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## Introduction

One of the basic problems of the classical Stalinist system concerns information about how the system is performing. Is there enough information accessible for requisite changes to be made, in general and during the course of events? To what extent do the “signals” of an impending crisis reach their addressees?<sup>1</sup> The Hungarian communist system was suffering a crisis in the summer of 1952, due to a poor harvest and to excessively tight plans imposed when the five-year plan was revised upwards in 1951. All branches of the economy were beginning to show serious imbalances. Although the signals from these had proliferated in the summer of 1952, the crisis was only recognized a year later, in the early summer of 1953.

The gravest situation arose in the countryside. The summer of 1952 brought the first signs of mass rural resistance to the system of compulsory deliveries: threshers’ strikes, refusals to surrender quotas and even acts of violence occurred. Sporadic resistance flared up several times during the year.<sup>2</sup> The social resistance and unrest soon elicited some measures to “improve the public frame of mind.” Deputy Prime Minister Imre Nagy put before the Secretariat of the Hungarian Working People’s Party a proposal to authorize free-market grain trading again. Two weeks later, Ernő Gerő, the deputy prime minister responsible for the whole economy, sent a dramatically worded note to Mátyás Rákosi, prime minister and party general secretary. The bad weather, he said, would not just reduce agricultural exports, it would necessitate imports of feed and potatoes. The lost exports alone would cost the country \$12 million (150 million foreign-

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<sup>1</sup> Kornai, János (1992), *The Socialist System. The Political Economy of Communism*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 156–9.

<sup>2</sup> MOL (Hungarian National Archives) MDP-MSZMP ir. (Hungarian Working People’s Party-Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party Archive), 276. f. 65/301. ő. e., p. 149: report by the MDP KV (Hungarian Working People’s Party Central Leadership), Department of Party and Mass Organizations, Information Sub-Department, on events at Szakmár-Réztelek and Szabadszállás, 23 July 1952. The delivery process at Szakmár-Réztelek, Bács-Kiskun County, for instance, led to a mass demonstration, with protesters swearing they would not let a single grain of wheat leave the village. The march, by 300 peasants, caused the deepest alarm. Apart from the whole county political leadership, Interior Minister Árpád Házi descended on the village, accompanied by requisite units of the ÁVH (security police). *Ibid.*, pp. 156–7: report by Sándor Sz. Nagy, head of the State Prosecution Office in Pécs, to István Timár, divisional head at the Ministry of Justice, on events in the Dráva Valley, 29 July 1952. MOL XIX-A-83-a. 68. d. MT (Council of Ministers), 18 July 1952: report by the chairman of Békés County Council, on unrest in the county over the state collections of produce. MOL XIX-A-2-v. Imre Nagy’s prime ministerial (deputy prime ministerial) papers, 1952–5. 66. d. N-51, 17 December 1952: note from Deputy Prime Minister Árpád Házi on the deviations in Bács-Kiskun County connected with the state collections. *Ibid.*, N-70, 27 December 1952: memorandum by István Dobi on a tour of eight collective farms at the end of November 1952. (During the tour, Dobi witnessed a strike at the collective farm at Szentistván, Borsod County.)

exchange forints), and an emergency loan would have to be requested from the Soviet Union.<sup>3</sup> Authorizing grain trading, apart from helping to calm the peasantry, was designed to increase the stocks held by the state.<sup>4</sup> Before the autumn harvest, the collection quotas for certain crops were reduced.<sup>5</sup> However, all these moves did little to alter the shortage of food and sowing seed in Hungarian villages at the beginning of 1953.

The first group of signals did not have much effect on preparation of the 1953 plan. Gerő, addressing the party Central Leadership at a meeting to discuss economic issues in November 1952, made no reference to such changes. However, he mentioned the bad harvest (adding that there had not been any famine in the event) and sharply criticized several ministries and ministers.<sup>6</sup>

A comprehensive assessment of the economic situation was begun in the apparatus of the Prime Minister's Office. Some contributory reports were written, but these did not come before the government or the party leadership.<sup>7</sup> A summary of the situation in arable farming, made in January 1953, presented a dramatic picture (yet only seven copies were made). By this time there was mention not only of the drought and frost-damage of 1952, but of other factors. Aggregate harvests, average yields and other indices since 1949 had fallen short of the average figures for the 1930s (for bread grain by 6 per cent, fodder grain by 15 per cent and potatoes by 13 per cent). The report listed indiscriminately all factors, important and unimportant, behind the decline. They included the fall in the area under grain cultivation, faulty planning policy by the agricultural authorities, the increase in fallow and uncultivated land, and the lack of technical

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<sup>3</sup> MOL MDP-MSZMP ir. 276. f. 65/41. ő. e., pp. 292–5: letter from Gerő to Rákosi, 15 August 1952.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 54/208. ő. e. MDP Titk. (Hungarian Working People's Party Secretariat), 27 August 1952. See also an article by Imre Nagy in the central party daily: "Szabad a gabona piaci forgalma" (Market Trading of Grain Allowed), *Szabad Nép* (Free People), 15 August 1952.

<sup>5</sup> MOL XIX-A-83-a. 69. d. MT, 29 August 1952.

<sup>6</sup> MOL MDP-MSZMP ir. 276. f. 52/22. ő. e. MDP KV, 29 November 1952.

<sup>7</sup> MOL XIX-A-2-v. 66. d. N-226, 13 January 1953: "Comrade Soltész's report to Comrade Ernő Gerő on the situation in the whole people's economy".

development.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, not a word was included about the shortcomings of agricultural policy, and the solutions proposed in the report still displayed “voluntarism” (wishful thinking). These reports which were passed around in decision-making circles had a marked effect, even though they failed to find adequate ways to remedy the ills of the economy. News of them leaked out to Moscow, through the network of Soviet advisers found at every level of the Hungarian administration by 1952–3. The position was similar in the case of the terror. For instance, there was a debate in the party Secretariat about the scale of the repression, well before the 1953 talks in Moscow. In August 1952, the Administrative Department at the party centre prepared a report entitled “Improvement of Criminal Proceedings and Reduction in Their Number”. It found that “excessive severity is being applied against the workers,” but “liberalism” shown towards enemy. The figures it gave for criminal prosecutions and sentences were to be repeated in 1953, by the Soviet leaders in the Kremlin.<sup>9</sup>

As in everything else, Rákosi tried to imitate Stalin’s last wave of vengeance. At the end of February 1953, he announced to the party Central Leadership the arrest of Gábor Péter, head of the State Security Authority (ÁVH), and of several ÁVH officers and leading party functionaries (including István Szirmai and András Bárd). The score-settling came dangerously close to the innermost circles of the party leadership. István Kovács and Zoltán Vas, both members of the Political Committee, were strongly criticized, dismissed and sent to the provinces.<sup>10</sup> All of these people were of Jewish origin. The “anti-Zionist” purge was a Moscow-inspired initiative begun

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<sup>8</sup> MOL XX-5-h. LB Nb. (Supreme Court, People’s Judicial Council), trial of Imre Nagy and Associates, op. ir. 29. k. pp. 210–25: “The Situation and Tasks in Crop Production”. The passage referred to is on p. 217.

<sup>9</sup> MOL MDP-MSZMP ir. 276. f. 54/208 ö. e. MDP Titk., August 27, 1952. According to a joint report by the Justice and Interior ministries and the party’s Administrative Department, the courts sentenced 72,300 prisoners in 1949, 98,000 in 1950, and 120,000 in 1952. The courts found 212,000 of the 870,000 accused not guilty, while the prosecution authorities preferred no charges in 150,000 cases out of 300,000. By the final year covered by the report, 500,000 penalties were imposed for petty offences (police and local-authority) alone.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 52/23. ö. e. MDP KV, 26 February 1953. Rákosi’s report: *ibid.*, 65/30. ö. e. (wrongly recorded as his report to the Political Committee meeting, 19 February 1953). Vas’s resignation: MOL XIX-A-83-a. 78. d. MT Eln. jkv. (minutes of the Presidium of the Council of Ministers), 30 January 1953.

in earlier years, but the concealed and repressed tensions in the leadership were probably heightened by the signs of crisis. This was how matters stood when news of Stalin's death arrived on 5 March 1953.

To manage the tasks arising from Stalin's death, the Secretariat of the Hungarian Working People's Party set up a committee of three, consisting of Rákosi, Gerő and Nagy.<sup>11</sup> Rákosi travelled to Moscow for the funeral, accompanied by two relatively young, non-Jewish members of the Political Committee. The main event in Budapest, held at the same time, was a mass meeting with Gerő as the speaker. Nagy gave an address in Parliament. Two members of the post-1945 quartet of communist leaders, Public Education Minister József Révai and Defence Minister Mihály Farkas, were not given parts in the observances, which suggested they were being sidelined.<sup>12</sup>

Only in the late spring of 1953 did the first sign come from Moscow that the leadership of the Soviet party wanted changes made in the policies of its East European allies, including Hungary. Rákosi, having already used the occasion of Stalin's funeral to have talks with the Soviet leaders,<sup>13</sup> traveled to Moscow again.<sup>14</sup> On 3 June 1953, he reported to the party Secretariat on the instructions he had received. This report has not survived, but it is clear from the Secretariat resolution what Rákosi was told in the Kremlin. The resolution blamed the inordinately large investment schemes for the failure to develop the production branches capable of raising the standard of living. The rapid pace of industrialization had brought on a labour shortage. This was having a "suction" effect on the villages, where many people were leaving the land. Free-market food prices had risen because of the poor harvest, and the standard of living had fallen, which was damaging the political mood. All the Secretariat members would have

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<sup>11</sup> MOL MDP-MSZMP ir. 276. f. 54/234. ő. e. MDP Titk., 6 March 1953.

<sup>12</sup> There had been signs of this earlier. Neither of them was appointed a deputy prime minister in the 1952 government reshuffle.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Rudolf Földvári by Adrienn Molnár, 1956-os Intézet (1956 Institute), OHA (Oral History Archive), No. 231, pp. 324–8.

<sup>14</sup> Rákosi's visit probably took place in the final days of May 1953. He attended the 22 May meeting of the Presidium of the Council of Ministers, but was absent on 29 May.



been more or less aware of this for some time, but only on Radio Free Europe broadcasts from Munich could they have ever heard it expressed in these terms. The problems were blamed on “enemy sabotage”, not the system of central planning. Astonishment increased when Rákosi announced that the Secretariat, and then the party Central Leadership, would instruct the National Planning Office to re-examine the plans for 1953, 1954 and beyond. Furthermore, the big investment projects with high financing requirements and low rates of return were to be slowed and personal consumption rise. These measures would have consequences for individuals as well. Younger, intellectual cadres who had “grown up” since 1945 were to be involved more closely in the leadership. The size of the government was to be reduced (from 32 to 17 or 18 members). One of the two remaining deputy prime ministers should be chosen from the new cadres. The duties of prime minister and party leader were to be split, and Rákosi relieved of his post as party general secretary. Mention was even made of an amnesty on 20 August (a national festival), although the cadre changes also left open the possibility of a purge. (This was implied in another resolution at the meeting, which called for investigations into the past of no less than 2200 leading cadres.)<sup>15</sup>

The Hungarian leaders learned from various sources how the political line in the Soviet Union was changing after the death of Stalin. His heirs were confronted by two basic questions: the question of succession, which it had been impossible to broach in his lifetime, and that of consolidating the situation in the empire. Measures to do with the second ensued within days of Stalin’s death. The ones that attracted most notice were the suspension of the investigation of the “Jewish doctors” and early moves to improve the population’s standard of living.<sup>16</sup> There are

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<sup>15</sup> MOL MDP-MSZMP ir. 276. f. 54/246. ö. e. MDP Titk., 3 June 1953.

<sup>16</sup> On de-Stalinization, see Fejtő, François [1969] (1977), *A History of the People’s Democracies*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, pp. 7–25; Schöpflin, George (1993), *Politics in Eastern Europe*, Oxford, Cambridge: Blackwell, pp. 104–26; Leonhard, Wolfgang (1962), *The Kremlin Since Stalin*, New York: Praeger; Molnár, Miklós (1991), *Egy vereség diadala. A forradalom története* (Triumph of a Defeat. The Story of a Revolution), Budapest: Educatio, pp. 35–40; Fehér, Ferenc, and Ágnes Heller (1990), *Jalta után* (After Yalta), Budapest: Kossuth, pp. 41–70; Heller, Michal (1990), “Rövid tanfolyam. A szovjethatalom hetvenéves történetének mérföldkövei” (A Short Course. Milestones in the Seventy-Year History of Soviet Power), *Századvég* (End of the Century), No. 1, pp. 67–74; Medvegyev, Roy (1989), *Hruscsov. Politikai*

several signs that Stalin had already considered some of the changes during the last lucid period of his life, for instance the idea of reducing the Cold War tensions. Stalin had raised the idea in 1952 of reunifying Germany as a neutral country. He had also suggested that world war might be avoided.<sup>17</sup> Post-war Soviet foreign policy towards the satellite countries was motivated by two factors: security considerations for the empire, and the mission to further world revolution. In the immediate post-war years, Stalin clearly gave priority to the security considerations. Later, as the Cold War tensions rose, he simultaneously gave a free rein to the greed for power shown by the local communist leaders and the “urge to conform” that imbued them. After Stalin’s death, his successors returned to the policies of the “cautious” Stalin, because they felt that the tensions in several East-Central European countries were approaching the flash point. This they ascribed to much the same causes in East Germany, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, and even at home. The mass terror had assumed such a scale and become so unpredictable that it no longer had any deterrent effect—people no longer had anything to lose—and impeded rational operation of the economy. The forced growth was causing severe economic imbalances, and in most countries the initially modest post-war standard of living had fallen sharply in 1951–2. The collectivization campaigns were producing the same effects on a smaller scale in Hungary as they had in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s. There were food shortages, rural depopulation, reductions in livestock herds, land left uncultivated, etc. The Eastern European party leaders (including Hungary’s in late 1952) tried to alleviate their problems with Soviet loans, although the Soviet Union was in dire need of funds to restore its own economy. There was also a need to settle relations with the West somehow, by consolidating the situation in Europe, lessening

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*életrajz* (Khrushchev. A Political Biography), Budapest: Laude; Vásárhelyi, Miklós, “Az első megghiúsított reformkísérlet” (The First Abortive Reform Experiment), in: Vásárhelyi, Miklós (1989), *Ellenzékben* (In Opposition), edited by Áron Tóbiás, Budapest: Szabad Tér Kiadó, pp. 238–60. Of the memoirs of the period, those of Khrushchev, András Hegedüs, Zoltán Vas and Miklós Vásárhelyi should be emphasized.

<sup>17</sup> See Békés, Csaba (1996), *Az 1956-os magyar forradalom a világpolitikában. Tanulmány és válogatott dokumentok* (The 1956 Hungarian Revolution in World Politics. Study and Selected Documents), Budapest: 1956-os Intézet, pp. 28–35; Mezei, Géza (1992): “Oroszok a Rajnánál?” “Az 1952. márciusi Sztálin-jegyzék” (“Russians on the Rhine?” The Stalin Memorandum of March 1952), *Valóság* (Reality), No. 2, 1992, pp. 26–39.

confrontation (after the end of the Korean War) and normalizing economic relations. Any social and political crises, disturbances and mass movements on the periphery would disturb and impede this process, and more importantly would negatively impact Soviet domestic policy. Stalin's successors were intent on "consolidating" and stabilizing the domestic situation in the satellite countries (initially in the GDR and Hungary), which had overreached themselves in building up a Soviet-type system. They also wanted to mitigate local tensions: they sought a solution to the German question and an end to the disagreements with Yugoslavia.<sup>18</sup>

Meanwhile much of the Soviet leaders' attention and energies were being expended on the personal power struggle to succeed Stalin. There could be little disagreement among them that changes were needed, or that it was up to the leadership to initiate them. The leaders of the allied countries then had to obey the Soviet instructions with the same discipline and fervour they had shown in implanting the Stalinist system. "They simply thought that what was good for the Soviet Union would be good for Eastern Europe as well"<sup>19</sup> However, opinions certainly differed about how deep the changes should go.

Since the mid-1980s, with the opening (and re-closing) of Russian archives attention has focused on the period following the death of Stalin. Several observers have seen this as the archetype of the Gorbachev reforms. Many consider Lavrenty Beria, dismissed as interior minister in the summer of 1953, to have been the most far-sighted of Stalin's successors, the

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<sup>18</sup> On Soviet foreign policy after Stalin, see Békés (1996), pp. 28–35; Hajdu, Tibor (1995), "Szovjet diplomácia Magyarországon Sztálin előtt és után" (Soviet Diplomacy in Hungary before and after Stalin), in: Romnic, Ignác, editor, introduction, Magyarország és a nagyhatalmak a 20. században. Tanulmányok (Hungary and the Great Powers in the 20th Century. Studies), Budapest: Teleki László Alapítvány (László Teleki Foundation), pp. 195–201; Hajdu, Tibor (1989), "1956 nemzetközi háttere" (The International Background to 1956), Társadalmi Szemle (Social Review), No. 8–9; Hajdu, Tibor (1990), "1956—Magyarország a szuperhatalmak játékterén" (Hungary in the Superpowers' Field of Play), Valóság, No. 12; Urbán, Károly (1996a), Sztálin halálától a forradalom kitöréséig. A magyar-szovjet kapcsolatok története (1953–1956) (From Stalin's Death to the Outbreak of the Revolution. The History of Hungarian-Soviet Relations, 1953–6), Budapest, ms., pp. 4–9. On the American response, see Borhi, László (1995), "Az Egyesült Államok Kelet-Európa-politikájának néhány kérdése" (Some Questions of the United States' Policy on Eastern Europe), Történelmi Szemle (Historical Review), No. 3, pp. 277–300.

<sup>19</sup> Schöpflin (1993), p. 105.

most “visionary” reviser of the system, and at times a true reformer.<sup>20</sup> The demonizing of Beria (which was by no means unfounded, of course) derived mainly from the rivals of his who prevailed in the power struggle. They were the ones, in and after 1953, who made him the chief culprit, or rather chief scapegoat, instead of Stalin, not least so as to diminish their own accountability. They also accused him of planning a coup, which may have been correct, but all the more prominent members of the post-Stalin leadership made similar efforts during those years. Beria may indeed have seen further than his colleagues on certain points. For instance, he wanted to put a stronger brake on the so-called building of socialism in some East European countries, and he was most concerned to see a reconciliation with Yugoslavia. Beria, as an advocate of Stalinist “etatism”, sought to relegate the party into the background. His underlying motive was certainly connected with his own power base. This lay in the interior services, the secret police and the state apparatus, rather than the party machine, where Malenkov or Khrushchev would be the more prominent “natural ally”. In other words, Beria was motivated by the logic of the struggle for succession. Rákosi, after 1953, quite successfully spread the impression that Imre Nagy, the leader and advocate of Hungary’s new course, was “Beria’s man”. (This was later repeated enthusiastically by János Kádár, for the last time to Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985.)<sup>21</sup> There is no documented evidence for this at all. It will become apparent

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<sup>20</sup> Reassessment of Beria became fashionable primarily in the Russian press, after the documents about his fall had become public. See “Delo Beriia”, *Izvestiya TK KPSS*, No. 1–2, 1991, pp. 140–214 and 147–208; Nekrasov, F. (1991), *Beriia—konets karery*, Moscow: Polizdat. The debate was summarized, for instance, in a Hungarian newspaper by Vida, László, “A tervezett reformjai miatt végezték volna ki Beriját?” (Could Beria Have Been Executed for His Planned Reforms?), *Magyar Nemzet* (Hungarian Nation), 15 May 1993. A new impetus came from some highly dubious reminiscences by people from Beria’s immediate circle, notably his son—Beriia, Sergo (1994), *Moy otets, Lavrenty Beriia*, Moscow: Sovremennik—and his ex-chief of special intelligence, Pavel Sudoplatov—Sudoplatov, Pavel and Anatoly (1994), *The Memoirs of an Unwanted Witness—a Soviet Spymaster*, Boston etc.: Little, Brown, pp. 353–74. For a criticism of this, see Kun, Miklós, “Szergo Beriia, az új orákulum” (Sergo Beria, the New Oracle), *Magyar Hírlap*, 5 September 1994. For a balanced, scholarly approach to Beria, see Kun, Miklós (1991), “Beriia bukása”, *Beszélő* (Visiting Hours), 25 May and June 1; Hajdu, Tibor (1992), “Így élt Beriia” (How Beria Lived), *Mozgó Világ* (Moving World), No. 2, pp. 28–35; Richter, James (1992), *Reexamining Soviet Policy Towards Germany During the Beria Interregnum*, Cold War International History Project Working Papers, No. 3, Washington: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.

<sup>21</sup> “Kádár János és M.Sz. Gorbacsov találkozója Moszkvában, 1985. szeptember 25-én” (The Meeting

from what follows that Beria was notably enthusiastic in his criticism of Rákosi in June 1953, but he was not distinguished from his associates by any difference of outlook. He and Malenkov were certainly the ones most intent on cutting the number of members of the Hungarian leadership of Jewish origin. Beria also pressed, for instance, in other republics of the Union, for “national” cadres to be preferred over ethnic Russians, fearing outbreaks of national and religious tension. Beria’s channels as head of intelligence and interior minister may have given him different information about the satellite countries and the tensions in East German, Czech and Hungarian society. His ministry and security advisers may have kept him better informed and gone further in drawing their conclusions.<sup>22</sup>

In principle, the CPSU party also had varied enough channels of information to form an up-to-date picture of the situation in the satellite countries. For instance, the minutes of all the main party organizations were sent to Moscow, along with the main presentations and summary reports from time to time. Information was received from the Soviet advisers working in the various ministries. Contact was maintained by the embassies, with their multitude of informants, most of whom had returned from exile in the Soviet Union. There were talks with party leaders as well. The problem during Stalin’s lifetime tended to be that Rákosi alone, for instance, had direct personal (and radio) contact with Stalin himself. It depended entirely on this bilateral dialogue what information might be “utilized” and in what form.

After Stalin’s death, all these shelved data, accounts and reports took on a new significance. A distinguished place among them was given to the reports and abstracts filed by Kiselev, the Soviet ambassador in Budapest. These were highly critical of Hungarian conditions,

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of János Kádár and M.S. Gorbachev in Moscow on 25 September 1985), *Történelmi Szemle*, No. 1–2, 1992, pp. 133–149.

<sup>22</sup> There is one small piece of evidence that Nagy may have seen Beria’s role differently from the way it appeared in official Soviet propaganda after 1953. In September 1956, on receiving the editors of a journal that was being launched, he said he understood that Beria had put forward the “most radical” alternatives during the internal debates after Stalin’s death. He had recommended, for instance, that the empire draw back so as to consolidate internally, making the satellite countries neutral, and perhaps the Baltic states and even Ukraine. This was to have recreated the situation after the 1918 Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. Interview with Sándor Lukácsy by János M. Rainer, OHA, No. 19, p. 180.

at least according to their author's later recollections. Kiselev and his staff felt particular antipathy for the Hungarian party leaders, especially Gerő, Révai and Zoltán Vas. The ambassador was not much fonder of Rákosi either, whom he described as "wilful and stubborn". Furthermore, Rákosi had placed him, as Budapest representative of the Soviet state and party (and perhaps of the intelligence), in a most uncomfortable position. "Kiselev never received, from his or the Hungarian government, any account of the confidential conversations with Stalin, so that he was in a very tricky position, never sure whether some action of Rákosi's was not done by agreement with Stalin."<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, he sent several critical reports about the living-standard policy of the Hungarian leaders, the repressions (on which Kiselev said his embassy prepared "statistics"), and the mood of the intelligentsia. Some of the embassy reports reached the still quite small foreign-policy apparatus attached to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) Central Committee. These confirm the ambassador's recollections: the two main subjects were agriculture and the conduct of the intelligentsia, especially the writers.<sup>24</sup> It also emerged in June 1953 that Stalin himself had raised objections to some aspects of the policies and lives of the leadership in Hungary (and the GDR, Czechoslovakia, and so on). For instance, he thought that the collectivization of Hungarian agriculture was happening too fast. After Stalin's death, Molotov requested a summary from Kiselev, and then studied his reports of the previous years, to prepare himself, along with other members of the leadership, for the June 1953 talks.<sup>25</sup>

The delegation of leaders of the Hungarian Working People's Party left for Moscow on 12 June 1953 in a special plane, from the military air base at Tököl. The invitations had been personal—the Presidium of the CPSU had chosen the eight members of the delegation. These were Mátyás Rákosi, party general-secretary and president of the Council of Ministers (prime

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<sup>23</sup> MOL XIX-J-1-j. 5. d. IV–100, item 2. Report by György Zágor, Hungarian ambassador in Cairo, 4 December 1956. (Kiselev was Soviet ambassador in Cairo in 1956.)

<sup>24</sup> See Hajdu, Tibor (1993), "Magyar irodalom—Moszkvából nézve, 1952" (Hungarian Literature—Seen from Moscow, 1952), *Mozgó Világ*, No. 3, 1993, pp. 21–6; Hajdu (1995).

<sup>25</sup> MOL XIX-J-1-j. 5. d. IV–100, item 2. Report by György Zágor, Hungarian ambassador in Cairo, 4 December 1956.

minister), three deputy prime ministers (Ernő Gerő, Imre Nagy and István Hidas), the head of the Secretariat of the Council of Ministers (Béla Szalai), a minister (András Hegedüs at the agriculture portfolio), the first secretary of the Budapest party committee (Rudolf Földvári), and the president of the Presidential Council (head of state), István Dobi, formally a non-party member. The missing members of the party Secretariat were Mihály Farkas, József Révai and István Kristóf. The uninvited members of the Presidium of the Council of the Ministers (deputy prime ministers) were Árpád Házi and Károly Kiss. “Not long ago we had talks with Comrade Rákosi on the situation in Hungary,” explained Malenkov on June 13. “After the conversation it seemed necessary to discuss certain questions among a wider circle ... [as] by and large we have only met one or two comrades so far. Comrade Rákosi himself recommended that we become acquainted with more comrades.” “When Comrade Rákosi was here last,” Beria added, “the idea arose that we should discuss certain questions with several comrades.”<sup>26</sup> It became apparent from remarks at a later stage in the conference that the main factor behind the choice of participants was an earlier proposal by the Soviet leaders in May, calling for changes in the leadership of the Hungarian party and state. Rákosi then had been unable to recommend anyone for his deputy: “... in everyone’s case there at once came an objection from Comrade Rákosi. ... That was what disturbed us and made it necessary for us to speak to other comrades.”<sup>27</sup> So some of those invited

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<sup>26</sup> Minutes of the talks between the Soviet and Hungarian party and state leaders, June 13–16, 1953. These were published by György T. Varga in *Múltunk* (Our Past), No. 2–3, 1992, pp. 234–69 (hereafter Minutes, June 13–16, 1953). The quotation appears on pp. 238–9. The basis of Varga’s text is the minute book registered as MOL MDP-MSZMP ir. f. 276 102/65 ö. e., compiled from notes taken by Béla Szalai, a member of the delegation who knew shorthand. Szalai’s notes agree fully in content with the contemporary notebook of Rudolf Földvári, the original of which is appended to the interview with Földvári (OHA No. 231). The text of this was published in Palasik, Mária (1989) “Láttelel a magyar függetlenségéről” (Constat on Hungarian Independence), *Kapu* (Gate), No. 5, pp. 4–10. Judging from the discussion documents he wrote in 1955–6, Nagy also made notes of the conference. He quotes sentences that do not correspond with Szalai’s notes, although they do not conflict with them in content. See Nagy, Imre (1984): *A magyar nép védelmében. Vitairatok és beszédek* (In Defence of the Hungarian People. Discussion Documents and Speeches), Paris: Magyar Füzetek (Hungarian Pamphlets), pp. 13, 153, 154, 162 and 175. However, these notes have not been found. The references here are to Varga’s publication. For an analysis of the conference, see Urbán (1996a), pp. 8–14. See also Ostermann, Christian (2001), *Uprising in East Germany*, New York: Central European University Press, pp.144-154.

<sup>27</sup> Minutes, June 13–16, 1953, pp. 244–5. Malenkov’s second contribution, 13 June.

were among those that the Soviet party leaders—based on their own knowledge, Kiselev’s reports and information from Rákosi—saw as young cadres “worthy of promotion” and capable of development. They included Hidas, Szalai, Földvári and Hegedüs, who were all in their early thirties and had joined the leadership in 1952. This meant they did not have any appreciable background of illegal activity and had not lived in exile, either in the East or the West. Another criterion was that none of them was a Jew, a point that had played no small part in their advancement before 1953. Rákosi, influenced by the Slánsky trial and the anti-Semitic campaigns in Moscow, had pushed Révai and Farkas into the background since 1952. Here he was fully in tune with the ideas of the Soviet leaders, who did not invite them to Moscow. Imre Nagy was something of an odd man out, in age and in having a “Muscovite” past, having been a wartime exile in Moscow. His renewed rise can really be interpreted as part of the same trend as the advancement of the younger leaders, and he too was “Hungarian.” Continuity was represented by Rákosi and Gerő, although as first and second in the hierarchy and the real decision-makers, the Soviets considered the primarily responsible for the crisis. Finally, the invitation to István Dobi probably resulted from some kind of misunderstanding. They may have assumed that the president of the Presidential Council played (or might play) a real part in the leadership, which was far from the case. Alternatively, it may have been assumed in Moscow that Dobi, a former member of the Smallholders’ Party, was some kind of national leader who commanded respect among the Hungarian peasantry, which was also untrue. On the other hand, the idea may have been to demonstrate the official, inter-state nature of relations.

At least according to their recollections, most of the delegation had no idea why they were being summoned to the Kremlin. Rákosi, who personally conveyed the news to the chosen members, did not give any explanation. However, the members of the party Secretariat—Nagy and Hegedüs, as well as Rákosi and Gerő—would have learned at the June 3 meeting, if not before, that after Stalin’s death the Soviet leaders were dissatisfied with the Hungarian situation.<sup>28</sup> For one reason or another, the whole delegation spent the flight from Tököl to

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<sup>28</sup> Hegedüs, András (1985), *Élet egy eszme árnyékában. Életrajzi interjú. Kész. Zsille Zoltán* (Life in



Moscow in a somewhat perplexed frame of mind.<sup>29</sup>

The discussions in the Kremlin began on the day after the Hungarians' arrival, in what had been Stalin's office, and now served as the meeting room for the Presidium of the CPSU Central Committee. The momentarily most influential members of the Presidium elected at the previous year's party congress were present: Georgy Malenkov, the prime minister, Lavrentii Beria, deputy prime minister and interior minister, Vyacheslav Molotov, deputy prime minister and foreign minister, Nikita Khrushchev, secretary of the CPSU Central Committee, Nikolai Bulganin, defence minister, and Anastas Mikoyan, deputy prime minister. Also invited to be present, but without the right to take part in the discussion, were two Soviet "Hungarian experts": Ambassador Kiselev and an interpreter named Baykov.<sup>30</sup> Before the "consultation" with the Hungarian leaders, there had been a similar one with the East German leaders, Walter Ulbricht and Otto Grotewohl. A communiqué was published in East Berlin on 11 June concerning the "*Neuer Kurs*", the first package of corrective measures to appear in the Eastern bloc.<sup>31</sup>

Prime Minister Malenkov, the pre-eminent Soviet leader at the time, proposed that they discuss three questions: "some questions of economic development," "selection of cadres" and the problem of "arbitrary acts." He also indicated that they should not confine themselves to exchanging views on the situation, but "discuss the method of correcting the mistakes" as well.

Rákosi took the floor first. He spoke largely in accordance with what had been agreed at the Secretariat meeting ten days earlier. Obviously expecting they would discuss the same

the Shadow of an Idea. A Biographical Interview. Conducted by Zoltán Zsille), Budapest: ABC, p. 188.

<sup>29</sup> See also the interview with Földvári, OHA No. 231, pp. 368–71. According to Földvári, Nagy "gave the impression of being extremely absorbed" on the journey.

<sup>30</sup> Three of the four copies of the minutes refer to him as "Boyko", and the fourth as "Boykov". Vladimir Romanovich Boyko was chief counsellor at the Soviet Ministry of Defence. In 1956, Vladimir Sergeyevich Baykov was in charge of the Hungarian desk, in the CPSU Central Committee's department for relations with foreign communist parties. After 4 November 1956, he worked alongside János Kádár as a liaison officer. He was the one present at the conference, as Anna Geréb explains in her documentary film *Titoktartók* (Keepers of Secrets), made in 1994–6.

<sup>31</sup> "New Documents on the East German Uprising of 1953", introduction and commentary by Christian Ostermann, *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, No. 5, Spring 1985, pp. 10–21. See also Ostermann, Christian (2001), *Uprising in East Germany*, New York: Central European University Press.

questions as they had at the meeting at the end of May, he took the line that he had more or less completed the “homework” he had received. He reported that the rate of industrial growth would be curbed in future. Turning to cadre policy, he declared that the party had made some progress with rejuvenation, and mentioned the young members of the delegation. He announced that they had decided to reduce the size of the government and separate the posts of head of government and party leader. He mentioned no names. He said nothing about “arbitrary acts,” other than to note that the number in custody was “slightly different” from his assertion at the end of May (a total of 45,000 prisoners and internees, not 30,000–40,000). This, he added, would be reduced by the amnesty planned for 20 August (although, he added, this could cause a “labor shortage ... on some construction sites”). Finally, he spoke at length about the Jewish question, stating that “many of the educated Jewish petty bourgeois had ended up in various functions ... We have not obtained decisive results in replacing these.”<sup>32</sup> Rákosi’s confidence at this point shows that he too was still unclear about the purpose of the conference.

Malenkov, the next speaker, immediately made it plain that this was not the approach the Soviet leadership had been expecting of Rákosi. “We gain the impression that the Hungarian comrades are underestimating the shortcomings.”<sup>33</sup> The Soviet prime minister mentioned the situation of the agricultural cooperatives, the excessive delivery quotas and the high number of prosecutions of peasants. He touched on the cadre question (“cadres have to be promoted much more forcefully”<sup>34</sup>), before handing the floor over to his colleagues.

There can be little doubt that the Soviet delegates had agreed beforehand on a “division of labor” concerning who was going to speak on what issues. There may also have been a joint advisory report, on the basis of which they all prepared themselves, so that several speakers later trespassed from time to time on their colleagues’ “specialist field”.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Minutes, 13–16 June 1953, pp. 249–50.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 238.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 239.

<sup>35</sup> Bulganin began his contribution by saying, “We have not agreed among ourselves in advance; that is not customary with us. There are many facts that I have now heard for the first time” (*Ibid.*, p. 242). The

Malenkov was followed by Beria, who probably had extensive notes in front of him, as he used the most figures. He also mentioned the agricultural situation by way of introduction, giving precise data on the abandoned farmland. He amplified what Malenkov had said by arguing that it was not enough simply to develop agriculture more strongly. The development of heavy industry would have to be curbed and greater attention paid to the manufacture of articles to satisfy public wants (consumer goods). However, his real speciality was home affairs, and he had the most to say on these.

“Is it acceptable in Hungary, with its population of 9,500,000, to have instituted proceedings against 1,500,000 people?” was the Soviet interior minister’s rhetorical question. His answer was plain: “These figures show the interior and justice authorities and the ÁVH have been working very badly, and so the Interior Ministry and the ÁVH should be merged.” Beria denounced the fact that Rákosi personally directed state security, intervened in specific investigations, and even gave personal orders for physical violence to be used. This, Beria rated as a professional error, because it might even lead to “innocent people being condemned.” The Hungarian leaders would not have failed to notice that on two occasions Beria even condemned similar behaviour by Stalin. Beria opened a succession of personal attacks on Rákosi. He declared that if for no other reason, he should resign as head of government because “it would be more fitting for the president of the Council of Ministers to be Hungarian.” (Here, on the other hand, Beria referred to earlier, similar advice from Stalin, who had remarked several times that “the Hungarians should be brought more to the fore.”) Beria was the first to mention Imre Nagy’s name, in two contexts. First he referred to Nagy’s expulsion over the 1949 dispute, as something that was not correct. Then he concluded his speech by saying, “If Comrade Nagy is to be president of the Council of Ministers, let Comrade Rákosi remain at the head of the party, as a comrade of rich experience and true to the party cause. Comrade Nagy would be suitable for

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truth was quite the opposite. Members would also “agree amongst themselves” before Presidium meetings. Cf. Vyacheslav Sereda’s introduction to Szereda, Vjacseszlav, and János M. Rainer, editors (1996), *Döntés a Kremlben. A szovjet pártelnökség vitái Magyarországról* (Decision in the Kremlin. The Soviet Party Presidium’s Debates on Hungary), Budapest: 1956-os Intézet. (1956 Institute).

president of the Council of Ministers (loyal to the party, Hungarian, with a knowledge of agriculture).”<sup>36</sup>

Molotov widened the criticism, saying “it is not just a question of Hungary, but of all the people’s democracies.” He remarked self-critically that the phenomenon of “leaderism” (autocratic behaviour) had originated from the Soviet Union, but this had to be corrected. Molotov spoke of a positive surge of repression against the general public, and the excesses in economic development (with special criticism for the goal of autarky). He too quoted figures, and picked cases from Kiselev’s reports as examples of measures that had impaired the standard of living.<sup>37</sup> The next speaker, Marshal Bulganin, warned that “a catastrophe will ensue if we do not improve on this situation.” He had some data on the purges in the army, and criticized Mihály Farkas, who “tries to make himself out to be a great army commander.”<sup>38</sup> Finally came Mikoyan’s criticism of the excessively tight economic planning, the unjustified development of the iron and steel industry (“Hungary has neither iron ore nor coke of its own”), some superfluous large investments (a huge foundry, an underground railway), and the “collectivization carried out without economic basis.” That concluded the first round. Now it was the Hungarians’ turn to speak, with Nagy as the first. He was the only Hungarian leader whom the Soviet leaders had mentioned approvingly so far.

Imre Nagy behaved with fellow-feeling towards his colleagues, shouldering his share of the blame. He tried to find a general explanation for the occurrences: “The main source of the problems is separation from the masses. We have not paid attention to the people’s needs. We have planned on paper, not taking the people’s interests into account.”<sup>39</sup> With the administrative measures, Nagy added to everything the Soviet leaders had mentioned a further item from his own field, the kulak list. “Anyone who features on the kulak list is excluded from society,” he

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<sup>36</sup> Minutes, 13-16 June 1953, pp. 240–41.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 242. Kiselev mentioned from memory in 1956 the “brazen profiteering” connected with the watering down of milk. Cf. MOL XIX-J-1-j. 5. d. IV–100, item 2. Report by György Zágor, Hungarian ambassador in Cairo, 4 December 1956.

<sup>38</sup> Minutes, 13-16 June 1953, pp. 243.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 251.

said.<sup>40</sup> He recommended that the state-security and interior organizations should be placed under party control, specifically under the control of the Administrative Department.<sup>41</sup> However, at the end of his speech he made a dissociating comment on the leadership “troika”: “Comrades Rákosi, Gerő and Farkas decide many questions among themselves. It leads to big mistakes if there are questions that some members of the Secretariat hear nothing about.”<sup>42</sup> The Soviet leaders knew this anyway, but Nagy obviously wanted to gain a confirmation of his appointment, on which all his subsequent moves would depend. He sensed that the “corrective” notions of the Soviets coincided with his own ideas, and for that reason he was willing to take over as head of government if the Hungarian leaders present agreed.

István Dobi also spoke mainly about the agricultural situation, in a thoroughly disconcerted way. István Hidas, the only “youngster” to speak, also shared the Soviet criticisms, although he came to Rákosi’s defence. For this he was roundly scolded by Malenkov and Beria (“you behave like a pupil, not like a leader of equal rank.”)<sup>43</sup>

Next came Khrushchev, who had not expressed his opinions in the previous round. It was clear from the beginning of his remarks that he agreed with the earlier speakers, but he wanted to go further and synthesize the argument. Although Malenkov was top of the power league at the time, Khrushchev’s ambition was plain and unequivocal.<sup>44</sup> He declared that Rákosi was clearly the man responsible for the mistakes—as a whole, not simply the administrative “abuses”. He added that Rákosi “has to draw profound conclusions” from this, and that collective leadership was needed (“Comrade Rákosi is unable to work collectively.”) Khrushchev also said that the collectivization of agriculture had been too fast, and he recalled—reproachfully—that Imre Nagy had been excluded from the Political Committee at that time. None of this could have escaped Nagy’s attention. Khrushchev’s emphatic support for correction gained importance a few weeks’

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Beria in his contribution had wanted to entrust the ÁVH to the “Central Leadership”. *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 253.

<sup>44</sup> This was also noticed by András Hegedüs. See Hegedüs (1985), p. 190.

later, after Beria, one of Rákosi's strongest critics, had been ousted from the leadership. However, Nagy could really take heart after September 1953, when Khrushchev's election as party first secretary was followed by increasing signs that he had prevailed in the struggle to succeed Stalin. Even in 1955–6, would Nagy often quote Khrushchev's words in June 1953 when writing his discussion documents.<sup>45</sup>

Khrushchev was followed by Malenkov, who summed up the tasks ahead. He began by proposing that they hold a further conference, but the Hungarian side should prepare beforehand a written plan of the measures to rectify the mistakes and a list of the personal changes. Malenkov defined two basic criteria for the latter. First, the sphere of responsible leaders needed expanding, and people with the requisite authority should be placed in the leading positions. (Here he recommended Gerő as minister of the interior.) Secondly, there had to develop some kind of division of labour among the leading bodies (the Political Committee, the Secretariat, the Council of Ministers). What this division of labour should be was revealed soon after by Beria. The government should decide on economic issues, while the party dealt with "training and cadre questions". Malenkov stated categorically, "We all, as communists, are responsible together for Hungary's affairs. The Soviet Union is also responsible for what kind of power there is in Hungary."<sup>46</sup> Here again he expressed some self-criticism. Moscow in Stalin's time had (also) given some incorrect advice that they here and now withdrew. However, he included the demand that the Soviet side retain the right to a say in what happened in Hungary, even if the Soviet occupation forces were withdrawn, as Beria had implied at the beginning of the conference.<sup>47</sup>

Only then did Rákosi try to explain or argue, at least on a few questions. He protested that he had done nothing other than what he had seen and heard from Moscow. Malenkov and Beria took it in turns to counter Rákosi's feeble efforts. Gerő, who had not spoken so far, proved a better tactician. He even spoke of mistakes that no one had mentioned so far. However, although

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<sup>45</sup> Nagy (1984), pp. 13, 153, 154, 162 and 175.

<sup>46</sup> Minutes, 13-16 June 1953, pp. 245.

<sup>47</sup> "The Soviet army is still there in Hungary today, but it will not be there forever. So you have to prepare and gain strength ..." *Ibid.*, p. 241.

he made it clear he agreed with Nagy's appointment as prime minister (on which Rákosi had nothing to say), he could not disguise his long-standing antipathy for him, and commented that the kulaks had delivered too little grain "compared with their role in society." Rákosi's silence was also apparent to Malenkov, who at the end of the session made a point of inquiring about his (and interestingly Dobi's) opinion of Nagy's appointment. The thoroughly humiliated Rákosi had no option but to express agreement. At the time, those present interpreted this as a change in the top position in the country.<sup>48</sup>

On the next day, 14 June, the Hungarian delegation sat down together at their accommodation to compile, based on the Soviet directives, the document that would serve as a basis for the new political course. Rákosi, still, was the first to speak. It was not at random that he suggested starting with the errors of the party leadership, because in the uncertain situation that prevailed, this in a sense upgraded the role of the party (the party leadership, and above all its leader). The minutes point to an extremely diffuse discussion. Everyone spoke above all about what sprang to mind after the shock of the previous day, or repeated what they had already heard. (Dobi mentioned how his picture had been taken down from the wall of a school and the managers of an agricultural machine pool had insulted his mother. Földvári spoke of lively relations between the functionaries and the masses, Nagy about the Bolshevik nature of criticism and self-criticism, Hegedüs and Hidas on how they had not felt equal in rank to Rákosi, and so on.) Then, without reaching any specific conclusions, they turned to the mistakes of the state leadership and the illegal acts that had been committed in various fields. Rákosi moved that they bring forward the amnesty planned for 20 August and end expulsion orders.

Only about halfway through the meeting, when it came to the mistakes of economic development, did the discussion become somewhat more effective. Imre Nagy, hitherto reticent,

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<sup>48</sup> "At the time we took the function of prime minister to be more important than that of first secretary, because we looked upon Prime Minister Malenkov as the top man in the Soviet leadership. How much we thought this emerges from a little incident that took place. We are going out of the meeting room, and Imre Nagy wants to let Rákosi go first. Rákosi also pushes Imre Nagy ahead, saying, "Off you go, Imre, you're the leader now!" Hegedüs (1985), p. 192.

took the initiative: “The rate of development has to be reduced .... in the agricultural-cooperative movement. Investment in agriculture has to increase. There must be security for peasants who farm individually ... We must ensure free commerce and raise goods production. Let us not aim for autarky at any price, and let that be considered when the plans are reviewed.”<sup>49</sup> Then came Ernő Gerő, whom the participants recalled as being the quickest to recover from the general dismay at the Soviet condemnation.<sup>50</sup> He was already prepared with the first version of a draft document that would later become the initial draft of the resolution passed by the party Central Leadership, at its meeting on 27-8 June.<sup>51</sup> The proposal concentrated mainly on questions of economic planning, above all piecemeal measures (halting investments, housing construction, gas imports from Romania, etc.) However, it already included abandoning as the top priority heavy industrial means of production, production of basic materials, mechanical engineering, and the arms industry. The measures to do with individual appointments and the power structure were largely a blend of the “advice” from Moscow and the steps agreed on by the party Secretariat on 3 June (discontinuing the title of general secretary, separating the posts of party leader and prime minister, and cutting the size of the government). Some change in the composition of the Political Committee was envisaged, with three alternate members (István Hidas, István Kristóf and László Piros) and Árpád Házi receiving full membership, but Révai and Farkas would have remained. The three new alternate members would have been “youngsters”: Földvári and Szalai, and also Lajos Ács. The government, apart from being reduced in size, underwent major alterations. The main ones were the changes of prime minister (Nagy) and deputy prime ministers: Gerő, Hegedüs, and a third post without portfolio that the meeting did not manage to fill.

The draft document that came out of the meeting, produced on the same day, began by discussing the distortion of the party leadership, and then went on to consider the errors in

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 258.

<sup>50</sup> Interview with Földvári, OHA No. 231, p. 382.

<sup>51</sup> Minutes, 13-16 June 1953, pp. 258–61. Szalai’s minutes record the whole first version as a spoken contribution by Gerő, but it is likely that interventions by several speakers had a hand in shaping this.



economic policy—this order was later reversed. There were two sentences alluding to Rákosi's responsibility, but not to that of the others'. Nor was there any mention of Rákosi's personal responsibility for directing the state-security service or for the arbitrary use of power. Finally, the idea was to associate the changes with the party. There was to be a public statement after the meeting of the Central Leadership that gave the initial endorsement to the change of political line.

The next day was taken up with translation and study of the draft, and so the two delegations, unchanged in composition, met again on June 16. It still fell to Mátyás Rákosi to present the draft and make some verbal amplifications. Molotov had some immediate criticisms. The draft did not mention ideological questions and the responsibility of József Révai, who was “everything rolled into one” in this field, which “not even Karl Marx, if he were alive, would have been able to claim for his own.”<sup>52</sup> Beria was again the most active of the Soviet leaders. His main objection was that the draft was too short and general, and contained no figures. He immediately went on to say how it should be expanded. Following Beria's “advice”, a separate chapter was devoted to the agricultural situation, the main figures on the mass repression, Rákosi's personal accountability for directing the ÁVH, and the eclipse of “cadres of Hungarian origin” (without adding, by those of Jewish origin). There was one point on which even Beria urged moderation. That was the point raised on the Hungarian side by Nagy, on the first day of the conference: abolishing the kulak list. Another important conclusion was included in the later resolution at Molotov's suggestion. The Hungarian draft spoke only of a “decisive slowing-down” in the organization of agricultural cooperatives. Molotov raised the prospect of forcibly organized cooperatives dissolving themselves, and said there need be no fear of actively dissolving them. Dobi immediately objected, presumably at the thought of a liquidation campaign like the one that had brought them into being.

Nagy took the initiative for the first time when it came to ideology. “We have never debated the ideological questions in the party. There has not been the clash of opinions without

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 264.

which ideological work cannot advance.”<sup>53</sup> He was the first to react to Beria’s additions, defending the idea of abolishing the kulak list: “The kulak list is the basis for the illegal acts against the kulaks. The first task is certainly to decide who is a kulak, but the kulak list has to be abolished.” Beria allowed this. It was the only moment on either day of discussions when a Hungarian proposal was accepted by the Soviet side.

That brought the debate about augmenting the document to an end. It was Imre Nagy’s turn, as the recommended prime minister, to weigh up the conference. His remarks disclosed both self-confidence and the opposite: “We shall work with all our might to implement the contents of the resolution. We are not going to stop halfway and bring in half-measures. Very much will depend on how far Comrade Rákosi contributes to correcting the mistakes.”<sup>54</sup> Beria commented that the correct policy did not depend on one man, and if Rákosi did not help, he would “ruin himself.”<sup>55</sup> Nagy was not satisfied with this, and asked directly about the relationship with the Soviet party leadership, which in recent years “has not been so direct” as before. Beria and Malenkov picked up this highly diplomatic, if you like, timid allusion to the relationship between Rákosi and Stalin. They assured the Hungarians that the relationship would be “more responsible, more serious and different” in future. Humiliated once again, Rákosi fell over himself to oblige: “I very much regret that I was not taught a lesson like this before ... I can assure the comrades that I will do my utmost towards correcting the mistakes.”<sup>56</sup> Nonetheless, even in this extremity, he managed to blurt out that it did not depend only on him, but on the whole leadership.

The lecture was still far from over, however. First, at Malenkov’s instigation, the Soviet leadership called for Mihály Farkas to be replaced as defence minister by István Bata. Malenkov

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 264–5.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 267.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* According to recollections, the phrase Beria used was that if Rákosi did not help, “we will break his spine.” See Hegedüs (1985), p. 192; Földvári interview, OHA, p. 391. According to Földvári’s notes at the time, the remark was, “If he honestly embarks on the road to overcoming the mistakes, things will go well, if not, we will break his back.” Palasik (1989).

<sup>56</sup> Minutes, 13–16 1953, pp. 267.

and Beria then more or less accused Rákosi of seeking contact with United States' leaders without informing his colleagues. Finally, Beria pressed for Gábor Péter's case to be reviewed. Only after all this did Malenkov dismiss the Hungarian delegation: "The Hungarian comrades will manage to draw up the resolution proposal and have strength enough to correct the mistakes."<sup>57</sup> The audience over, the Hungarian delegation immediately left for home.

On the next day, 17 June 1953, "implementation" of the change of political course immediately began.<sup>58</sup> The work was still carried out according to the old structure, in the leading organizations of the party, under Rákosi's direction. It was decided that a different resolution before the meeting of the Central Leadership than before the "general public". Initially, a committee of three, consisting of Rákosi, Nagy and Gerő, was instructed to prepare only the former.<sup>59</sup> By the time an expanded meeting of the Political Committee took place on 20 June, the Hungarian leaders had more detailed information about the strike that had begun in East Berlin on 16 June and the following day's uprising in several East German cities, suppressed by a display of Soviet armor.<sup>60</sup> Influenced by these events, Rákosi conceded that if the Hungarian leadership did not make "an immediate turn," "the gravest of crises" would threaten. What was to come was "one of the most decisive turning-points since the conquest of power by our party and people's democracy."<sup>61</sup> At this point Rákosi listed his own mistakes, including almost everything that had come up in Moscow. The other three of the top four leaders also exercised self-criticism (and were criticized by other speakers). However, Farkas and Révai added that recently the leadership had been more or less confined to two people, Rákosi and Gerő. First Révai and then Gerő expressed distaste for the Soviet leaders' line that the top positions in the Hungarian

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 269.

<sup>58</sup> On this, see György T. Varga's introduction to Minutes, June 13–16, 1953, pp. 234–8; Szabó, Bálint (1986), *Az "ötvenes évek". Elmélet és politika a szocialista építés első időszakában Magyarországon, 1948-1957* (The "Fifties". Theory and Politics in the First Period of Socialist Construction in Hungary, 1948–57), Budapest: Kossuth, p. 71; Urbán, Károly (1992): "Nagy Imre, az államférfi" (Imre Nagy, the Statesman), *Múltunk*, No. 4, pp. 50–52.

<sup>59</sup> MOL MDP-MSZMP ir. 276. f. 54/248. ó. e.

<sup>60</sup> On the events in East Berlin, see "New Documents on the East German Uprising of 1953", *op. cit.*

<sup>61</sup> MOL MDP-MSZMP ir. 276. f. 53/122. ó. e. MDP PB (Political Committee), June 20, 1953, p. 3.

leadership were held by “Jews.”

On 27 June there was an expanded meeting of the Central Leadership, at which the full and alternate members were joined by all the ministers of the government and the county and district party secretaries. In line with the script prepared in advance, participants received the draft resolution an hour before the meeting began, but not the minutes of the Moscow conference. The task of relating what had happened there went mainly to Rákosi and Nagy.<sup>62</sup>

Rákosi analysed in detail with his own responsibility for the mistakes committed. As directed in Moscow, he condemned the personality cult, “leaderism”, concentration of power in the hands of himself and a few associates, sidelining of cadres of “Hungarian origin”, party domination over the state, and so on. The speech must have come as a profound shock to the wider circle of party and state leaders who were not Political Committee members and had not heard the news that began to spread about the Moscow meeting.<sup>63</sup> Here was the wise leader of the people spending more than an hour explaining how almost everything he had done was wrong. Although Rákosi took pains to say not a word or a sentence more than the resolution and the Moscow minutes contained, he delivered the most self-critical speech of his career. This part amounted to about a third of the text, and was followed only by his commentary on the resolution.<sup>64</sup>

Imre Nagy more than fulfilled his assignment of introducing the resolution. He went further than the criticism of the Soviet leaders, which had lacked any kind of deeper analysis, delving into the question of how such serious distortions could have occurred.<sup>65</sup> He declared that

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<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 52/24 ő. e. MDP KV, June 27–8, 1953.

<sup>63</sup> The news leaked out soonest from those around István Dobi, to journalists and members of the intelligentsia. See Ernő Gerő’s note to Rákosi and Nagy on 18 July 1953, complaining of Dobi’s “tattle”. *Ibid.*, 65/41. ő. e., p. 334.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 52/24. ő. e. MDP KV, 27-8 June 1953, pp. 3–31. The text of the speech appeared in print in Varga, György T. (1990), “Rákosi Mátyás referátuma a MDP Központi Vezetőségének 1953 júniusi ülésén” (Mátyás Rákosi’s Report to the June 1953 Meeting of the Party Central Leadership), *Múltunk*, No. 1.

<sup>65</sup> MOL MDP-MSZMP ir. 276. f. 52/24. ő. e. MDP KV, 27-8 June 1953, pp. 32–51. Nagy’s speech was first published by János Kis and István Pető in 1984, in the tenth issue of the samizdat journal *Beszélő*.

“the roots of the mistakes go much deeper than they appear to do at first glance,” and so “the prime task is full exposure of the mistakes. That is the prerequisite for successfully correcting the mistakes. I have to state plainly that the work done on this so far has not been sufficient.”<sup>66</sup>

Success largely depended on how far the leaders party to the mistakes were prepared to contribute, and this was still “largely before us.” According to Nagy, “the mistakes for which Comrade Rákosi, as party leader, is primarily responsible arose because the party, in its internal life, its guiding principles and its practical activity in several fields of work, departed from the bases of Marxism-Leninism and violated these.”<sup>67</sup> He considered that freedom of opinion within the party and the opportunity for debate would allow such distortions to be recognized or avoided. “It becomes possible to politicize arbitrarily, without Marxist-Leninist preparation, it becomes possible to play the leader, it becomes possible to repress and set aside the young cadres, when there is no theoretical work taking place, when there is no ideological debate, and no clash of opinions breaking out ... Not until we have changed all this will there, or can there ever be any guarantee that we will not commit further, still graver mistakes.”<sup>68</sup>

Several people described, in Moscow and later, during the drafting of the Central Leadership resolution, how Rákosi had concentrated the main areas of authority into his own hands. “We violated the basic principles of people’s democracy, in the relations between the party and the state, and the state and the masses,” was the theoretical conclusion reached by Nagy. Although he did not use the expression “party-state”, he referred to a “shadow [puppet] government” and a “police state”. He included in his proposal for a solution the phrases “the democratic principle of true popular representation” and “governmental responsibility.” He called for “further steps in the field of democratizing the life of the state.”<sup>69</sup>

Turning to economic policy, he told the meeting, “The gist of the mistake is that our

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See *Beszélő Összkiadás (Beszélő Complete Edition)*, Vol. 1, 1992, Budapest: AB-Beszélő Kiadó, pp. 628–41, from which the subsequent quotations are taken.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 630.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 632.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 632–3.

economic policy, though aimed at building socialism, fails to apply the fundamental economic law of socialism: a constant rise in the population's standard of living." There too Nagy saw a deviation from Marxism-Leninism, and he expressed himself more strongly than the resolution did. What had occurred "can be described without exaggeration as an adventurist policy."<sup>70</sup> Although the draft resolution "contains some sound and far-reaching measures ... it can certainly be developed further." What Nagy formulated was not just a policy turn, but a process of correction, so that a single set of measures would not suffice. He underlined in the final section of his speech how important it was to implement the resolution to the full, and warned the party leadership against being content with "half-measures."

Most of the contributors who spoke after the two main speeches set out to blurt out the grievances and fears they had built up in recent years, or discuss some specific aspect of the resolution. Mihály Farkas and József Révai made speeches on a level of abstraction similar to Nagy's. However, they were the ones who placed most emphasis on the importance of continuity and tried to make excuses for Rákosi. Several speakers examined mainly the dangers that might be expected from the measures proposed, especially István Dobi, who was present again as a guest. Although everyone agreed with the resolution, the identification remained formal in many cases. Most of the Central Leadership members showed no inclination to take Imre Nagy's contribution seriously, or even consider "the roots of the mistakes".<sup>71</sup>

The final wording of the resolution was entrusted to the new Political Committee. As for the question of making it public, Rákosi received a telephone message from Moscow during the meeting. According to his account "the comrades called me to the phone and said they were familiar with this resolution; this was a resolution we should not make public; we should make it public once the results had appeared."<sup>72</sup> He at once put forward an additional proposal. Let the

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<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 634.

<sup>71</sup> MOL MDP-MSZMP ir. 276. f. 52/24. ó. e., pp. 52–180.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 53/170. ó. e. MDP KV, 14 April 1954, p. 103, speech by Mátyás Rákosi. The last part of the sentence appears to be a distortion by Rákosi. Vladimir Farkas wrote the following in his memoirs: "According to my father [Mihály Farkas], the Moscow leadership were so anxious about the events in the

meeting of activists to draw up the resolution be postponed for a few days, and let the number invited be fewer. The measures should be made public not in a communiqué at the Central Leadership meeting, but in Parliament, as the programme of the new government.

It was easy for Nagy to see how advantageous it was for Rákosi to have the resolution presented in that way. There would be no place for criticizing the party leadership or leading figures in a prime minister's speech presenting his program. The procedure allowed Rákosi to avoid having the serious criticism levelled at him personally and the personal responsibility he bore displayed for all the world to see. This certainly reduced the chances for the prime minister who was preparing to implement the programme.

The resolution consisted of four main parts. The first detailed the mistakes, the second the causes of them, the third the immediate economic and other measures to be taken, and the fourth the organizational tasks.<sup>73</sup> The part listing the mistakes dated the policy of excessive industrialization back to the second party congress in February 1951. This in effect meant that the original targets of the first five-year plan, set in 1950, were declared to have been correct. Only from 1951 onwards did a sectarian policy apply, which "regarded socialist industrialization as an end in itself, and neglected the interests of the working class, the working people. There was a certain megalomania manifest in this incorrect economic policy, which also contained elements of adventurism, in that it partly based the forced pace of development of the country's heavy industry on unavailable, unsecured resources and raw materials." While the section on industrial development was extremely sketchy, the resolution analysed the mistakes committed in agricultural policy in some detail. Mention was made of the reduction in investment, the

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GDR that a letter or telegram signed by Molotov arrived in Budapest, addressed to the newly composed party and state leadership, saying that they should mute their criticism of the earlier policy at the Central Leadership meeting and under no circumstances take it out into the street." Farkas, Vladimir (1990), *Nincs mentség* (No Justification), Budapest: Interart, p. 380.

<sup>73</sup> The resolution was not made public in full in 1953. The text first appeared in the samizdat *Hirmondó* (Courier), No. 2, 1985. It was later published in the party journal *Propagandista*, No. 4, 1986, pp. 136–7, and then in a collection of documents: Balogh, Sándor, editor, introduction (1986), *Nehéz esztendőök krónikája 1949–1953\_Dokumentok* (A Chronicle of Difficult Years, 1949–53. Documents), Budapest: Gondolat, pp. 497–510. The quotations that follow are taken from the last of these.

handicaps suffered by individual peasant farmers (taxation, compulsory deliveries, penalties), the excessive burdens placed on the kulaks, the forced pace of collectivization, and so on. The “rehabilitation” of Nagy was slipped into the section as well: “The forced pace of socialization [collectivization] of agriculture was all the graver a mistake because Comrade Imre Nagy argued within the party leadership against this policy, but instead of adopting his position, the party leadership branded it “opportunistic” and applied administrative action against Comrade Nagy.” The third group of mistakes consisted of allowing the living standard of the population to decline. Contributing factors, alongside the forced industrialization, were the

“development of the armed forces to a greater extent and at a faster pace than necessary, and inflation of the state apparatus. Consequently, the living standard of the population, including that of the working class, has not risen adequately in recent years; indeed the real wages of workers and employees have fallen in the last few years. Although the extremely bad harvest of 1952 contributed significantly, the underlying causes of the unfavourable trend in real wages and the living standard were the mistakes committed in economic policy and the party’s general line.”

The resolution gave the briefest treatment to the mass repressive measures against society, although some figures were included at the behest of the Moscow leadership.

“Between 1951 and May 1, 1953, in other words in a period of two years and four months, the police acting as a court for petty offences passed sentences in exactly 850,000 cases. And although the sentences in 831,000 of the 850,000 cases were fines, of which 760,000 were of less than 100 forints, and only 19,000 of the sentences were custodial, of which a high proportion were suspended, the number of penalties for petty offences is intolerably high. This number shows that administrative measures are being used in Hungary against the public to an extent that is unacceptable in a people’s democracy, a working people’s state. The operation of the courts of law testifies to the same conclusion. Between 1950 and the first quarter of 1953, in other words a period of three-and-a-quarter years, the courts dealt with the cases of 650,000 persons and passed sentences on 387,000 persons. Also incorrect and unacceptable is the system and practice of imposing mass fines for failures to deliver produce. So far, a sum of almost 400 million forints has been exacted in compensation from working peasants, agricultural cooperatives and kulaks, a sizeable proportion of



which has been illegal and unjust even under the existing regulations.”

The resolution saw as the main cause of the mistakes the substitution of personal leadership for collective leadership, for which Rákosi was mainly responsible. “Leadership of a personal nature impeded and prevented a real leading collective at the head of the party and state from developing. Only in very small numbers were leading cadres of Hungarian origin promoted to the topmost functions, and even in their case it happened formally rather than actually. In fact the leadership was clique-like and concentrated into the hands of just four comrades—Comrades Rákosi, Gerő, Farkas and Révai.” The “clique-like” leadership lost touch with the masses. It ignored the signals “that came from the population about the proliferating breaches of the law, the incorrect, inimical conduct of the police and state-security organizations towards the workers, the activity of the councils, often bad, illegal, and unjust to the people, the high number of sentences by the courts, and so on.” All this was encouraged by “the party’s serious shortcomings in the ideological field.” The party

“expropriated the function of the state, the Council of Ministers. The Council of Ministers did not play an independent role, and became a mere projection of the party leadership. What greatly contributed to this was that the office of party general secretary and of president of the Council of Ministers became concentrated in one person, the person of Comrade Rákosi, which was wrong. The party and Comrade Rákosi wrongly directed the State Security Authority. It was wrong for Comrade Rákosi to give direct orders to the State Security Authority on how it should investigate and whom it should arrest, and to give orders for detainees to be physically mistreated, which the law forbids. Furthermore, Comrade Rákosi’s orders were wrong in many cases, and made it harder to discover the truth.”

On the direct economic and political tasks, the resolution stated, “The party’s economic policy must be radically altered. The rate of industrialization, especially the rate of development of heavy industry, must be reduced. There must be a re-examination of the development plans for the people’s economy, and in connection with this, of the investments.” The document was very

sketchy about what this precisely meant. It contained rather more detail about the tasks in agriculture, the most important of which were abolition of the kulak list, cancellation of delivery arrears, and authorization of withdrawals from the collective farms. It allowed cooperatives to be dissolved if the majority of members agreed. The resolution called for an immediate rise in personal consumption, which would mean improving the supply of consumer goods, raising demand by reducing prices, and increasing the production of consumer goods and foodstuffs. It also provided for a strong increase in state housing construction (40,000 completions in 1954, as opposed to 24,000 in 1953). The final part of the resolution dealt with organizational changes in the political leadership (abolition of the title of party general secretary, a new, smaller Political Committee, subordination of the Secretariat to the Political Committee, separation of the posts of prime minister and party leader, and so on.)

The contents of the resolution were more of a list of the problems and immediate measures of a “fire-fighting” nature than a deeper analysis. On the other hand, it prescribed a change of economic and political direction so significant that it seemed almost irreversible at the time.

The change of direction received far less support from the personal changes made than from the text of the resolution. Mihály Farkas, József Révai, Károly Kiss and Árpád Házi were dropped from the new Political Committee (Mátyás Rákosi, Imre Nagy, Ernő Gerő, András Hegedüs, István Hidas, István Kristóf, Rudolf Földvári, Lajos Ács, and Mihály Zsofinyecz, with István Bata and Béla Szalai as alternate members), but the members were drawn mainly from young people that Rákosi and Gerő had singled out in 1951–3. The same can be said of the Secretariat (still important to deciding appointments), where Ács and Béla Vég took their seats alongside Rákosi.<sup>74</sup> The new government contained only a couple of ministers (István Bata, Sándor Zsoldos) who had not been members of Rákosi’s government. Prime Minister Imre Nagy had to work with people like himself, who had been part of the second link in the chain of command, carrying out the very policies now being criticized so strongly. Nagy had no choice for

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<sup>74</sup> MOL MDP-MSZMP ir. 276. f. 52/24. ő. e. MDP KV, 27-8 June 1953. On Rákosi’s initiative, the function of the first secretary was defined only in an internal, non-public resolution. Cf. the press statement

the time being. He lacked the team of men who would later constitute his supporters, but in 1953 they were still in jail for the most part, and knew nothing at all of the changes. Most importantly, the Soviet leadership did not want to see a more radical change of personnel. Their intention was to replace the Rákosi-Gerő twosome with a more moderate “troika”, by adding Nagy.<sup>75</sup> So the key figure in the correction was Imre Nagy, in Budapest and for Moscow.

What was it that had turned Moscow’s attention to Nagy? In 1952, while the “anti-Zionist” campaign continued, a deputy prime minister had been made out of the minister in charge of compulsory deliveries of farm produce, as the only “Muscovite” member of the Hungarian leadership not of Jewish origin. Nagy was reputed to be the best expert in Hungary on the agricultural question, while the Soviets considered the agricultural situation to be one of the main factors behind the crisis. Moreover Moscow wanted someone it knew, so to speak, whose past, whose previous life and political character could be “checked.” Malenkov, for instance, as a former head of the CPSU’s cadre department, had a thorough knowledge of the personal files on Nagy. Beria had at his disposal the documents on Nagy’s relations with the secret police (NKVD), and the investigations conducted and completed on him in 1930 and in about 1939–41.<sup>76</sup> Marshal Voroshilov had personal impressions of the man who had been minister of agriculture in 1944–5. Khrushchev, according to his memoirs, had heard a favourable opinion of Nagy from Stalin himself.<sup>77</sup> Based on all this there was much to be said for him. He had taken part in the Russian Civil War as a Red Guard. He had been an illegal communist in Hungary. He had behaved in a way appropriate to a party member. He had become an expert, and he had held important positions after 1944. It would certainly have been put to his credit that he had provided information to the state-security organizations during the purges of the 1930s. On the other hand,

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on the appointments decided at the meeting, *Szabad Nép*, 30 June 1953, reprinted in Balogh (1986), p. 496.

<sup>75</sup> On this, see Hajdu (1995), p. 198.

<sup>76</sup> These components can best be reconstructed from the enquiry into Nagy made closer to this time, for the CPSU Presidium, in December 1956. See *Arkiv Vneshney Politiki Rossyskoy Federatsii (AVP RF)*, f. 077. op. 37. p. 191. d. 39, pp. 82–93, report on the support given to Imre Nagy and his policy by the Yugoslav leaders, 4 December 1956, especially pp. 82–3.

<sup>77</sup> Khrushchev, N.S., “Memuari Nikiti Sergeyevecha Khrushcheva”, *Voprosi Istorii*, No. 5, 1994.

there were a number of things that spoke against his appointment: right-wing leanings, and the kind of “suspicious moments” found in everyone’s case—his release from custody in 1927, expulsion from the party in 1936, and his weakness as interior minister at the turn of 1945 and 1946. However, the arguments against him were outweighed by some circumstances of particular importance in 1953, and this decided the matter.

First was Imre Nagy’s position as the only member of the Hungarian leadership to have argued with Rákosi and Gerő in 1948–9 over agricultural transformation, from precisely the “platform” that Moscow was now promoting again as the remedy for the crisis. The documents to show this were in the possession of the Moscow party presidium. These showed Nagy to be a man of vision, forward-looking, courageous, and at the same time disciplined, willing to submit himself to the collective will even if it went against him. To offset the “over-industrializing” Rákosi and Gerő by placing a politically educated agricultural expert as head of government would balance the equation in Moscow’s eyes. It would give them someone whose characteristics, reputation and abilities meant he would balance out Rákosi and Gerő, whom Moscow did not want to dismiss completely. On the contrary, it wanted to utilize them in implementing its corrective policy, but especially in Rákosi’s case, they had good reason to suspect that he could not be trusted with the task alone, or in a team consisting only of his old associates. They also considered (to use Kiselev’s expression) the “wild Hungarian nationalism”, which to their mind meant that a person of “Hungarian origin” should be appointed to head a team dominated by those of “Jewish origin.”

The National Assembly first elected on 17 May 1953 met on 3 July when Mátyás Rákosi tendered his government’s resignation. Election of the new government took place early the next morning, on 4 July after which Imre Nagy gave his speech presenting his programme. The radio reported it in its midday news bulletin, and broadcast a recording of the whole speech at eight o’clock that night. The importance of this session of Parliament and the prime minister’s speech (events that had aroused little interest in previous years) was apparent from the news. All over the country, everyone who could gathered to listen, with few expectations.

Nagy's speech was based mainly on the third part of the Central Leadership resolution passed on 28 June 28, dealing with the immediate tasks. However, he expanded on this source material and in some places gave it a different political slant. He declared, for instance, that this Parliament marked

“the beginning of a new phase, in which greater expression has to be gained for the sovereignty of the people, and a greater role for Parliament, in the legal direction of state life, in the definition of the underlying principles and objectives of responsible government, and in the practice of the constitutional rights of the National Assembly. I intend to rely to a greater extent on the National Assembly in performing the tasks of government ... The Council of Ministers, relying on the legislature, will become an organization with full rights to conduct state affairs, based on wider authority for the ministries and greater responsibility on the ministers. In this way, essentially, we are taking a further advance in democratizing the life of our state.”<sup>78</sup>

The section of the speech on economic policy started out from the party resolution in June:

“I have to say honestly, before the country, that the raised targets of the five-year plan exceed our strength in many ways. Fulfilment of them makes excessive demands on our resources, hampers expansion of the material bases of welfare, and has recently caused a decline in the standard of living. There must clearly be a radical change in this respect. The development of socialist heavy industry cannot be an end in itself ... From this emerges clearly one of the main tasks in the government's economic policy: to make a general, significant reduction in the rate of development of our people's economy and in investment. Here the government will review the plan for the people's economy, in production and investment terms, and propose requisite reductions. We must also change the direction of development in the people's economy. There is nothing to justify the excessive industrialization and the attempt to reach industrial autarky, especially as we do not possess the raw-material basis to do so.”<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Nagy, Imre (1954), *Egy évtized. II. k. Válogatott beszédek és írások 1948–1954* (A Decade. Volume 2. Selected Speeches and Writings, 1948–54), Budapest: Szikra, p. 352.

On agricultural policy, Nagy went further than the party document, outlining a strategic change: “As you know, our agricultural production rests on individual holdings, whose production is not just something the country requires. On the contrary, development of their production, in cultivation and stockbreeding, is in the national interest. The government views it as a task of the utmost importance to promote the production of individual holdings, and to help them obtain means of production and manpower, equipment, fertilizers, improved seed, and all the other agro-technical requirements. The government wants to consolidate peasant production and security of ownership by every means.”<sup>80</sup> Nagy was much more emphatic in his position on the beleaguered private sector:

“In recent years, the state has been extending its own economic activity into areas where private initiative and private enterprise could still play an appreciable role, and help to meet the needs of the population to a greater extent. These areas are retail trading and small-scale industry. Although the small-scale industrial cooperatives show a marked development, they still cannot make up the shortage in small-scale industrial production. This prompts the government to encourage private enterprise and allow the issue of trade licenses to those entitled to them under the legal regulations, and to ensure artisans the conditions they need to ply their trade: supplies of goods, credit and so on.”<sup>81</sup>

The June resolution made only scattered, half-sentence references to the intelligentsia, the churches and religious belief. In the government programme, Nagy addressed himself more or less directly to social strata and groups that had hardly been mentioned in recent years in other than pejorative terms (or even as an outright enemy):

“Regrettably—although the government intends to alter this radically—there are still occasions when intellectual work and the intelligentsia in general, especially the old-established intelligentsia, do not receive due recognition. There is often

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<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 353–4.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 357

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 359–60.

an air of suspicion around them, which leads in the end to avoidance, at a time when every field of economic, cultural and scientific life has a shortage of experienced, qualified intellectuals. The socialist development of our people's economy offers them very wide scope for their talents. Yet on grounds of suspicion or in unwarranted purges, well-intentioned members of the intelligentsia are sometimes treated in a way unworthy of a people's democracy, and deprived of the chance to apply their expertise in their specialist field, for the country's good. The government will take strong measures to end such ill-conceived, unacceptable procedures, and firmly intends to remedy the legal grievances."<sup>82</sup>

On religious matters, Nagy called for "greater tolerance". It is inadmissible in this field to use administrative means, which has certainly happened on some occasions. The government's stand on this question is one of toleration, with enlightenment and persuasion as its weapons. The government condemns and will not stand for the use of administrative or other coercive measures."<sup>83</sup>

The section on policy towards the intelligentsia was followed by the passage that most contemporaries were to remember word for word, although it was far less important than the one just quoted: "We have really forced matters in higher education, making enormous sacrifices. We will now have to be much more modest in this field. Let us not build castles in the air. Meanwhile much greater attention needs to be paid to elementary schools. We must step up investment here, raise the number of schools, classrooms and teachers, provide the optimum conditions for basic teaching of the hopes for the future, the little Hungarians, which—I have to say—we have greatly neglected so far, due to the overemphasis on higher education."<sup>84</sup> Nagy had scored a bull's-eye. Here was a communist prime minister talking of the "hopes for the future, the little Hungarians", in a country where even the national festivals had been abolished a few years ago.

Yet the really important part of the speech, affecting society as a whole in the most general

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<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 365–6.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 366–7.

way, was still to come.

“The government rests, in all its activity, on a basis of the law and order and legality laid down in the Constitution. The basis of our people’s democratic system of state and our economic and social life is socialist legality, strict compliance with the civil rights and responsibilities laid down in the Constitution and the laws of the People’s Republic.” Nagy added the attribute “socialist” to the word legality, which the decisive majority of people took to be a qualifier. But the next passage put names to the events, without qualification: “Often, the fundamental principle of people’s democratic state life and administration—legality—has not applied sufficiently in the work of our judicial and police organizations and our local councils ... High numbers of judicial prosecutions and proceedings for petty offences, widely used administrative measures, compulsory deliveries, tax collection, the kulak list, mass transgressions and abuses in land redistribution, and other types of harassment have offended the population’s sense of justice. They have shaken their faith in legality and weakened the ties of the working people with our state organizations and local councils ... Even otherwise rightful, fair and lawful measures are implemented in a way that plagues people’s lives. They forget they are there to serve the people and not the other way round, and that modesty, attentiveness and civil behavior are virtues that any citizen, and the government itself, can rightly demand of everyone in our public offices. Consolidation of legality is one of the government’s most urgent tasks. We must apply strict measures, and if they fail, strong penalties, and overcome the mistakes and negligence, so as to ensure that in a short while our judicial and police organizations and our local councils become firm supports and guarantees of the people’s state, legality, and law and order.”<sup>85</sup>

Imre Nagy positively instilled the concept of legality, without qualification, into these few sentences, where he uses the expression four times. It meant the government had ended hostilities against the people.

The vast majority of Hungarian society received the speech with delight, relief and expectation. This emerges from the reports on the public mood in the country made at the time

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<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 366.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 367–8.



and from the recollections and interview responses of emigrés after the 1956 revolution. Perhaps it is not an exaggeration to say this was the first speech of a communist leader since 1945 with which the majority of the country agreed.<sup>86</sup> The beneficiaries of the policy of recent years received the government programmed suspiciously, fearing a loss of the various privileges that they had gained. The programmed did not promise a fundamental change, a change of system. It simply indicated that communism itself could be seen as a plural phenomenon. In the tense situation of the time, that meant a great deal.

Imre Nagy's name and picture were soon on international front pages as a symbol of change. The news agencies rushed to assemble his biographical data, and found they knew scarcely anything about his previous life. "The speeches he has made in recent years are each connected with a topical agricultural question. The tone of his statements is moderate. He does not conceal the difficulties," according to a background material prepared by the Hungarian department of Radio Free Europe.<sup>87</sup> "Tell me, who is this Imre Nagy?" was the question President Tito of Yugoslavia put at Bled, Slovenia, to Ferenc Fejtő (François Fejtő), correspondent of the French news agency AFP. "He has a reputation of being a full-blown Bukharinite, very interested in the Yugoslav experiences," Fejtő replied.<sup>88</sup> "Apparently he is a Russian citizen," wrote John MacCormack, Vienna correspondent of *The New York Times*.<sup>89</sup> The same paper suggested the next day it would be mistaken to think the new prime minister was just a puppet. "He is known to be a strong-willed person, who has stood up to his party bosses on

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<sup>86</sup> In this there is full accord between the career interviews made in the later 1980s, now preserved in the Oral History Archive of the 1956 Institute in Budapest, and interviews made with Hungarian refugees, for instance in 1957–60, in Europe and the United States. Indeed the remarks are often the same word for word. See the copy of the in-depth interviews made for the Columbia University Research Project on Hungary, Országos Széchényi Könyvtár Kézirattára (National Széchényi Library Document Collection), 413. f. l. ő. e.

<sup>87</sup> Central European University, Open Society Archives, Radio Free Europe Research (CEU OSA RFE), Imre Nagy File, biography of Imre Nagy, pre-July 1953.

<sup>88</sup> Fejtő, Ferenc (1990): *Budapesttől Párizsig. Emlékeim* (From Budapest to Paris. My Memoirs), Budapest: Magvető, pp. 363–4.

<sup>89</sup> "Hungary Shakes Up Regime and Moves to Appease People", *The New York Times*, July 5, 1953.

more than one occasion. Nonetheless, he is a one hundred-per-cent faithful communist.”<sup>90</sup> “They will certainly have been keeping a file on him in the Kremlin for a long time, with good points of various kinds on it ... Now that Rákosi has been forced to give up the post of communist-party general secretary, Nagy is among those who have joined the leading Politburo team. The motto of Nagy’s extremely moderate communism is that “Hungary is an agricultural country.” Moscow has unexpectedly received him more than favourably. He was even able to allow himself to describe June 17 in Berlin as a warning to all people’s democracies.”<sup>91</sup> There were conflicting assessments of how important the change was. As MacCormack put it, “His program clearly corresponds with Lenin’s famous, though short-lived New Economic Policy ... If his speech ... can be believed, the individual peasants can now feel themselves better protected from forcible collectivization in Hungary than in Yugoslavia.”<sup>92</sup> “Prime Minister Nagy’s promise of a better life has made a deep impression on the man in the street—the average Hungarian.”<sup>93</sup> Another American commentator wrote, “We have to wonder what is meant by the current change in the Hungarian dogmas, that Prime Minister Imre Nagy has proclaimed: just another NEP, or a tactical break, and not a strategic change?”<sup>94</sup>

A few days after the government programmed of 4 July was announced (probably on 7 July), the Soviet leadership invited the Hungarian “troika” of Nagy, Rákosi and Gerő to Moscow, to be briefed on the party resolution condemning Beria. According to Rákosi’s recollections, Khrushchev emphasized that Beria’s “stance, how he behaved at the discussion of the Hungarian question, contributed much to his exposure.” Rákosi’s memory probably did not fail him when he wrote that he immediately made an attempt at a revision of the June consultation, but the Soviet

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<sup>90</sup> “Rákosi’s Importance Stressed” (commentary by Endre Marton), *The New York Times*, 6 July 1953.

<sup>91</sup> CEU OSA RFE, Imre Nagy file, “Imre Nagy, der neue Mann in Ungarn”, *Internationaler Biographischer Pressedienst*, No. 164/1983, July 6, 1953.

<sup>92</sup> *The New York Times*, 5 July 1953.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, July 6, 1953.

<sup>94</sup> Sulzberger, C.L., “Shift in Hungary Recalls Lenin’s NEP Concessions”, *The New York Times*, 7 July 1953.

leaders would not bend.<sup>95</sup> The party first secretary conveyed the news of Beria's dismissal and arrest to the members of the Political Committee on 9 July 1953. Influenced by this, decisions were taken on calling a meeting of party activists in Greater Budapest, on the report the party leader would deliver, and on having live radio coverage.<sup>96</sup> Up to that moment, the country had only heard about the change of direction from the prime minister's speech, which lent a special significance to this public utterance from the party.

Beria's fall really restored the spirits of believers in the old course. Rákosi delivered a forceful, militant oration to the meeting of party activists, where it received with frequent applause and mounting enthusiasm by the audience, which had been confused by the previous days' events. In fact he retained the criticism, but he only spoke of it very briefly, and made obvious attempts to reduce its importance. (For instance, he remarked about the earlier upward revision of the five-year plan that it certainly had to be raised, but not by that much.) He spoke about the achievements of which everyone could rightly be proud, but he did not accept Révai's advice, because again he did not go into much detail. He was far more interested in the immediate future, which was the subject of his first important statement: "The experience of the last few days has convinced us it would have been more sensible to have announced the tasks first in the party's name."<sup>97</sup> The audience of activists, and through the radio broadcast, all those who had directed, participated in and benefited from the system built up since 1947–8, lapped up first secretary's words when he said the old objectives and slogans would be unchanged, from industrialization to priority for the agricultural-cooperative road, from enhanced vigilance to statements of the type "we-want-to-produce-more-coal-and-more-steel-than-last-year" type.

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<sup>95</sup> Rákosi, Mátyás (1997), *Visszaemlékezések 1940–1956* (Recollections, 1940–56), Vol. 2, Budapest: Napvilág Kiadó, pp. 936–8. The Romanian and Bulgarian party leaders were also present at the briefing.

<sup>96</sup> MOL MDP-MSZMP, 276. f. 53/125. ő. e. MDP PB, 9 July 1953. The news of Beria's fall was only reported by TASS on the following day, July 10, so that it appeared in the papers on 11 July the morning of the activists' meeting.

<sup>97</sup> Rákosi, Mátyás, "A Magyar Dolgozók Pártja Központi Vezetősége 1953. júniusi határozatának végrehajtásáért. Beszéd a budapesti pártaktíva értekezletén, 1953. júl. 11" (On Implementation of the June 1953 Resolution of the Hungarian Working People's Party Central Leadership. Speech to the Meeting of Budapest Party Activists, July 11, 1953), in: Rákosi Mátyás (1955), *Válogatott beszédek és cikkek* (Selected

Applause broke out when he said, “We will not tolerate anti-cooperative agitation either, just as we will not tolerate agitation against our socialist construction.”<sup>98</sup>

Imre Nagy delivered a thoroughly weak speech. After the coherence of the government programme, his contribution seemed far less structured. He ritually repeated that the resolution of the Central Leadership was the guideline for implementing the government programme, and he too referred to the achievements so far. Nagy spoke less about the “attack by the enemy”, or any aspect of the mood since the change of course had been announced. (He even avoided expressions suggestive of a new phase.) Instead he recounted the early measures taken by the government: cancellation of the sums levied on those behind with their compulsory deliveries, remission of such arrears, and reduction of the delivery quotas, and spoke of the measures planned for the days to come. He began and concluded his speech by emphasizing the importance of party unity, while the event itself, by comparison with the one a week earlier, demonstrated that either the party was altering its policy with remarkable speed, or there was no unity within the leadership.<sup>99</sup>

“Mátyás Rákosi, in his speech to the Budapest party activists” meeting on 11 July 1953, announced that he had to report opposition in the party apparatus and from the state and economic organizations,” Nagy wrote two years later, conveying at the same time that he himself had seen all that occurred simply as a prelude.<sup>100</sup> The different emphases were noticed abroad as well. *The New York Times* reported that Rákosi “warned those who had reached the conclusion that the [new course] was coming into immediate effect,” while underlining the announcement in Nagy’s speech that the amnesty law and the decree abolishing internment would appear before the end of July.<sup>101</sup>

Despite this obvious difference of political opinion, the first practical measures ensued

Speeches and Articles), 4th, expanded edition, Budapest: Szikra, p. 567.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 574.

<sup>99</sup> Nagy, Imre, “A Központi Vezetőség határozata iránytű a kormány számára” (The Central Leadership Resolution Is the Guideline for the Government), in: Nagy (1954), pp. 377–88.

<sup>100</sup> Nagy (1984), p. 168.

quite quickly. These included a restricted amnesty on 24 July canceling prison sentences of under two years, cutting longer sentences by a third, but excluding political prisoners. Other measures concerned increasing the size of private “household plots” on collective farms, to one cadastral hold (0.57 hectares), amending the 1953 investment plan, cutting food prices (31 July), modifying the plan for iron and steel, housing construction (7 August), abolishing the judicial functions of the police (4 August), and amending the 1953 directives for budgetary organizations (22 August).<sup>102</sup> Of course there were disputes in the meantime within the government, mainly about whether it was necessary to issue the regulations so fast. Nagy would not be contradicted, and it was fruitless for some ministers to argue, along Rákosi’s lines, that the haste was causing “uncertainty”. (For instance, Iván Altomáre, the food-industry minister, reported that compulsory deliveries of produce had “ceased.”)<sup>103</sup> The main focus of opposition developed in the Political Committee. There, under Rákosi’s direction, every effort was made to slow the implementation of the programmed.

While Nagy was acting energetically in the government, the Political Committee became much more doubtful and cautious after the “Beria shock”.<sup>104</sup> However, it did not remain idle. Rather than engaging in sterile debate, it tried to clarify how far the reversal in Moscow went. On 16 July, a few days’ after the Budapest activists’ meeting, Nagy made an approach, on his own initiative, to Soviet Ambassador Kiselev. Counting on the ambassador’s report reaching the Presidium through Molotov, he “expressed concern that fulfillment of the joint plan for the transformation (*perestroika*) of the economy and politics is not progressing as they had earlier planned.”<sup>105</sup> He stated plainly that opposition could be discerned in the party apparatus, and even in the leadership, following Rákosi’s speech at the activists’ meeting. As for Rákosi and Gerő,

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<sup>101</sup> “Rákosi Sees No Shift in Satellite Policy”, *The New York Times*, July 12, 1953.

<sup>102</sup> MOL XIX-A-83-a. MT jkv. (minutes of the Council of Ministers), 87–89. d. 10 July–22 August 1953.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 87. d., 10 July 1953.

<sup>104</sup> Rákosi (1997), p. 940.

<sup>105</sup> AVP RF, f. 077. op. 33. por. 9. pap. 161. II. 41–9, Kiselev’s report on his conversation with Imre Nagy, 16 July 1953.

“they saw the hand of the enemy in any demand from the working people.” Nagy added that he could not “get rid of the feeling that since Beria’s arrest, Rákosi views his, Nagy’s, upholding of the programme and efforts to fulfil it almost as an attempt to restore capitalism.”<sup>106</sup>

As the report shows, the prime minister’s intervention served its purpose. A few days later, the Soviet party leadership requested a report from the Hungarians on the results so far. This, as Nagy put it at his next meeting with Kiselev on July 25, “caused Rákosi to consider carefully what they had managed to achieve in that time.”<sup>107</sup> Nagy took heart from the succession of important measures they had taken in the government, including the controversial amnesty, establishment of the Supreme Public Prosecutor’s Department, dissolution of the internment camps, and so on. This all induced him, at the beginning of the conversation, to take an almost jocular view of the political conflict. According to Kiselev’s account, Nagy told him it was “hard to change the old man (meaning Rákosi). He still forgets that he is not the prime minister, and as before, he often gives state and administrative instructions to the ministries, and he has only come to his senses since he, Nagy, reminded him that he could safely trust the matter to the Council of Ministers.”<sup>108</sup> However, there could hardly be stronger evidence that all was not well than Rákosi’s attempt, even on this occasion, to retain his prerogative over relations with the Soviets. For “only after a second warning from Nagy did he decide to inform the PC members of the mentioned enquiry from the CPSU CC.”<sup>109</sup>

What finally reassured Nagy was Prime Minister Malenkov’s programme presentation to the Supreme Soviet on 8 August 1953. There he summarized in the sections on internal and economic affairs the corrective measures taken since Stalin’s death. Although the speech did not refer to a change of course, its emphasis on living standards, light industry and agriculture showed that Beria’s fall did not imply a restoration of the old Stalinist order. In form (a

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<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, II. 52–6, Kiselev’s report on his conversation with Imre Nagy, 25 July 1953.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

government program) and content, it reinforced Imre Nagy's position.<sup>110</sup>

So Rákosi failed to bring about a complete revision of the decisions taken in June and July 1953. For a while he changed tactics, without changing his nature in the least. He did not openly obstruct the implementation of the program Moscow had prescribed. Instead he began to press for a deep analysis, showing which of the measures had proved to be mistaken and what should be changed, and for this to be the basis for deciding the character and depth of the subsequent tasks. Let it be assessed conclusively what immediate and longer-term effects arose from the changes implemented so far. "The HWPP CL set about applying the advice received in Moscow in a clumsy way," Rákosi said at the end of September, on his return from holiday, in a conversation with the newly arrived Yuri Andropov, the chargé d'affaires who was standing in for Kiselev. "Instead of pondering and expounding before the party and the people a positive program of action derived from the critical comments made in Moscow, the leadership of the HWPP CL simply criticized its own mistakes, so clumsily that the enemy could exploit this in its subversive activity."<sup>111</sup> Nagy, by contrast, simply waited for the shock of Beria's fall to subside, and he followed a strengthening of the political support for the new course. "Nagy said he was very satisfied that full agreement had emerged in the PC on the question of assessing the circumstances and tasks," Andropov reported a few days later, after meeting Nagy for the first time. "He had met with Rákosi in Sochi during his vacation and given him his ideas on several issues. Subsequently, they had developed a common position on most questions of principle."<sup>112</sup> He was also reassured when the CPSU Central Committee adopted a resolution on the development of agriculture, on 7 September 1953.

The corrective system displayed a continuity with classical Stalinism in considering the central, state economic policy as the prime system of social regulation. The ideas underlying the

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<sup>110</sup> Malenkov's speech appeared in *Pravda*, August 9, 1953. See Urbán, Károly (1996b) "Nagy Imre és G.M. Malenkov. Két miniszterelnök Sztálin után" (Imre Nagy and G.M. Malenkov. Two Prime Ministers after Stalin), *Múltunk*, No. 1.

<sup>111</sup> AVP RF f. 077. op. 33. por. 9. pap. 161. II. 94–8, Andropov's report on his conversation with Mátyás Rákosi, 30 September 1953.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 101–4, Andropov's report on his conversation with Imre Nagy, 7 October 1953.

change of economic policy in the autumn of 1953 can each be described as a central “package of measures”<sup>113</sup>

The first package allowed some of the accumulation fund to be moved into the fund for personal consumption. In other words, it reduced heavy-industrial investment and spent the sum released on agriculture, light industry and food processing, and housing construction and maintenance. These measures were taken relatively quickly, using the earlier system of control, mainly through central directives. More significant changes would only result in the longer term.

The second package, consisting of wage rises and price reductions, was also introduced by central directive. The wage rises affected 928,000 people, with an average increment of just over 100 forints, costing a total of 981 million forints. The public gained about the same aggregate sum—1 billion forints—through the price reductions in July and September.<sup>114</sup> This meant that the effects were almost immediate, as higher purchasing power, increased demand. For the time being, the goods required could only be provided by central action, to the extent that the meager reserves of consumer goods allowed.

So the first two packages of measures remained within the existing system of instruments. This could hardly have been otherwise, because both the changes had to be implemented straight away, mainly for political reasons. On the other hand, the first package threatened to break down a mechanism that had hardly become established, while the second presented the danger of upsetting the economic equilibrium.

The third package set out to ease the burdens on the general public, above all the peasantry, but making use, to some extent, of economic regulators, not just central commands. There were almost fifty government resolutions dealing with agricultural policy in the latter half

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<sup>113</sup> The measures are described and analysed in detail in Pető, Iván, and Sándor Szakács (1985), *A hazai gazdaság négy évtizedének története 1945–1985. 1. köt. Az újjáépítés és a tervutasításos irányítás időszaka 1945–1968* (The History of Four Decades of This Country’s Economy, 1945–85. Vol. 1. The Period of Reconstruction and Control by Planning Directives, 1945–68), Budapest: KJK (Economic and Legal Publishing Co.), pp. 246–61.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 258.



of 1953, and several dozen measures were taken. The leadership took a much more varied approach in agriculture to obtaining the kind of changes pursued in industry chiefly by altering and “balancing” plan indicators. The main effort in July and August went into reducing and eliminating the effective levies, which had reached impossible proportions, and the various outstanding obligations and arrears. This was followed in early autumn by measures to stimulate the propensity to produce, such as the chance to repurchase land offered to the state or abandoned, and tax-free tenancies of up to 25 hold (14.25 hectares). Preparations began for a new system of compulsory deliveries valid for a longer period (1954–6), instead of the annually changing system hitherto. This was not issued until December 1953, instead of October, but it brought a significant reduction in delivery quotas as well.<sup>115</sup>

Although the triple package of economic measures made no basic change in the system of economic control and social organization, it offered some scope to economic rationalism, at the expense of rigid adherence to dogma.

Like the economic measures, the political measures were intended to ease the tensions that were threatening to burst. The pattern for easing the repression was the so-called “Beria” amnesty in the Soviet Union. The general pardon pronounced directly after Stalin’s death applied to those convicted of common-law crimes. However, there were also preparations for a political amnesty, the first sign of which was the ending of the investigation into the “doctors” plot’ and the release of the accused for the giant Zionist trial that was being planned. However, the fall of Beria caused a delay in the political amnesty in the Soviet Union.<sup>116</sup> The Hungarian solution resembled the Soviet in that the amnesty (the freeing of those serving binding sentences of imprisonment) applied only to those sentenced to up to two years in custody (and to older

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<sup>115</sup> The regulation drawn up in the prime minister’s absence was removed from the agenda on his return. See MOL XIX-A-83-j. 93. d. MT, 2 October 1953. The final text was approved by the government at its meeting on 11 December. *Ibid.*, 95. d. MT, 11 December 1953. see Erdmann, Gyula (1992), *Begyűjtés, beszolgáltatás Magyarországon 1945–1956* (Collection and Delivery in Hungary, 1945–56), Békéscsaba: Téván Kiadó, pp. 182–96.

<sup>116</sup> See Zhukov, Yuri N. (1996), “Borba za vlasty v paryno-gosudarstvennykh verkhakh SSSR vesnoy 1953 goda”, *Voprosi Istorii*, No. 5–6, pp. 39–57; “Novy kurs” L.P. Berii 1953 g. Publ. podg. A.I. Kokurin,

prisoners and to minors). This meant expressly that it did not apply to most political prisoners. However, the easing of the repression applied widely to those condemned formally for greater or lesser common-law or economic crimes, but who had actually fallen victim to campaigns of political reprisals. This applied to fines or jail terms for produce-delivery arrears, public-supply offences and crimes, plan infringements, stealing or “arbitrary departure” from work, and above all to forms of preventive political victimization: expulsion and internment. These categories gave the measures the character of a restricted political amnesty, of a kind that can certainly be seen as specific to Hungary. The Hungarian gulag more or less ceased to exist in the autumn of 1953. The internment camps and the Hortobágy camp for deportees were closed, and the practice of residence assignment was abandoned.

According to a report dated 18 November 1953, “The amnesty measures affected almost 748,000 persons ... The provisions occasioned general good feeling among the released convicts and those who had been detained for other reasons, and among the working people. There were a small number of hostile comments, mainly expressing doubt about whether the measures were being fully implemented.”<sup>117</sup>

Altogether 15,761 persons were released from prison (out of almost 40,000 prisoners). About a third of these had been convicted of “profiteering or a crime against public supply”. Out of more than 5,000 persons held at the ÁVH internment camps (at Recsk, Kistarcsa, Kazincbarcika and Tiszalök), 3,234 had been freed by the end of October. Criminal charges were brought against another 659 (for espionage, war crimes, unauthorized crossing of the frontier, etc.), while most of the foreign former prisoners of war held at Tiszalök (more than 900 out of

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A.I. Pozharov, *Istorichesky Arkhiv*, No. 4, 1996, pp. 132–64.

<sup>117</sup> Report by Deputy Interior Minister László Piros and Chief Prosecutor Kálmán Czako on implementation of the legislative decree on the exercise of general pardon, and of the Council of Ministers resolution on abolition of the institution of police-authority custody and on the lifting of expulsion orders, in: Solt, Pál, *et al.*, editors (1993), *Iratok az igazságszolgáltatás történetéhez* (Documents from the History of the Administration of Justice), Budapest: KJK, pp. 586–7. In an account a few days later, Piros gave the final total of those affected as 758,611. Quoted in Révai, Valéria, editor (1991), *Törvénytelen szocializmus. A Tényfeltáró Bizottság jelentése* (Unlawful Socialism. Report of the Fact-finding Commission), Budapest: Zrinyi—Új Magyarország, p. 210, note 394.

1200) were handed over in the late autumn, mainly to West Germany. About 500 people were released from the police internment camps. Meanwhile 7,281 people deported to Hortobágy regained their freedom, and the residence-assignment orders against 13,670 deportees from Budapest and 1,194 expelled from provincial cities were lifted. The law courts annulled 21,000 fines, the police and local-council courts for petty offences almost 5000 prosecutions and 189,000 fines, and the courts for petty financial offences the fines imposed on more than 217,000 people. Proceedings against almost 230,000 persons were dropped by the various courts for petty offences. Law-court proceedings and investigations by the prosecution service or the police against almost 29,000 people were terminated during the amnesty. Police surveillance orders against 4,500 people were lifted.<sup>118</sup>

However, many thousands of political prisoners remained behind bars, including communists and social democrats. Several hundred internees were sent to prison. Very few of those released or returning were able to go back to their original places of residence or recover their possessions. There was a central order precluding compensation. Some people were placed under police surveillance and others under “operative control” (surveillance by the secret police). There was no question of them recovering their original jobs.<sup>119</sup>

On 17 August 1953, the Hungarian government issued a statement announcing the release of Edgar Sanders, a British citizen convicted in the so-called Standard trial of 1949, and some other foreign citizens.<sup>120</sup> Typically, Nagy informed Moscow of this, through Kiselev, before it was made public, and outlined in a lengthy foreign-policy disquisition the likely benefits from the move, for instance the deepening Anglo-American discord following the case. On 20 August Ludwig Leber, a West German Christian Democrat politician from Württemberg who had clearly heard about the Sanders case, telephoned Imre Nagy, who was at a football match in the People’s

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<sup>118</sup> Solt (1993), pp. 585–94.

<sup>119</sup> Révai (1991), pp. 138–40, 143–4 and 149–52.

<sup>120</sup> MOL XIX-A-2-v, papers of Prime Minister Imre Nagy, 70. d. Catalogued documents, 1953, catalogue II, item 562. Sanders’ parents were instructed through the Hungarian diplomatic mission in London to file an appeal for clemency.

Stadium. In the end he continued the conversation from home. Leber, who spoke Hungarian (he was a native German from Hungary), was enquiring about the ethnic German prisoners of war transported back to Hungary from the Soviet Union, whom the Federal Republic of Germany considered to be its citizens. Nagy gave him an account of the amnesty orders, and added meaningfully, “The solution to this question does not depend only on us.” However, when Leber pressed him further, Nagy confirmed that he thought the Germans would regain their freedom during that year. This previously unimaginable gesture found a big response, although Leber did not make the conversation public until the end of the year, after the prisoners had been handed over to Germany.<sup>121</sup>

The churches in Hungary and their members suffered direct and indirect repression after 1948, especially the Catholic Church, which was the largest in size and political influence. Its relations with the state sank to their lowest point after the show trial and imprisonment of two archbishops, József Mindszenty and József Grósz. Nagy mentioned in the government programme that his new government would follow a more tolerant policy towards the churches. Even before the start of the 1953–4 school year, arrangements were made for late applications to attend religious instruction, as a result of which attendance rose by a quarter.

At the end of July, Gyula Czapik, archbishop of Eger (and in the absence of the Esztergom and Kalocsa archbishops, chairman of the Bench of Bishops and head of the Hungarian Catholic Church) asked Imre Nagy to receive a delegation of Catholic bishops.<sup>122</sup> The meeting took place on 27 October and according to Czapik’s assessment at the time, “the discussions took place in a friendly enough, indeed very friendly atmosphere.”<sup>123</sup> Nagy and the leaders of the Catholic

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<sup>121</sup> Of course the Post Office-ÁVH telephone-tapping service knew about the conversation straight away. Antal Katona, deputy minister of transport and postal affairs, immediately sent a report to the top leadership. *Ibid.*, papers of Prime Minister Imre Nagy, 70. d. item M-256.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 67. d. item M-60/25 July. Czapik made an application through the State Office for Church Affairs for Nagy to receive the delegates of the Bench of Bishops, and himself separately. According to his application, the delegates wished to submit their complaints. He did not identify himself with these, and wanted to explain which of the complaints could be realistically remedied.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 70. d. Catalogued documents, 1953, catalogue I, item 178. Report by János Horváth, President of the State Office for Church Affairs, on the Conference of the Bench of Bishops on 10 November 1953.

Church agreed immediately on several questions. For instance, the government did not reduce the state contribution to church expenditure as it had planned. The church received a convalescent home, and facilities for aged priests. Nationalized dwellings for clergy were returned. The government undertook to allow former monks and nuns to “take part in production” through small-scale industrial cooperatives. Current archive materials were restored to the church archives. Some libraries (for instance at Eger) were also returned. The administration of extreme unction was allowed again in hospitals. The government undertook that the local councils would not interfere in the arrangements for mass. Books of religious instruction would be reprinted, and so on. According to the notes taken of the meeting, the cases of Mindszenty and Grósz were not mentioned.<sup>124</sup>

If occupational bans are included among the forms of political repression, the resumed authorization of private small-scale industry and retail trading can count among the mitigating measures. Although there was no mention of this at the Moscow conference, Ambassador Kiselev informed Gerő before the June Central Leadership resolution was passed that the Soviet leadership considered that a serious mistake had been made.<sup>125</sup> The measures taken in the latter half of 1953 made the issue of permits easier to obtain, and prospective artisans (or those resuming their trade) were even allowed to take out loans. Some restrictions remained, however: a maximum of three employees, permits only for occupations that directly served the needs of the general public, etc. The number of artisans, 200,000 in 1949, had fallen to less than a quarter in four years. It doubled after the first new measures, and exceeded 100,000 in 1954.<sup>126</sup> With private trading, the government tried initially to prevent an “excessive expansion” by setting

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<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, items 176 and 177, notes of the State Office for Church Affairs on the agreements reached and the matters left pending. See Gergely, Jenő (1985), *A katolikus egyház Magyarországon 1944–1971* (The Catholic Church in Hungary, 1944–71), Budapest: Kossuth, p. 139.

<sup>125</sup> MOL MDP-MSZMP ir. 276. f. 65/41. ő. e., pp. 326–8, Gerő’s note of June 19, 1953 to the Secretariat, on his talk with Kiselev. According to Gerő, Kiselev himself raised the subject of Molotov’s “excessive elimination of private retail trading and small-scale industry.”

<sup>126</sup> Pető and Szakács (1985), p. 258.

numerical limits, but these were steadily raised.<sup>127</sup> The authorization of free-market sales by private agricultural producers and traders, in the autumn of 1953, caused some concern in the Soviet leadership. Were the Hungarians “sure that relinquishing the collection of some agricultural products will benefit the working people and not the entrepreneurs? Could it not be that the private traders will push up the meat and fat prices in the spring, when there is less food available?” enquired Andropov, the Soviet chargé d’affaires, in conversation with Mihály Farkas. “There is a danger of this,” the Central Leadership secretary replied, “but the government trusts that the delivery and collection of agricultural products will be successful, and if need be it will be able to influence the prices on the private market.” In saying this, he also made it plain that the initiative had come from the government.<sup>128</sup>

Prime Minister Imre Nagy’s speech presenting the government program was followed almost immediately by spontaneous withdrawals from the agricultural cooperatives, which were dissolved in several places. Members simply went home with the livestock and implements that had been forced to contribute to the collective. There were two courses open to the leadership. It could prevent the total collapse of the agricultural cooperative movement by administrative means, or it could offer collective farmers greater benefits than it had planned and make the position of those withdrawing more difficult. The latter course was chosen. Under ministerial regulations on withdrawals and dissolutions issued in the early autumn, those withdrawing could not have back the lands they had contributed. Instead, the cooperative general assembly would assign them land. Furthermore, they became responsible for the obligations of the cooperative, not just in proportion to their land, but personally as well. (This meant an extra burden of fifty per cent, on top of the debt per member, so that they were assigned a share in the same debt on two counts.) Only a two-thirds majority of the general assembly, in an open, personal vote, could dissolve a collective farm. Even then, if at least ten members wanted to continue collective

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<sup>127</sup> MOL XIX-A-2-v, papers of Prime Minister Imre Nagy, 70. d. Catalogued documents, 1953, catalogue I, item 133, József Bognár’s report on the issue of private trading licences.

<sup>128</sup> AVP RF F. 077. op. 33. por 9. pap. 161. II. 107–11, Andropov’s report on his conversation with Mihály Farkas on 19 October 1953.

farming, the agricultural cooperative survived, and the rest had to shoulder their obligations according to the rules for members withdrawing. The regulation did not allow withdrawals or dissolution until all the autumn work had been completed.<sup>129</sup> In general the regulations were tightened further by the local authorities.<sup>130</sup> Out of more than 5000 agricultural cooperatives, only 688 (12 per cent) were wound up by the end of 1953, but the aggregate number of members fell by a third, from 376,000 to 250,000, and the area farmed collectively fell by more than a quarter. All these indices fell further in 1954, if not so fast. Nonetheless, a complete collapse of the cooperative sector of agriculture had been avoided.<sup>131</sup>

The change of course in 1953 and Imre Nagy's mandate to make from the corrective measures taken in the Soviet Union after Stalin's death. The Soviet political scene was dominated right up to 1957 (or at least until 1955) by the struggle for power. This continued until one man—Khrushchev—had managed to embrace the main institutions and gain adequate authority over those running them. In 1953, however, Malenkov was the more decisive figure, during and after his duumvirate with Beria. Malenkov, like Beria, regarded the problems of governance pragmatically. He was immune to much ideological dogma, but not motivated by such crude and primitive ideas as the head of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD). Malenkov had good administrative and organizational abilities, and chose his colleagues well. He was on cordial terms with the scientific elite, especially those working on the atom and hydrogen-bomb programmes. According to Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov, Malenkov was the first Soviet leader to understand fully the fatal consequences of a war fought with the new weapons of mass destruction. That is why he tried to break with the Soviet “imperial-revolutionary” foreign-policy paradigm, with its intrinsic element of confrontation, by pushing its “revolutionary” component into the background.<sup>132</sup> According to his son, Malenkov saw himself simply as the

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<sup>129</sup> Regulations 4/1953. F. M. and 278/1953. F. M. of the minister of agriculture, *Magyar Közlöny* (official gazette), Regulations Register 1953, items 48 and 50.

<sup>130</sup> Pető and Szakács (1985), p. 251–4.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 256–7.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137–73 [?].

leader of the Soviet “technocracy”.<sup>133</sup> According to the Russian historian who has examined in greatest detail the “Beria interregnum” after Stalin’s death, it was Malenkov who headed the plot against Beria, not Khrushchev, despite all the versions of the latter’s memoirs. This version presents Malenkov as a visionary, far-sighted politician, who precisely understood the nature of the post-Stalin crisis.<sup>134</sup> Others call him an undecided, almost insignificant figure, whose strength—if he had any—came solely from his collaboration with Beria, and who did not grasp the importance of the party apparatus. (According to this version it was not Malenkov, but Molotov who headed the ouster.)<sup>135</sup> Another author rejects the logic of a personal struggle for power. He prefers to explain the duel between Malenkov and Khrushchev mainly in terms of differences, even clashes in their economic ideas, especially on agriculture. Malenkov wanted to remedy the empire’s constant food crisis by reducing the burdens on the peasants (collective farmers) and increasing the importance of production of their “household plots”. In other words, his solution was structural, whereas the ostensibly orthodox Khrushchev saw such moves as dangerous. He wanted to find a quick solution in vast campaigns using extensive measures (ploughing up virgin lands, ordering a switch to maize).<sup>136</sup>

Although Nagy’s similarity with Malenkov is conspicuous, he explained the 1953 change of course in terms of his own political logic. Nagy argued that Hungary’s development in the previous years had missed out a stage in the “transition to socialism”.<sup>137</sup> To put it more precisely,

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<sup>133</sup> Malenkov, Andrei (1992), *O moem ottse Georgy Malenkov*, Moscow: Sovremennik, p. 103.

<sup>134</sup> Zhukov (1996); Khrushchev, Nikita (1997), *Vospominaniya. Izbrannie fragmenti*, Moscow: Vagrius, pp. 267–84.

<sup>135</sup> Naumov, V.P. (1996), “Borba N.Sz. Khrushcheva za yedzsinolichnuyu vlasty”, *Novaya i Noveysaya Istoriya*, No. 2, pp. 10–31.

<sup>136</sup> Pikhoya, Rudolf G. (1995), “O vnutripoliticheskoy borbe v sovyetskom rukovodstve”, *Novaya i Noveysaya Istoriya*, No. 6, pp. 3–14.

<sup>137</sup> Nagy, during his period as prime minister, did not put forward his theory of “turning back” even in the internal reports circulating among the narrowest circle of the party leadership. Nonetheless, he made it clear that he was thinking of this. The two-volume collection of his post-1945 writings entitled *One Decade* (Nagy, 1954) appeared in October 1954. Here he republished articles and public speeches of 1945–7 on the significance of the land reform and the importance and development potential of small and medium-sized peasant farming. Furthermore, he included a study, banned in 1948, on the slow transition of Hungarian agriculture, and much of the defence he wrote during the 1949 party debate. So apart from one or two minor



the period known as the people's democratic transition had been unjustifiably shortened, in favor of a policy characteristic of a subsequent, "more developed" stage. Nagy was not originally thinking of a change or amendment of the model, simply of curbing a process of development that had advanced too far, and directing it back onto an earlier, slower but surer path. However, this theoretical construct contained a serious problem that emerged with every practical step. The historically short period of half a decade since the acceleration of the "slow transition" (in 1947–8) had effected a profound political, economic and social transformation. Gradual changes could not be superimposed on what Stalinism had left of the "people's democratic" stage, because hardly anything of it remained. Meanwhile, there was the massive edifice of the new institutional system, with its new ruling stratum, dominating over everything, which had the destruction of the earlier, latter-day coalition structure to thank for its advancement. Hungary's classical Stalinist system of political and economic institutions, assembled at lightning speed, was accompanied by a political mentality that had rapidly become conditioned to it. This, whether he liked it or not, was the structure that Imre Nagy had to change, the only possible point of departure.

Implementing the correction advised by Moscow in 1953 relieved the most acute tensions. One possible scenario would have been to stop at that point, so that the unaltered structures continued to operate, under a corrected system of guidance. That is not what happened, however. Marked tensions appeared in the economy in mid-1954, and a debate broke out about economic policy. By the end of the year, new tensions of a different origin, and affecting different groups in society, were expressing themselves in political conflicts. This occurrence can be traced back ultimately to the nature of the system itself: "In the coherence of the classical system lies its strength, but also its weakness. One might exaggerate slightly by saying it produces a fabric so

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diversions, these "pioneer" works led directly to the government programme of 1953 and other speeches and writings on the new course. The "selected writings" of communist leaders always have a line of thought running through them. They are not illustrations of the development of an author's life's work, but sets of examples subordinated to current political purposes. With the publication of his writings, Nagy explained in an almost provocative way that he considered these post-war ideas still valid in 1954, indeed as a government program.

closely woven that if one strand breaks, it all unravels sooner or later.”<sup>138</sup>

The paradigm of the desire to effect change is a contradiction. The agent of change, seeing the operational problems, makes alterations designed to defend the coherence of the system. In the event, these attack the integrity of the system and act in the opposite direction, causing new, perhaps graver operational problems, in the same place or elsewhere. The coherence is only apparent. It screens a fatal inflexibility: the system cannot be corrected or correct itself, because its closed nature leaves it unable to institutionalize any deviation from its teleological goals. The only possibilities that remain are complete rigidity, or an equation of continual correction (reform) plus deferment, postponement. In 1954, Imre Nagy and the political camp forming around him waged a great struggle against those who were even against correction. He tried to develop the corrective process further, into a real reform. That did not succeed, and he suffered a political defeat, losing all his positions in the spring of 1955. However, those subsequent events fall outside the scope of this paper.

However, the most important historical result of the whole 1953–5 period can be shown by analyzing the starting point discussed here. The self-confidence of the Hungarian Stalinist leadership evaporated once and for all. The partial self-criticism, the correction and the alternatives arising in specific fields bred uncertainty, introspection and a propensity for revision in certain leaders, and then ever more widely in the apparatus, among functionaries, and above all among the party intelligentsia. Though this leading stratum might give the impression of being almost unaffected after Nagy’s fall, doubt immediately appeared in the reaction to the slightest sign of crisis. The other side of the same social-psychological mechanism appears in the phenomenon of society moving into action in the autumn of 1956, in the political mass movements followed by revolution. Imre Nagy, a new kind of leader at the head of unchanged structures (or believed to be that—the distinction is immaterial from this point of view), along with a new kind of operation of the mechanisms, initially gave rise only to a sigh of relief. Later it became an intelligible point of reference, and its politically conscious representatives—the

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<sup>138</sup> Kornai (1992), p. 383.

believers in the new course who were within the system and became known as the party opposition after the spring of 1955—could not be swept aside precisely because their alternative did not exceed the bounds of the system. It also became a point of reference for those who would not accept as an ultimate goal anything other than a change of system. To them, Imre Nagy and “communism with a more human face” were the first step, from which the path might lead even to the final objective. It offered—instead of the fear, the total constriction and the illusory expectation of miracles that typified the Rákosi system—the prospect of political thinking (and even action) on behalf of intelligible, eligible goals. These public sentiments did not end with the reversal in the spring of 1955, any more than the psychological and political disintegration of the leadership. Generally, the most durable and important result of the Nagy correction, and of the subsequent, short-lived experiment with reform, was that it served as a point of departure and reference for later, more radical changes.

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