

VIOLENCE ON THE ANNIVERSARY OF 1956

Yesterday, the Hungarian government commemorated what many here consider to be the single most important event for Hungary in the 20th century—the revolution of 1956. The irony is that at this most important occasion, one which has been planned for and anticipated for months, no Hungarians were present. Well, OK, a handful was there—members of the ruling coalition of the Hungarian Socialist Party and the Alliance of Free Democrats, a few individuals reading poems and standing symbolically in an old truck reminiscent of 1956, and of course a military band. A number of foreign dignitaries were also present. But otherwise, the events went on without Hungarians. Indeed, ordinary Hungarians were not allowed to get within a kilometer of the Parliament, where the official events were taking place. Beginning the night before, a barrage of special police units had cleared all outlying streets and even shut down the metro to prevent passengers from getting off at the stop near the Parliament.

Is this what Laszlo Sólyom, the president of Hungary, had in mind when he said that all Hungarians should unite so that there could be a real national commemoration? Imagine an American president celebrating the Fourth of July in front of the Capitol with a spattering of foreign guests and a few handpicked kids on bikes in a little parody of a parade, with a solitary fire truck for good measure. A police cordon forms a vast circle in order to keep ordinary Americans from getting closer than a mile. Imagine that an American president did this not on any ordinary July 4th, but on the Bicentennial. Indeed, it's rather more like Orwell than a democracy at the start of the 21st century.

The three main official events of the day--10:00 on front of the Parliament, 5:30 again at the Parliament, and 7:30 at the new '56 memorial--were all equally and eerily quiet. Cameras of the state television station MTV1 dutifully filmed the performers and the guests, careful not to stray beyond that narrow focus to reveal the silent and empty streets, or the hundreds of police safeguarding that silence. On another channel, HIR TV, the opposition television, showed tens of thousands of demonstrators at a counter-event organized by the two leading opposition parties, the Alliance of Young Democrats (Fidesz) and the Christian Democrats. The crowd consisted of all age groups, from children to grandmothers and everything in between. The sound of the speakers was nearly drowned out by the constant circling overhead of a police helicopter as well as the constant punctuation of police

firing tear gas canisters into crowds on neighboring streets. Police also used water cannons, truncheons, rubber bullets and mounted police to drive the crowds back and maintain the wide circle of silence around the Parliament, injuring more than one hundred people in the process.

Why did the government go to such lengths to create and maintain the cordon of silence around its official events? Because they knew that to allow ordinary Hungarians anywhere near would have been to allow shouts of protest and dissent. Many Hungarians are determined to see the downfall of the prime minister, Ferenc Gyurcsány. They feel he relinquished his right to lead the country when on a leaked recording he admitted to lying for months about the economic state of the country in order to win the general election, and did so using obscene language that was an insult to everyone. The fact that his government coopted what should have been a day of national commemoration has further fuelled their anger and dismay: Gyurcsány was himself a leader in the communist hierarchy, and his wife is the granddaughter of one of the officials responsible for the bloody repression of the revolution. As such, many feel Gyurcsány's praise for the Freedom Fighter's heroism in 1956 sounds hollow, insincere and out of place.

The government is trying hard now to discredit the demonstrators as right wing extremists. To dismiss one's critics as fascists and extremists is a tactic communists have been using for decades. But the tens of thousands who demonstrated in Budapest last night and indeed around the country were not extremists. There certainly were a few such people among the demonstrators, but they were by far in the minority. The majority were merely Hungarians who want true freedom and an accountable government, people who did nothing to provoke the police violence used against them. They were Hungarians who did not deserve the beating they received yesterday and the world should be outraged at the behavior of this government and the violence it has employed to silence its critics.

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