

Minutes of the Meeting of the HSWP CC Political Committee

31 January 1989

[On 23 June 1988, the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party Central Committee established a committee to analyze Hungary's political, economic and social development during the preceding thirty years. The panel, headed by Imre Pozsgay, a politburo member and minister of state, included party officials and social scientists. After several months of examining pertinent archival documents, the Historical Subcommittee (one of four working groups) completed and discussed its final report at its meeting on 27 January 1989. Most sensationally, the report described what occurred in 1956 in Hungary as not a "counterrevolution" (as Moscow and the regime it installed in Budapest headed by Janos Kadar had long insisted) but a people's uprising. This very point was announced by Imre Pozsgay in an interview on both the morning news program and the next day, on the most popular political journal of Hungarian Radio, "168 hours," without any prior consultation with the political leadership. The issue triggered a serious crisis in the Party and eventually served as a very important catalyst in the transition process. The following excerpt reflects the first reaction of the Politburo members.]

(EXCERPT)

Imre Pozsgay: With regard to the specific issue, the subcommittee, headed by Ivan T. Berend, had a debate Friday morning, on the basis of a 102-page report.

I had no chance to read the document before the debate because it has just been given to me. Nevertheless, let me point out only one aspect of the debate, namely that six members of the Central Committee were present, and the leaders of two Party institutions. There was no argument about the incriminating assessment; on the contrary, the conclusion was drawn that a minimal public consensus—I merely interpret this, as I have no right to borrow others' words—so, a minimal public consensus does not harm the identity of the Party, nor does it shatter the personal identity of those who tied their lives, career and behavior specifically to this struggle. Nonetheless, it can lead to social reconciliation and national consensus on certain bitter and still all too distressing issues, such as the whole situation since 1948-49, and especially its peak—or nadir, as others believe—the crisis and tragedy of 1956. The committee unanimously agreed on this issue. And finally we also agreed that this document, even before it is discussed by the Central Committee, has to be publicized, so that scholarly opinion, supported by wide masses of the Party, can be used to create a political direction. These were the fundamentals and basic motives of the committee. In a way it is an answer to the numerous questions, in fact asked from many sides, as to why the Central Committee did not discuss the issue first. According to the earlier procedure, this would indeed have been the way of handling such questions. However, I am convinced that this procedure is the very reason why the Party has been hoisted on its own petard, when it came to discussing similar issues.

As regards further connections and problems that the issue raises: Certainly, or rather undoubtedly, the ensuing political effect—even if it has the minimal consensus I have just referred to—is expected to become a bone of contention within the Party,

something that divides people and induces political polemics, although it will not hurt even those who have won the Honor for the Socialist Fatherland for their sacrifices. The committee has been aware of this fact from the very beginning, knowing that we cannot get around this debate, that it has to happen, so in a way the cup of sorrows must be drunk. (...)

Mihaly Jasso: The vast majority is dumbfounded, and not because they have heard the results of the scholarly research from the Historical Subcommittee, but because they feel that a pillar of the institutionalized political system is about to be uprooted. Party members feel that our political system is somehow based on 1956. And now they have the impression that this foundation is being pulled out from under them. They think that this slice of the past—1956—has to be assessed with subtle differentiation. But now this assessment shows no sign of differentiation either. Figuratively speaking, they used to make a fine cabinet with an axe, and now they are trying to do the same. [sic] I don't intend to be too poetic but I'm coming from the office where I got phone calls and letters today, asking what we are going to call the monument on Koztarsasag Square? Who sacrificed their lives there? Defenders of the people's power? Resistance fighters of the people's uprising, or their opponents? It is all confused. What shall we call the Mezo Imre Street? And so on. Because perhaps it was a people's uprising that started the whole thing but it led to something else. Given that, we need at least a subtle, differentiated assessment of the whole period. The present one is not differentiated at all. This is another extreme assessment that sets people far apart. If we start a debate on the issue, which is now, of course, unavoidable, I think it will only result in separating some of the party membership. It is a crude simplification but if we segregate party members into two groups on the basis of this, there would be "pro-uprising" and "procounter-revolution" members. Obviously I refer to the underlying political content. Perhaps we cannot avoid the debate, but I am not sure that it has to be induced so radically at once. (...)

Rezso Nyers: The problem is greater, and we have to widen its scope. Is 1956 really the foundation of the Hungarian communist movement? If 1956 is our foundation, I will not expect the movement to hold out very long, because it is a weak foundation indeed. Our decisions and historical assessment of 1956 were driven by the spirit of the time and not without controversies. While things were going smoothly, people tolerated all this, but when times are hard, the same people seem discontent with what they tolerated before. Therefore we should not consider 1956 as a foundation. 1956 was a tragic event, a moment that manifested the prevailing crisis, and today we have to conclude that in fact 1956 signified a more serious crisis than we thought at the time, or even in 1957. We belittled the problem, but now we all agree—and I think there is a consensus about it in the Party—that it was the materialization of a historical mistake. (...)

Consequently, I have to point out that it would be a serious mistake—especially for the future of the Party—to tie our policy to the 1956 bandwagon.

We have to conclude, having read the document—I have read the document and the material of the Committee debate as well—that Pozsgay's statement and the exposé of the Committee show a unanimous approach. They are in accord. Which does not justify how the statement was publicized. I am still of the opinion that it was disadvantageous, hasty and inaccurate. I hold to my opinion, even though there is no fundamental controversy between the standpoint of the Committee and that of Pozsgay.

As to whether it was a “people’s uprising” or “counter-revolution,” my opinion is that a definition without controversy is impossible on this issue. Personally, I think that it was a people’s uprising; our declaration in December 1956 acknowledged it in the first paragraph, labeling it as the rightful discontent of the people. I do maintain, though, that hostile enemies gradually joined in, and they could have turned the wheel of history backwards, so the danger of counter-revolution was imminent. As to our opinion on 1956, I argue against the far-fetched criticism of Imre Nagy and his circle, and the significance of revisionism. ... I declare with communist honesty, it was a mistake. It is not true that the revisionist group around Imre Nagy had such a vital role in the events ... At that time, I myself accepted this interpretation. However, we become smarter, and now we see what went on. We now realize that the mistakes were more serious. We realize that it was wrong to think that between 1953 and 1956 Rakosi was a dime and Imre Nagy was a dozen, so to speak. In that debate, well, Imre Nagy was right. It is a matter of honesty, if someone thinks it over and believes that it is so, one should speak out forthrightly. And I do speak out. Imre Nagy was not a counter-revolutionary, he was not. If a Party ever, with their own... [unintelligible— Ed.] One just has to read his speeches. Where the hell do we find counter-revolutionary ideas with Imre Nagy? Nowhere, absolutely nowhere! And these are matters of honor. Rather, he was a sectarian. If he was still among us now unchanged, he would be more of a Stalinist. His role in the 1956 events remains debatable, it cannot be clarified. The Soviets were mucking around, which we swept under the carpet. Even today we cannot see the truth. I already know, however, that the Soviets had a lion’s share in the decision. Janos Kadar and the Politburo of the time took full responsibility, for which I respect them. However, they are far from being the only ones to blame. Their responsibility is without question, because it cannot be accepted either that a decision was made in Moscow, or that it was executed here. Unfortunately, though, I have to emphasize again that we won’t be able to come to terms with the question of 1956. Legally Imre Nagy was culpable, because he breached the law. It is not too moral, at a time when everybody is breaching the law—I was breaching it, and so was Janos Kadar—the lawbreakers themselves accuse and convict the weaker one on the basis of the sectarian law. These are not righteous things. All the same, those who did not live in that situation are unable to imagine how it was—and this is the dramatic aspect. I think, if we leave it as the focus of political debates, it would result in the serious weakening and a crisis of values of the communist movement. Consequently, we have to put history right; it can be corrected. Roughly according to the opinion of the committee, it can be corrected, but let me emphasize that the word “counter-revolution” should not be replaced with a single term, and it has to be decided who makes the correction. I think it is now time for us to try and come to some kind of political consensus. We cannot let the undulations of political life shatter the tenuously forming unity and co-operation of the Party and its leadership, so that other players take over while we eventually fall apart. I also mean that Pozsgay should not become the victim of this affair either. Yet Pozsgay should show more discipline and more mutual responsibility as well.

All in all, we should not let ourselves confront each other to an extreme. What do I think the possible action to take is? I believe that the Central Committee should be summoned and presented the material of the committee. The Pozsgay affair should not be presented on its own; it would be an impossible trial that wouldn’t lead to anything. I think that the documents of the subcommittee have to be submitted for debate, and only

then could it be discussed whether what he did was wise or not, and what action has to be taken in order to settle the debate. At the same time, principle issues of daily politics should be presented to the Central Committee, such as what should be done now in the question of the single-party system and the multi-party system. Things have passed over our heads. I cannot see another option other than that we accept the multiparty system. But we need to debate all this. And if we decide against the multi-party system, then that will be our decision, and everybody decides according to his conscience whether he takes the political responsibility for his decision. I do admit sincerely, I would take responsibility for both, even if I do not agree with the decision. It can be done intelligently. Retreat, however, is the worst thing one can do, it can only lead to our defeat. We have to do it sooner or later, anyway. (...)

All in all, I say that we take seriously the compilation of the committee, and consider their report worthy of being presented to the Central Committee. We suggest to the Central Committee that we publicize the documents of the committee. We'll see if the Central Committee will accept the suggestion. (...)

In fact, the most serious and sensitive issue of our policy is quite palpable here, namely how we relate to the Kadar era, to the Kadar regime. In my opinion, it would be a mistake for reformers to entirely do away with the Kadar regime. On the other hand, it would be a mistake to canonize the policy of the Kadar regime and battle to the last man standing in defense of what we have created since 1956. Some in the Party have a leaning towards the latter view, while others are ready to prove and expose the mistakes. Neither of these should be embraced. We have to try to solve the problem rationally. If relevant circles, or the dominant circle of the Central Committee put the issue on the agenda, a consensus is possible. We should start working on activity programs, preparing for the multiparty system. We need these projects for creating a stabilization program that addresses today's conditions, as well as more specific government programs. (...)

[Source: Magyar Országos Levéltár (MOL) [Hungarian National Archives, Budapest], M-KS- 288-5/1050 o.e. Translated by Csaba Farkas.]