

# Hungarian revolution

[History](#), [Revolution](#)



## A Plan of the investigation

### 1. Subject of the investigation

How the political thoughts of Imre Nagy did change so fast leading up to the 1956 Hungarian Revolution?

### 2. Method of investigation

i. Study the history of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. I selected authors who had direct memories of the events and of Imre Nagy. ii. Study various sources on Imre Nagy's life and political beliefs before and during the Revolution in order to understand his transformation from a die-hard communist into a national leader and martyr of freedom. iii. Selection of two detailed books on the personal and political factors of his transformation. One is Karl Benzinger's *Imre Nagy, Martyr of the Nation*, and the other is *Twelve Days: The Story of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution* by Victor Sebestyén. iv. Analyze and compare the pre-1956 and the revolutionary leader Imre Nagy.

### B. Summary of evidence

Imre Nagy has been one of the most emblematic personalities in Hungarian history, even in overall retrospect. Accordingly, there are abundant historical studies and interpretations on his political and personal background. These sources uniformly agree that he represented a dramatic transformation of becoming from an ardent communist a revolutionary leader of the 1956 Revolution, and consequently a national hero and martyr of the cause of freedom. But there is no agreement among the many authors, former friends, political acquaintances and fellow revolutionaries regarding the

precise impact of historical and political events in his life and in the era of the 1950s on his political conviction.

Imre Nagy was born to an ordinary peasant family in 1896, in the peak year of poverty when millions of Hungarians emigrated in the hope of a better future. His early life amidst World War I, and the following political oppression and economic crisis predestined him to become a harsh critic of the still existing feudal system. By the age of 22, he became a follower of Communism. After conscripted in WWI, he was sent to the Soviet front, where he was taken prisoner and sent to a prisoner camp in Siberia, where he volunteered to the Red Army in 1918 and fought in Russian Civil War on the Bolshevik side. In 1921, he was sent back by the Soviets to Hungary to work underground and to recruit for the Communist Party. When as a consequence he spent two years in jail, he started to study agriculture to which he later owed his popularity as a Communist leader.

In 1930, he moved with his family to Moscow. Some sources suggested that he survived the political purges because of his KGB connections. Sebastyen concludes that as a disciplined Communist he put the Party's interests above everything else, but such compromising documents only surfaced after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and suspicion has been that these were falsified. His pro-Soviet liberation message on the clandestine Hungarian radio during the war was important for Moscow. He asserted that the Russian liberators would give land to the Hungarian peasants for the first time. In 1944 he returned to Hungary, and became the co-founder of the Stalinist one-party state. As Minister of Agriculture in the new government, he kept his earlier promises.

His political career included various positions, like Minister of the Interior (1947), Speaker of the Parliament (until 1949), Prime Minister (1953-55), and also held other key Party positions. In 1953, as result of disappointment in the Soviet Union by the policies of Hungarian Communist hardliners like Rakosi and others, Moscow appointed him as Prime Minister. But by the spring of 1955, he fell out of favor with the Soviets, and was sacked from all government and Party positions. He became Prime Minister again on popular demand on October 24, 1956, at the outset of the Revolution.

When the Soviets reentered Hungary on November 1, he announced the withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact, appealed through the UN to the great powers for recognizing Hungary's neutrality, and declared the establishment of a multiparty system. His statements as the unwilling leader of the revolution gradually became harshly anti-Soviet and clearly manifested freedom, liberty and democracy as final objectives. Even in these days Imre Nagy remained steadfastly committed to Marxism, which for him was a “science that cannot remain static”, and he also railed against the “rigid dogmatism” of the “Stalinist monopoly”.

#### C Evaluation of sources

In *Twelve Days*, writer Sebestyén offers a comprehensive picture of the revolution. He also provides the necessary precedents of 20th century Central and Eastern European developments, primarily those in Hungary. He vividly describes the brutal Russian crush of the revolution as well. He talks with the precision of an eyewitness although he left as a little child with his family to the West, so at best his account constitutes a secondary source. His presentation is also based on new material from archives, including those in <https://assignbuster.com/hungarian-revolution/>

Russia and in the US. There are also rich family tales of the actual events. These resources are masterly compiled together into a homogeneous political history with the skill of a journalist who worked and wrote for a variety of British newspapers.

For him, Imre Nagy was “ one of the principal characters in the 1956 story”, who is now “ revered as a martyr to the cause of freedom” . For him, even the already partly proved facts about Imre Nagy’s cooperation with the KGB cannot shake his conviction that he was an honest man, but a hopeless political leader . His presentation of the revolution and the political progression of Imre Nagy are typical of the apologetic sentiment in Hungary about 1956: Imre Nagy was a Communist, but the revolution he led was about introducing democracy and ending Communism in Hungary for good. Sebestyen represents this school: he emotionally writes about the revolution, and quotes Nagy’s words after his death sentence proclaiming that “ my life is needed to prove that not all Communists are enemies of the people” .

The author of *Imre Nagy: Martyr of the Nation*, Benzinger, frequently visited Hungary to research on the revolution and the role of Imre Nagy. Since his wife is a Hungarian, during these visits he was able to communicate with a broad variety of sources on the subject. He is an associate professor of history and of secondary education at Rhode Island College, these two disciplines determine the main thrust of his book. He provides a most relevant analysis of the development of political thoughts of Imre Nagy before and during the revolution. This is, however, not the main theme of his book that concentrates on the contemporary interpretation and evaluation of

Nagy's role in the 1956 Revolution by Hungarian political parties, and their contest to use his personality for their political mythmaking.

He deals in detail with the education of the revolution in Hungarian secondary schools, which is irrelevant for my theme. However, there are three chapters in his book that offer views related to my subject matter. It is sometimes disturbing for the English reader that he uses Hungarian phrases and words without providing their exact meaning in English, only describing the meaning of them. Given his broad Hungarian contacts, it is irritating that he misquotes such trivial dates as the founding of the Hungarian state, for example. As it is more of a text book than a history review, it is more valuable for research into political sociology and political theory in general, but it still added crucial points of view for my study.

#### D Analysis

Sebestyén and Benziger analyze the development of the political thoughts of Imre Nagy, and the changes in his perception about politics. Both authors start, and conclude, with the fact that Imre Nagy was a firm Communist until his death on the gallows, who believed that Communism can be reformed from within to accommodate human aspirations. According to Sebestyén, Nagy was trying to prove to Hungarians that he was making a new start and not only returning to his New Course of June 1953, which was a modest program of reforming Communism. Although he was an irretrievable Communist, he condemned Stalinism as its most brutal brand. Until the end of October, he was behind the events. According to Sebestyén, Nagy was critical of the student demonstration that started the Revolution, and refused to take part in it, let alone lead it.

He was against the students' Sixteen Points that included free elections and the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Hungary. In three key moments during the Revolution, Nagy failed to rise to the occasion: on October 23, he called the friendly demonstrators "comrades", and only after whistling and booing from the crowd he addressed them as "citizens", then a day later he called upon his compatriots to "stand behind the Party" although the events had already turned anti-Communist, and when the Soviet troops re-entered Hungary, he refused to resign as Prime Minister because he hoped that Moscow would understand that he wanted to introduce Communism with a human face.

Benziger's approach shows what motivated Imre Nagy's political progress to finally adopt political ideals that were alien to his Communist beliefs, and thus he became a man shaped by the events. Benziger concentrates on the contested interpretations and contradictions about him. Nagy's confrontation with the Hungarian Stalinists made him liked in Moscow after Stalin's death, but his faithfulness to Communism made him unpalatable for the democratic opposition. This political duality was later used to legitimize diverse views: he symbolized the quest for democracy, as well as the reforming of Communism.

At the beginning, Nagy was not interested in political pluralism and democracy. During the first days of the revolution, the political demands of the anti-Communists outpaced Nagy's conviction of reforming the one-party system. Gradually he transformed into a charismatic national symbol who accepted the calls for democracy and independence. He had to realize that reform from within was not possible. Nagy's diary indicates that first he

disliked the radical course of the revolution as it was too far apart from his concept of reforms . As Benziger concludes, Nagy only challenged the Hungarian Stalinists, not his loyalty to Moscow . In 1948 he wrote that ‘ we should cultivate the most cordial relationship...with the country of socialism, the Soviet Union’ . The less than two weeks of the Revolution dictated a pace of changes that Imre Nagy was unable to overcome the dichotomy of being both a reform-minded Communist and a hero of liberty and democracy.

## E Conclusions

Historical challenges require a leader to lead, and not to follow the events. The 1956 Hungarian Revolution started as the expression of dissatisfaction with Communism by those who had voted for it a few years earlier. At the end, it turned out to become the most significant uprising in Communist-dominated Central Europe. Its leader went through a profound political development for becoming capable to stay with the mainstream of the popular movement that turned into a freedom fight against the Soviet army.

Imre Nagy was first and foremost a Hungarian. He had to accept the occupation by the Soviet Union, a country in which he had faith. He was a disciplined Communist whose political ideals evaporated from one day to another. His radicalization was déjà vu in his life: during WWI, he became from a soldier in the anti-Soviet Hungarian army to be a fighter for Communism. Similarly in 1956, from a Communist, he became a hero of freedom and democracy. For this transformation, he had to pay with his life in 1958. He was executed for leading what was labeled as counter-revolution, but of which 35 years later history determined that it drove the first nail into the coffin of Communism .

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