Episode 10, I Did Nagy See That Coming continues where we left off last time with some more titbits on Hungary under Soviet occupation, and looks a bit more at the person of Matyas Rakosi as well. Rakosi was the Stalinist dictator of Hungary as soon as communism was installed as the moving force of the country in the late 1940s, and he set about establishing a Hungarian Stalinist regime, complete with all the trappings Stalin enjoyed. For every purge, every policy and ever character assassination that the man of steel engaged in, Rakosi felt compelled to demonstrate his loyalty by going still further. He would terrorise the people of Hungary into a burning, resentful, but also petrified silence, but his hold on power was only as strong as the secret police.

Imre Nagy, a passionate communist and eager reformer of all things Stalinism, was guaranteed to butt heads with a man like Rakosi, and in this episode we examine why this was the case. What were Nagy’s guiding principles, why was he such a committed communist, and what did he bring to the table that a man like Rakosi did not? Nagy was as complex as Rakosi was cruel, but this doesn’t mean we can’t give our best shot at analysing this fascinating individual who became, almost in spite of himself, a hero and then a martyr of the Hungarian people. This episode is a pivotal instalment as we examine the background to what was to come in Hungary, and how a quiescent vassal became the centre of anti-Soviet sentiment within only a few stormy months. All of this began, of course, in the eventful year of 1956.

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Hello and welcome history friends patrons all to 1956 episode 10. Last time we introduced Hungary, the scene for one of the most significant revolts of the CW, but before we get there we have a few things to bring to you guys first. I am really enjoying taking our time here and giving the story the detail it deserves, so in line with this trend, today we’re going to look a little bit at how Hungarian endured the new system they were now under, after we explained last time how this system, by hook and crook, was set up. Under the terrifying and terrified leadership of Matyas Rakosi, the People’s Hungary was set to emulate all other Soviet satellites, with some disastrous consequences for the lives, the freedoms and the incomes of the people that lived there. That being said, let’s get into it, as I take you to the glorious workers’ paradise of the People’s Democratic Republic of Hungary.

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For most Hungarians, the working day began the same way. The collective reading of the darkly ironic official state organ, *A Free People*, was followed by the Party official giving you the Party line of the day. Such activities took place half an hour before the working day began, and absences were noted. Most simply read and played along, as Hungary’s neighbours would do for the next two generations. All of this was conducted beneath a portrait of ‘our wise leader’ Matyas Rakosi, whose sickly false smiling face only moved halfway across his thick, squat head. It was by Party decree that Rakosi had acquired the adjective ‘wise’; his personality cult had plainly grown unchecked, and all Hungarians were expected to play along in their semi-worship of this vain, sadistic and frankly unwise little man.

What was so clearly unwise about Rakosi’s position was the very nature of the contract which he and so many other meagre officials had with Stalin. At any moment, at any time, Rakosi or his ilk could be carted away and never seen again, based on nothing more than something had said, not said, hinted at or when their sigh at the wrong moment had indicated some kind of latent anti-democratic bias deep within their character. Rakosi knew only too well that the contract with Stalin – which of course he guarded fiercely – could at any moment be terminated. After all, Rakosi had seen to it that potential rivals of his had been thrown under the bus, and all of this had been done with Stalin’s tacit approval. It must have been exhausting, to constantly have to check what one said or did at all times. To put up with the blatant contradictions which were daily on display, or to endure the immensely dispiriting demands of the regime, which always wanted more work for less pay.

Rakosi would visit Stalin nine times between 1948-53, but it is not known what was talked about during his visits, or even how much Stalin actually saw him. Rakosi liked to present himself as the only Hungarian Stalin would talk with, but in truth, Stalin couldn’t stand him. He had an inbuilt grudge against Rakosi for his Jewish heritage, which Rakosi couldn’t help, but he also disliked the sycophantic Hungarian because of the lack of backbone he continued to display, out of fear of course for what Stalin would do to him if he refrained from showing the most nauseating reverence at all times. Above all though, Stalin held grudges which dated back years. It was in 1947 that a Hungarian delegation, then consisting of the coalition Rakosi was soon to destroy, travelled to the White House to meet with President Truman.

While all the other Hungarian statesmen looked somewhat uncomfortable, perhaps some could then sense that wouldn’t survive long upon their return, Rakosi was a picture of amiability, and he talked at length, and was photographed sharing a joke with the US president. Rakosi’s explanation, and the one which makes the most sense, was that Rakosi was the man chosen to speak for the delegation, since among the other nine languages he spoke fluently, Rakosi had also mastered English. Rakosi’s multilingual skills couldn’t be denied, even by his rivals, yet when Stalin saw the picture, it was enough for him to exclaim that Rakosi must be some kind of western spy. The notion was ridiculous of course, but as Rakosi could have well known, Hungarians had been executed for far less ‘evidence’ since he had taken over.

One such figure was Laszlo Rajk, a former minister of the interior and zealous communist, who had risen up the ranks in communist Hungary after 1948 to become one of the country’s most important figures. Rajk was cruel to a fault, ruthless and uncompromising in his quest to establish the socialist ideal in his homeland, but he was also handsome, disarmingly charming and quick witted in speech and manner. Of course, these latter qualities caused Rakosi to become immensely jealous of him. Rajk’s career in communism had also been far more glamourous than Rakosi’s, as Rajk had fought in the Spanish Civil War, and returned to lead Hungary’s communist underground during the SWW. He had built a name for himself in this way, while Rakosi had faced few perils safely in his Soviet exile. Rajk and his wife were the equivalent of the communist glamour couple, and Rajk set to work with eagerness conducting the whims of the new Hungarian state. He oversaw the persecution of its Catholic hierarchy, and ensured that his secret police, the AVO, remained well informed at all times. A few weeks before his trial, Rajk was replaced as interior minister and given the post of foreign minister instead.

This was a strange omen, and was in fact the first indication that Rakosi, having acquired Stalin’s approval, was moving against him. On 11th May 1949, he was arrested at his Budapest flat, along with 13 ‘conspirators’. Rajk had no illusions about what awaited him – he had after all ensured that many men before him faced into same abyss which he now did. Gratuitous torture beckoned, until a bogus confession was wrested out of him, after which point he would present his guilt at a show trial. Rajk’s arrest, forced confession and execution by hanging was by no means a fleeting case – instead Rajk’s was the first step of the Great Terror implemented in the satellite states in Stalin’s final years.

The numbers of Hungarians affected by the terror remain staggering. Between 1950-53, in a country of less than 10 million, some 1.3 million were prosecuted, half of them jailed. At least 50k were arrested never to face trial; more than 2k were summarily executed, shot where they had stood. Many more rotted to death in police cells or one of the notorious concentration camps, which held more than 40k inmates in all. Some 13k citizens were forced to leave Budapest and work in dire conditions on the many collectivised farms, on the surface because this was a time ‘of imperialist incitement and sharpening of the class struggle’. In reality, the reason was to ensure that the large, luxurious houses would be available for the busy bureaucrats, who had become an elite class a cut above the average citizen. Yet Stalin’s terror consumed even these loyal children of the revolution; of the 850k communists in the party in 1950, almost exactly half were imprisoned, exiled or dead within three years. By the time of his death, much as he had done in other satellites, Stalin had cut a swathe through Hungary’s communists, destroying the assumptions upon which the Party had been based, and scaring the living daylights out of Matyas Rakosi, who always feared that he could be next.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The secret police in Hungary, the AVO, had been created to ensure that the Party retained an iron grip on the populace, but it wasn’t long before the AVO began to eat the very people who had established it. There were always excuses or reasons given for why certain figures had to be removed. In Stalin’s break with Tito, rightist deviation or Titoist spy replaced the old favourite of Trotskyite, but there was no real rhyme or reason to the whole process. If you had left Hungary during the inter-war years, you could have been a Western spy; if you fought for the communists during the Spanish civil war you were probably a Trotskyite; if you had stayed in Hungary during Horthy’s fascist reign, you were bound to be a Horthyite informer, as Horthy still lived in exile, and remained an immensely useful figure of blame. This passion for arresting anything that moved led to an explosion in the population of the jails, and one inmate’s account captures the insanity of the whole process. He remembered that in his jail there were:

High church dignitaries, former Horthy generals and Spanish civil war generals, on the communist side of course, the main war criminals, or the followers of Laszlo Rajk…a former president of the Republic, a galaxy of former ministers and under secretaries of state. On the first morning, when the convict orderlies came on their rounds, we discovered that our floor was served by a former cabinet minister and a former parachutist general. One of the gardeners was a Count, the plumber in our wing was an old guard communist who had served as under-secretary of state under Rajk. We met great names of the Hungarian, Romanian, Czech, French and Belgian communist movements. In another wing, a Colonel Kalcsics was the orderly. He had fought through the Spanish Civil War and then the Belgian resistance, and there is even a street named after him in one of the Belgian towns. In 1948 the Belgian communist party wanted him to stay, but Rakosi insisted. He pointed out that the great hero was of Hungarian origin and as such should help in rebuilding the Hungarian army. He returned early in 1949 and was sentenced to life imprisonment as Rajk’s accomplice.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Of course, it wasn’t just the notables that were arrested, the AVO also expended much resources arresting random citizens, often on the whims or guesses of the secret police. All the while, no mistakes could be admitted. We are drawn to the example of Gyula Fazekas, a resident of the Hungarian town of Pecs. Fazekas was minding his own business, doing his best to tow the official line, when he was arrested and rigorously beat and tortured by AVO agents for three full weeks. After such a terrible experience, during the course of one gruelling session, an AVO colonel entered the room and told Fazekas that unfortunately, the AVO had erred, and had been looking for a different Gyula Fazekas. Yet, since after three weeks of torture Fazekas was in bits, the AVO colonel reasoned that it would be impossible to set him free. To avoid having to apportion blame for the mess up, Fazekas was packed off to a labour camp for several years, his only crime having been to possess the same name as a person the AVO were actually after.

Another example also is worth mentioning. Janos Cseri was arrested in a bar in a passed out state and woke up the next morning feeling very tender indeed. He was told by the stern AVO agent that he had been among friends the previous night, and that his friends had sung the forbidden song ‘I am Miklos Horthy’s soldier’. Cseri’s plea that he had been too drunk to sing was actually acknowledged by the official report, which noted:

Janos Cseri was arrested in a pub together with his friends who were singing anti-democratic songs. Although it was proven that, owing to the high degree of intoxication, Cseri did not participate in the singing, it can be presumed that had he been sober he would have done so. On the basis of the above I intern Cseri for six months for state security reasons.

In actual fact, Ceseri would not see the light of day for two whole years.[[3]](#footnote-3) The totally arbitrary nature of the ‘justice’ meted out in the terror would have been darkly comic had it not been so terribly depressing and tragic for those caught up in it. It was impossible to discuss family members who had been caught up, since you never knew who was listening or who was an informer. One communist journalist recorded the difficulty even of sharing his innermost feelings with his wife:

If I had admitted my fear to her and possibly been arrested then she might have had doubts about me, because I was afraid. In a socialist system a person whose conscience is clear should have no reason for being afraid, so went the slogan at the time.[[4]](#footnote-4)

To many it was a question of survival above all. The novelist Paul Ignotus, arrested and tortured by the regime of course, later recalled that:

In general, those who had survived the purges unharmed were probably more sycophantic and barbarous than others who were murdered, imprisoned or at least pushed aside until Stalin’s death. But some of the executed were chiefly sorry for not being among the executioners. The selection of criminals was based quite openly on assumptions about deviation, rather than upon anything they had actually said or done.[[5]](#footnote-5)

There it was. It didn’t matter how guilt you were, because as soon as you were arrested, the AVO would torture a confession out of you. It was pointless to resist, unless you wanted to be tortured forever, so it was better to admit to whatever they wanted to hear in the hope that you would only be imprisoned rather than executed. Little wonder that a grim joke in Hungary put it at the time that ‘there are three classes in this country: those who have been in jail, those who are in jail, and those who will be in jail.’[[6]](#footnote-6)

As exhausting as it must have been to consistently put on a Party-approved face, it must have been equally frustrating to see and hear mostly through rumour what that same Party was doing to your country. In a primarily agricultural state as Hungary had always been, the Soviet Union model of enforcing industrialisation no matter the consequences was bound to cause problems. Collectivisation ruined the agricultural balance of the countryside, which had once been under the control of the landed class, who had since had their houses taken and been condemned as kulaks, just as had occurred in the Soviet example. In all things, Rakosi was determined, even desperate, to follow the Soviet example because he believed it was the best way to demonstrate his loyalty to Stalin. Stalin, indeed, would never have been humble enough to admit that his ‘nation of coal and steel’ model was not applicable everywhere one went.

It was largely because the system was failing that food shortages, longer work weeks and lower pay was gradually introduced from 1950, as Hungary tried its hand at some five year plans of its own. A piece rate scheme, or getting paid for the number of items you crafted rather than the hours you worked, had once been condemned when the communists had been in coalition. When it became state policy though, the idea was lauded as a ‘blessing for the workers’, since it granted all the opportunity to make more money. Of course, the scheme was a miserable failure. Each worker was set personal targets – a norm – which he or she had to make. If they went under their target, they were docked pay or privileges, yet if they made too much over their quota they returned the next day to see the number reach even higher levels. Under the circumstances where workers rushed to meet their norms, quantity increased while quality nosedived, so much so that Moscow cancelled several manufacturing deals with Hungarian production centres, everywhere blamed the inefficiency on the workers, and on imperialist influences, and the whole mad system was allowed to continue.

This Hungarian example, a microcosm in the grand scheme of the total Soviet bloc systems, provides just one explanation why this same bloc so lagged behind the West, yet there were countless other examples just like this Hungarian example, where ideology was allowed to ruin the economy on an unchecked scale. To some Hungarians brave enough to speak or think about it, it must have seemed that the Soviets were plundering and destroying Hungary for the sake of it – surely, they can’t have actually believed that these methods were benefiting anyone? Indeed, the plundering of resources, the chronic hunger from food shortages, and the always underwhelming production records tell the story of a master pushing a slave he cared not one iota about, rather than a great socialist cooperative wherein all were equal and all could take part.

At first, Hungarian citizens didn’t know quite what to make at the sight of members of the communist party, some of whom were high profile actors like Laszlo Rajk, getting arrested, admitting their crimes at a show trial, and facing the consequences. After a while though, the process became as familiar as any other; the only thing that was clear was that Rakosi always called the shots. No matter how big any figure was, no matter what position he held or what he had done for Rakosi in the past, Rakosi always liked to make it clear that he merely had to say the word, and their lives were forfeit. Indeed, in January 1953, Gabor Peter was arrested and put in shackles, after Rakosi bellowed at him the accusation that he was a traitor and a spy. Peter was the chief of the AVO, and had believed himself untouchable as he swaggered around Budapest, visiting his mistresses, and expecting, perhaps that Rakosi would never eliminate him after all he had learned. Yet Peter’s arrest and trial was another knee-jerk response on Rakosi’s part to Stalin’s escalating paranoia.

The Soviet leader’s latest idea was that all doctors were out to get him, especially Jewish doctors, or maybe just the Jews in general, Stalin never made it particularly clear. It was soon obvious though, for the ethnic Jew Rakosi, and for his Jewish peers like Peter and others, that another purge was afoot. Rakosi, as ever, acted to intercept Stalin’s paranoid meanderings by arresting any Jews in high profile positions that he knew of. Since he was hardly about to arrest himself, Rakosi arrested Gabor Peter on the first step towards a systematic elimination of as many Jews in positions of power that he could find. Then, on 5th March, Stalin died.

It was on 13th June 1953 that Rakosi and his few remaining peers arrived in the Kremlin for a top secret discussion. The room which the Hungarians entered into contained a table, and sat at it were the SU’s first genuine experience of collective leadership in its history. Khrushchev, Molotov, Malenkov, Beria and Mikoyan were the main players, and now they had called the Hungarians to Moscow without explaining why. Rakosi soon found out in a typically Soviet fashion – he was here for a dressing down, and in front of his colleagues no less. Lavreti Beria began the meeting’s agenda by stating:

Listen, Comrade Rakosi, we know that Hungary has had Habsburgs emperors, Tartar Khans Polish princes, Turkish sultans and Austrian emperors. But as far as we know she has never yet had a Jewish King, and that is what you are trying to become. You can be sure we will never allow it.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Beria ridiculed Rakosi for the actions of AVO, which the Soviet Union’s head of the fledgling KGB noted had gotten out of control. Whether it struck Rakosi as absurd that Moscow’s most infamous bureaucrat could accuse him of having an overactive secret police, Rakosi did not dare say. Malenkov’s criticism of Rakosi wasn’t much easier to handle. The heavily sweating Rakosi had to hear about Malenkov’s unfavourable observations about the state Hungary had deteriorated to under his leadership. In front of him Malenkov had a thick file, compiled by the Soviet ambassador to Hungary, who, unsurprisingly, was not hugely fond of Rakosi. The file said everything we’ve examined already in great detail – Hungary’s agriculture was dire, its economy was in the toilet, its jails were overflowing, its secret police was out of control, and Rakosi’s own cult of personality was lampooned as well. ‘You have finally to understand that you cannot eternally govern with the support of Soviet bayonets’, Malenkov concluded.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The solution, dictated to this supposedly sovereign Hungarian government and its crumpled leader, was a collective leadership situation similar to that which supposedly endured in the Soviet Union, though not for long as we know. Rakosi had monopolised power for too long, and because his leadership style dominated so many posts in government, no new blood had been able to give fresh ideas or rejuvenate the country. From now on, the Soviet circle determined, Rakosi would relinquish the post of PM to his detested rival – the ‘land divider’ of yore, Imre Nagy. Through this formula, it was explained, the natural collective leadership state of affairs would bring Hungary back from the brink, and bring some credibility back to Rakosi’s regime. They were not, contrary to his darkest fears, preparing to remove Rakosi, but it was implied that this state of affairs could not continue. If Rakosi wasn’t careful, and if he didn’t try to embrace this new status quo, then not only would he fall out of favour with Moscow, but the Hungarian people ‘will chase you away with pitchforks.’ Rakosi could have made the wry point that in Hungary one was lucky to possess a pitchfork after all the agricultural destruction he had presided over, but he refrained from making any such point, and sat in a stunned silence. Stalin’s death evidently meant the death of Rakosi’s iron grip on Hungary.

Who was Imre Nagy? This portly, almost remarkably unremarkable man, who one could easily have passed over for a school headmaster, hosted a Tom Sellick moustache which dominated his otherwise ordinary face. It was the most notable thing about him, and one is struck by unlikely a figure Imre Nagy for any of the accolades later heaped upon him. He was born to Calvinist peasants in 1896, on a village near the Serbian border, and left school at the age of 12, having shown no particular aptitude for any specific subject. He moved to Hungary’s industrial slum town to gain an apprenticeship, and like so many of his era, it was the eruption of the FWW which really ignited his life. Taken prisoner on the Eastern Front, he was present in Russia during the revolution and became a communist. Released after Russia’s peace, Nagy decided to fight for the Soviets in the Civil War, and was by all accounts a brave soldier, on one occasion escaping from a POW to make his way back to the front. Courage, indeed, was perhaps Nagy’s outstanding quality, and it made an appearance even under the most terrifying microscopes.

During the 1930 Congress in Moscow, after spending years in and out of his homeland’s jails, Nagy represented the Hungarian Communist Party, and made waves by arguing against the policy of collectivisation – why not let the peasants keep the land after taking it from landlords, Nagy said, since this would endear the peasants to the communists and guarantee a solid support base. This heresy shocked those in attendance, who were already becoming aware of Stalin’s propensity to demand unswerving obedience. For the next 15 years, Nagy lived an unremarkable life in a Moscow flat with his wife and young daughter, who could barely speak Hungarian by the time the family returned in 1945. Notably for the time, Nagy’s wife never shared his passion for communism, and quite unlike the norms of the era, he never sought to forcibly make her see otherwise. It was a principle he seemed to retain throughout his life – that communism would speak for itself.

Of course, a zeal for communism and its positive impact did not prevent him from aping the behaviour of his fellow Hungarian Muscovites upon the return in 1945. Nagy participated in the regime as willingly as any other, with a critical distinguishing feature – as a child of hardscrabble peasants, he understood the importance of holding out hope for the people of Hungary that things would get better. This, indeed, had been his message when during the SWW he had participated in the dissemination of communist propaganda back to Hungary. The Soviets, Nagy said, would deliver land to the peasants. So popular did his tone and message become, that Nagy seemed the obvious choice for minister of agriculture in the coalition government. As we have seen, he gained a reputation as the land divider, and was open about his desire to see land be given to those that had so little of it. So open in fact, that Nagy was replaced as agriculture minister and pushed onto the interior portfolio. He barely lasted a year there before being dropped altogether from the government.

Several times his peers attempted to bring him back, but even when Rakosi communists held absolute power after 1948, Nagy was never able to hide his opinions. He openly warned agricultural bosses that the collectivisation schemes would lead to disaster, which must have greeted with an even more intense silence than when he had said so nearly two decades before. It is not clear whether Nagy realised that his life would be in imminent danger unless he zealously towed the Party line, but in many respects, Nagy was unlike his stoic, unsmiling peers in the Party. He told jokes, smiled and talked with people not while standing on an authoritative pedestal, and he even attended his daughter’s wedding in a Calvinist Church service, something which Rakosi and his ilk held against him even after Nagy had acquired permission to do so.

As he had been forced to do in 1930, Nagy issued a public apology, confessing his ‘rightist deviation.’ If alarm bells were ringing for Nagy then they should have been – since rightist deviation was one of Stalin’s favourite flavours of bullshit to use against his former ideological allies. Somehow, Nagy was one of the lucky ones who survived, but his luck was not total. While Nagy tried to live a quiet life as an academic in Budapest University, he was called back in 1950 to implement the very policy he seemed to disagree with – crop collection. The man who believed in land for the peasants would now take that land in the name of the Party. Understanding the hand he had been dealt, Nagy solemnly did his duty, and this was noticed by the Party and in Moscow, as he was granted permission to give the eulogy in Hungary’s Parliament following news of Stalin’s death. ‘My heart is heavy as I mount the speaker’s platform to face our deeply mourning people’, Nagy began, adding:

To express their deep love for our greatest friend and liberator and teacher, the Hungarian people are all rallying around the Party, the government and our beloved Comrade Rakosi and they are devoting all their energies towards carrying Stalin’s great cause to triumph in our country.[[9]](#footnote-9)

It was three months later that Nagy was summoned to Moscow as part of the Hungarian delegation, instructed shortly thereafter to denounce the damage Stalin had done to his country, and to abandon at all costs the logical conclusion to Stalin’s great cause. Perhaps, at last, Nagy could now follow through on his promises to deliver what the peasants deserved. Yet the road continued to be bumpy even without the man of steel breathing down their necks. Rakosi for one, now held a deep seated hatred of his new PM in Imre Nagy, and he seemed to blame him more than any other individual for what the Soviets had done to him. Worse was of course to come for Rakosi in 1956, when the very system and the personality cult as a concept would be publicly denounced, and people would at last be free – to a degree at least – to express how they actually felt about their wise leader.

The fallout from the secret speech would cause Rakosi to abandon his post and move back to Moscow in July 1956, but let’s not get too far ahead of ourselves just yet. In the next episode, we will detail how this incredible year looked in Hungary, and what the immediate reaction to the secret speech was. I hope you’ll join me for that my lovely history friends and patrons but until then, my name is Zack and this has been 1956 episode 10. Thanks for listening and I’ll be seeing you all soon.

1. Figures provided by Victory Sebestyen, *Twelve Days*, pp. 41-42. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cited in *Ibid*, p. 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See *Ibid*, p. 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Cited in *Ibid*, p. 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Cited in *Ibid*, p. 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Cited in *Ibid*, p. 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Cited in *Ibid*, p. 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Cited in *Ibid*, p. 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Cited in *Ibid*, p. 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)