentences were also the “result” of informing the UN from Hungary.⁴⁰

As time passed, the “List of Communication Received” documented the worrisome development that death sentences were growing in number. All too often, when a life sentence was appealed, it resulted in a new sentence of execution by hanging. The last half of 1957 and the first half of 1958 witnessed increasing concern that the lives of the leaders of the Revolution, too, would not be spared. Yet the Hungarian authorities continued to reject all requests for information, regarding the inquiries as interference with the internal affairs of the country. Furthermore, they persisted in denying that trials would be staged against them.

In September 1957, General Assembly Dag Hammarskjöld was reappointed as Secretary-General. The meeting made it clear that Hungary would not face any serious consequences for disregarding the UN General Assembly resolutions. In light of this decision, the Hungarian authorities had no reason to halt their “Reprisal.” Major trials were secretly initiated as Imre Nagy and Pál Maléter were accused of high treason for attacking Hungary’s constitutional order. Imre Nagy’s appeal to the UN—interpreted as a request for military aid against his own country that threatened the outbreak of a general war—became a major item in the indictment.⁴¹ In other cases, the UN’s attention and the expressions of concern by the international community did help to avert death sentences.⁴² Yet the profound silence from the UN during this new phase of “Reprisal” also encouraged the Kádár regime to continue its “Consolidation.”

News of the death sentences and executions of the former Prime Minister, the former Defense Minister, and their associates were successively announced in Moscow and then in Budapest on 16 June 1958. As the documents show, the UN seemed unprepared to respond to these developments.⁴³ After the SpecCom was reconvened, a communiqué condemning the executions was ultimately released on 21 June 1958. The minutes of the SpecCom meetings suggest those present were concerned about how to proceed without undermining the Special

⁴⁰ See the so-called „Lukács conspiracy” involving Ákos Tumbász, Alajos Czermann and László Lukács. HAHSS (ÁBTL) V-14G-247-2 and 3.1.5. O-12132.

⁴¹ See NAH XIX-J-1-j, Box 55.

⁴² Young writers, József Gáli and Gyula Obersovszky, were at first sentenced to death, subsequent international uproar caused the Hungarian authorities to change their sentences to life terms.

⁴³ See “Provisional Summary Report of the 74th [SpecCom] Meeting,” Hedervary Collection, NSL MC Fond 523. 12. Tk / 19.

Representative's authority. It took significant time to establish contact with the Prince and then to compose a report about the trials and the sentences. A large part of the second UN Report focused on the reasons for the UN's inaction throughout the previous year. However, the Second Report would not be discussed at the General Assembly session until 22 September 1958—more than three months after the executions. It was not followed by any kind of emergency measures either.

In the meantime, Hungarian politicians established a very detailed plan to avoid any kind of sanctions or “attack” by the UN. Preparations in the Foreign Ministry began well before the sentences were announced.⁴⁴ Despite the uproar from the international community, the Hungarian diplomats soon revealed that the judicial murders were hardly followed by any repercussions. On 12 December 1958, the work of the SpecCom was effectively terminated by the silent consent of the representatives from the five countries comprising it.⁴⁵ After Prince Wan's term of inaction, Sir Leslie Knox Munro from New Zealand took over the job. However, his authority was more limited than that of his predecessor,⁴⁶ while interpersonal strife also tainted his relationships.⁴⁷ Both the Secretary-General and his deputy Andrew Cordier had also advised the Hungarian UN representative that the Hungarian government should not consider Munro's role significant: Munro had no permanent office, working out of temporary locations, and the “secretary” working for him was occupied with other duties for 95 percent of her time.⁴⁸ Declassified documents also reveal that for the Special Representative his own business activity was a priority both concerning lobbying for Western companies in the Middle East and giving lectures for different organizations for a significant fee. All these activities were organized by his office at the UN while the Reports submitted to the General Assembly in the years to come were the products of his colleagues.

The Danish deputy secretary of the SpecCom, Bang-Jensen was deeply unsatisfied by the UN's response to the Hungarian tragedy and suspected that all that happened was not accidental. He accumulated significant proof to substantiate his concerns about the sabotage during the SpecCom's activity and concerning the errors in the Report, the lack of emergency session, the rejection of supplemental reports, actually the violation of the UN's resolutions by high-

44 See: NAH XIX-j-1-o, Box G. and XIX-J-1-j, Box 55.

45 See: NAH XIX-j-1-o, Box G. See also the cable of the U.S. UN Mission: NARA 320.11/12-458.

46 See the UN Resolution 1312 (XIII) of 12 December 1958.

47 Munro became unpopular among delegates, the U.S. Mission reported: “[Munro] thoroughly disliked by virtually all members.” See: NARA 7G4.00/11-2G59. The Hungarian intelligence services knew about his “problems with alcohol.” See: HAHSS (ÁBTL) 3.2.5. 0-8-079.

48 See: NAH XIX-J-1-j, Box 231.

ranking UN officials. His concerns remained unanswered when revealed to the US-UN Mission, while the UN leadership launched a campaign against him, particularly after Bang-Jensen rejected to turn over the list of secret witnesses to his superiors. Disciplinary proceedings followed his rejection of instructions that resulted in firing him from the UN. When he did not give up his efforts to prove he was right, he was found dead in Long Island in November 1959 and until today we do not know if he was killed or committed suicide.

CONCLUSION

During the Cold War, it was especially easy for those not involved in the daily business of international politics to trust that the UN could consistently apply the ideals of the UN Charter to its management of international crises. But in moments of calamity, the contradiction between principles and practice can become fatal—particularly when superpowers take up opposite sides of an issue. Such was the case for the Hungarian Revolution, as the revolutionaries who took to the streets placed their ultimate hope in the United Nations. Unfortunately, neither their leaders nor the pragmatic diplomats inside the international organization shared this “naiveté.”

Almost 65 years after the event, few key participants of the Hungarian Revolution are alive today. There indeed remain many unanswered questions regarding the UN’s response to the Hungarian Revolution. Until more relevant documents become available to researchers and scholars, we cannot determine with confidence which of the UN’s failures were inevitable at the time, or if such catastrophes could have been avoided by an alternative approach to the “Problem of Hungary.” Maybe with less pragmatism and more morality? One can fail in both but it is better to fail when ethically intact.

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