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André Prudhommeaux

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The Grapes of Wrath

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1956

For ten years Hungary, once upon a time Europe's bread-basket, went hungry, whilst its new leaders had, after the ravages of occupation and war, held out the promise of "tomorrows that sing".

Ten years of hard slog to lift the country out of the poverty into which it had fallen had simply thrust it deeper into the mire, because, as fast as the work targets could rise, parasitism and the communist mess bloated, sucking the marrow out of the country, under cover of industrialization, collectivization, and the defence of Peace and mutual assistance between the socialist nations.

The students, workers and very peasants had long trusted to the regime, some because they had hopes to taking up their place in the ranks of the rising elites, others to ward off any replay of the old seigneurial feudalism, invasion and civil war. But – due to a level of administrative efficiency that stood at zero and hid behind the most derisory excuses (spying, sabotage, Colorado beetle infestations dropped by parachute, etc.) – the new feudalism of Red policemen now masters of factory and field was forced, in order to deck itself out in revolutionary clothing, to don a veneer of idealism and incorruptibility.

The country's long-suffering patience ran out on the day when moral repugnance was added to its economic distress: after Khrushchev's speech, the mask had fallen away from stalinism's infamy and, far from any stepping-up of concessions that might have created the impression of substantial reform, the likes of Rakosi¹ and Gerö² simply took a more hard-line approach in their position as swaggering martinets in the service of a foreign power.

Empty bellies presented with empty shops, irked by the soviet-made or American-made cars of the "Chevro-letariat", harassed by work that was proving increasingly pointless. The Hungarian workers now knew that they had been lied to, that the Budapest trials had been the handiwork of ermine-robed counterfeiters and provocateurs and that the regime had disgraced itself.

All that was needed now to totally destroy the fiction of the Red tsars as the "protectors" of the people, was the sight of "comrade ministers" drafting in the help of soviet armoured divisions in putting down demonstrations and of Russian tanks, at their command, crushing thousands of corpses beneath their blood-stained tracks.

That final straw arrived and now, back under the yoke, the entire population in Hungary – minus the "unforgivable" few trapped in their lot as executioners and traitors – is now learning the new lesson of unanimous, non-violent struggle against the direct rule of soviet armies.

For a long time, it was uncertain where the Russian governments stood: but one could make out two interchangeable strategic and

¹ Matyas Rákosi – Hungarian Stalinist leader and instigator of purges and show trials in Hungary in the early 1950s. He stood down in 1953 and was replaced as government leader by Imre Nagy. When the Hungarian uprising began in 1956 he fled to the USSR. Ejected from the Communist Party in 1962.

² Erno Gerö – Stalinist Comintern operative active in Spain during the Civil War as 'comrade Pedro'. A feared and vicious stalinist hack, he and Rakosi secured the Communist Party's hold over post-WW2 Hungary by racking up 150,000 political prisoners and (it is believed) 2,000 executions. He described the Hungarian insurgents of 1956 as 'fascists' and 'terrorists'

political options. One comprised the building of a solid cordon of forces around insurgent Hungary, cutting her off from the other satellites and leaving the country to “stew in its own juices”, in accordance with the tactic of withdrawal practised by Thiers back in 1871. Whilst appeasement offerings had been made to the Czechs, Poles, Yugoslavs, Romanians and East Germans, by way of a reward for their political loyalty, a fresh plan of attack would be drawn up for Hungary against the day when deliberately fostered factional rivalries would have finished off the putrefaction of a devastated, divided and demoralized Hungary. The other approach amounted to proceeding immediately and forcibly against the insurgents and using force to restore the authority of the pro-Russian government, which could then be reshuffled according to the requirements of the repression and a softening (or hardening) line. When all is said and done those two tactics have been deployed one after the other or both together with unprecedented duplicity and brutality.

But the fate of Hungary, as of all the countries behind the Iron Curtain, does not hinge upon political and military measures alone. The social and economic roots of the past revolutions, present troubles and near or distant futures of those countries are traceable to the agrarian problem, which is simultaneously a problem of subsistence. Despite all of the efforts invested by bolshevism over nearly fifty years, first to capture industrial countries and then to build an industrial empire that has taken on the dimensions of an entire hemisphere, to this day Moscow has dominion only over mostly rural, peasant countries, to which she has brought the initial shock of lawful liquidation of land-owners as a class by distributing the land, and then has steered them willingly or by force down the byways of state control of agriculture, by economically, politically and socially penalizing the family farm and through the massive introduction of the bureaucratic and military approaches recommended by Marx (the notorious “army of agricultural production” mentioned in *The Communist Manifesto*). Now (despite the Ger-

man military authorities' experiences in the occupied countries in 1914–1918, designed to replicate the system of the Pharaohs and Incas), bureaucracy and militarism do not 'take' in farming: to this day, it is the family farm, complemented by voluntary cooperative organization that remains the normal and natural form of arable farming. To no avail, the communist parties may strive to foist a barracks discipline on the peasant masses by pitting them socially against one another and putting them under the pressures of a planned economy, or political discrimination and political terror. Until such time as they abandon the *kolkhoz*³ and *sovkhoz*⁴ system once and for all (plus those Agritowns so beloved of Nikita Khrushchev) – which is to say until such time as they cease being *communists* in respect of agrarian matters – the Marxists are going to run up against the huge contradiction whereby agriculture's technical requirements conflict with their social program and they will reap nothing but the grapes of peasant wrath.

Over and above any political imperative, it is that wrath that is still at work inside Hungary – and, alongside it, the vengeance taken by things on marxian Promethean ambition. One does not plan farm production, and above all, one does not bureaucratize it, unless one means to kill it off. In order to bolster the dictatorship of the towns, the soviets toil in vain to double their populations or boost it by ten or a hundred-fold, thereby boosting the number of intelligentsia and industrial workforce mouths that need feeding. In vain do they swamp the very countryside with policemen, paper-shufflers and desk-bound types charged with bringing the peasant sorts to heel. An enslaved, famished and terrorized peasantry cannot decently feed either the industrial proletariat that has been elevated to "ruling class", or even the "Chevro-letariat", which

³ Kolkhoz – Soviet jargon for collective farms that peasants were compelled to join, donating all land, livestock, seed and tools to it. They were run along vaguely collective, cooperative lines.

⁴ Sovkhoz – Soviet jargon for a state-owned and -run farming collective in which there were no smallholders, merely waged labourers.

is the profiteering segment of it. And sooner or later, those two classes will have no option but to join the peasantry itself in demanding that heed be taken of the natural order of things and that they stop trying to work the soil on the basis of Karl Marx's cobbled together recipes from a hundred years ago, when he was a complete ignoramus in matters relating to the land.

However the Hungarian crisis turns out, an economic "improvement" and political "easement" can only be brought about through the practice of a wholesome physiocracy. By strangling the Smallholders' Party, which out-pollled it by three million votes in the last *free* elections in Hungary (as against eight hundred thousand cast for the communists), what Rakosi has done is kill the goose that lays the golden eggs, just as Lenin, Trotsky and Stalin did when they liquidated the Social Revolutionary Party of the Russian "kulaks" which had won the last free elections to the Soviets and the Constituent Assembly by a huge majority. Will Beria⁵, murdered by the Party's top bureaucrats for having sought to liberalize farming, and Malenkov⁶, dropped from the first team for having outlined a shift in that direction see their successors adopting their de-collectivization policy? That is unlikely, but until such time as that is done, the formula "All Quiet on the Eastern Front" will sadly still apply.

⁵ Lavrenti Beria – Leading Stalinist secret police chief and official; one of a triumvirate that took over the USSR after Stalin's death in 1953. He was executed in 1953 following a secret trial.

⁶ Georgi Malenkov – Former head of Stalin's personal staff who joined the Politburo of the Soviet Union in 1946. One of the triumvirate that took over after Stalin's death. In 1955 he acknowledged that his agricultural policies had failed and stepped down as prime minister. He was later denounced as part of an "anti-party" organization, dropped from the Central Committee and ended his days as the manger of a hydro-electric station.