

Role of China in Strangling the Hungarian Revolution From 1956

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I. Introduction

The Hungarian Revolution of 1956 was one of the most important moments in the history of world's communism. For the first time in a state with popular democracy, a satellite-country of Moscow, the communism regime was threatened. From the point of view of inter-socialist relations, the brutal military intervention of the Red Army was in fact "the first war between two socialist states."¹ Moreover, the violent repression of the Hungarian revolution clearly pointed out the limits and concessions the Soviets were willing to accept in the relationship with the states of the socialist block.

Moscow's decision to handle the crisis *manu militari* based on important strategic, political and ideological reasons was the result of a difficult and sinuous process, the Soviets initially leaning toward a Polish-like solution. The rapid development of the situation in Hungary that heads to the "finlandization" as well as the acknowledgement the West is not to intervene, absorbed by the simultaneous crisis of the Suez,

II. First Soviet intervention in Hungary

Subsequent to Stalin's death in 1953, the latent conflict between the Soviet and Chinese leaders started to develop. In a new conjecture, Mao Zedong claimed for himself a much more important position within the international communist movement, instigating to the equality with Moscow. Throughout 1956, various adversities arose as regards the destalinisation announced by the 20th Congress of CPSU.⁷ For a better stance arguing, the Chinese communists tried to draw in their game the states on the European orbit of the Soviet Union, stressing upon it should give up "great-power chauvinism" in the relationship with fraternal parties.

Mao enforced such an attitude during the events in Poland, in the autumn of 1956, whom he perceived as anti-soviet, and not threatening

leaned towards this solution. The Soviets were supported by the leaders of communist countries, following Khrushchev's consultations.

China ranks an important position among the factors influencing Moscow's stance toward the Hungarian crisis. Hence, the role of Beijing in the decision-making process of the Soviet leaders is still hard to establish, mainly because that most of Chinese documents are hardly accessible.

Most of the specialty studies diminish China's stance and its impact upon the events deployment. These facts are obvious and stressed out in exceptional monographs dedicated to the Hungarian revolution in 1956. Thus, Johanna Granville² scarcely mentions China, while A.S. Stykalin mentions it in half a page.³ This does not exclude the outstanding contributions in the field, such as Chen Jian's work.⁴ The value of his work relies on Chinese sources completing the materials in Soviet and European archives. Some of the most recent and significant articles are those of Shen Zihua⁵ and Péter Vámos.⁶

the solidity of the communist camp. China consequently insisted upon the fact an eventual use of the force by Kremlin would seriously violate the principles of "proletarian internationalism" and set against Moscow's intervention in Warsaw's internal affairs.⁸

Mao sent to the Soviet Union, at the suggestion of Kremlin, a delegation led by Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping that aimed to mediate the situation between Polish and Soviets. Vladislav M. Zubok said the event was significant, China undertaking for the first time the role of mediator between Moscow and its European satellite countries.⁹

Mao's representatives arrived at Moscow on October 23, 1956, namely on the day of bursting the Hungarian revolution. Khrushchev himself

welcomed them at the airport. The bilateral discussions started during the same evening, right after the setting up of the Chinese representatives in the guests' room. The dialogue was suddenly interrupted by the telephone of Marshal Zhukov announcing the burst of the revolt in Hungary. Khrushchev ceased the meeting with the representatives from Beijing, whom he briefly informed about the crisis in Budapest, to take the advice of the other members of the Soviet leaders.¹⁰

CPSU Presidium met by emergency to analyze the situation. Most of the participants agreed with Khrushchev's suggestion on the military intervention, which was very necessary. Kaganovich explained "the government is being overthrown. There's no comparison with Poland."¹¹

The decision of the first Soviet military intervention in Hungary was made without consulting the Chinese delegation.

The next day, Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping took part in the session of the Soviet Presidium, being informed about the operation of the Red Army in Hungary. Khrushchev said the Hungarian crisis is different from the Polish one,

considering a counter-revolution was developing in Budapest. Without any information about the events in Hungary, Liu Shaoqi told the lesson he learned back home when referring to Poland, stressing that Moscow should mitigate the issues with Warsaw in a "comrade-like" way. He could not overlook the events in Hungary, which made him say the tension in the European-satellite countries are fueled by USSR's "chauvinism of great power".¹²

Another meeting between the Chinese delegation and the Soviet leaders was held on October 26, the Polish issue being on the top of the agenda.

The reduced attention to the Hungarian file has two explanations: first of all the Soviets said the order is about to be reestablished in Budapest and induced this perception to the Chinese. Secondly, the representatives from Beijing were neither updated upon the evolutions in Hungary, nor authorized by Mao to discuss upon such a topic. The Chinese leader had no information in the field as the Chinese embassy in Budapest had practically interrupted all communications with China, after the startup of the conflict in Budapest.¹³

III. Influence of China upon the Soviet decision on the revolt strangling

On October 29, Khrushchev, Molotov and Bulganin paid a visit to Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping at the guests' house. Between October 24 and 29, things turned more complicated in Hungary. The dialogue was much more consistent this time, the Chinese focusing the discussions towards the overall issue of the Moscow's relationships with the countries in Eastern Europe.

While Khrushchev communicated the Chinese emissaries Hungary's request on withdrawing the Soviet troops, fearing that a similar request from other satellite countries would originate the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, Mao himself phoned Liu Shaoqi.¹⁴ Based on his instructions, Liu Shaoqi resumed the debates with the Soviets and expressed "a fundamental suggestion" from the Chinese leader.¹⁵ According to Liu Shaoqi, the relationship between Moscow and the states with popular democracy in Eastern Europe should have been governed by the principles from "Pancha Shila". Thus, Kremlin should not intervene in the internal affairs of the satellites and should comply with the

independence goal of Hungary and Poland as well as of the other communist countries. Liu Shaoqi raised the stake and pointed out that as regards the Warsaw Treaty, Kremlin should counsel the satellite-countries as regards the statute of the Soviet troops.¹⁶

In his memoirs, Khrushchev accounts for the confused and indecisive environment of the consultations, focusing upon the option of the military intervention in reestablishing order in Hungary. "I don't know how many times we changed our minds back and forth. Every time we thought we'd made up our minds about what to do, Liu Shaoqi would consult with Mao Zedong. It was no problem for Liu to get in touch with him on the telephone because Mao is like an owl; he works all night long. Mao always approved whatever Liu recommended. We finally finished this all-night session with a decision not to apply military force in Hungary. Once we had agreed on that, I went home. Liu and his delegation stayed on at the dacha".¹⁷

On October 30, USSR's official newspapers "Pravda", said "Budapest turned quiet again."

But in fact things aggravated in Hungary. Under the pressure of revolutionaries, Premier Imre Nagy announced on radio that a pluriparty government was establishing: "In the interest of the further democratization of the country's life, the Cabinet abolishes the one-party system and places the country's Government on the basis of democratic cooperation between the coalition parties, reborn in 1945".¹⁸

Moscow felt the major shock was coming from China. The impact of the October 29 meeting was devastating for the Soviets. The following day, during the session of the Soviet Presidium, Khrushchev said, talking about the discussions with the Beijing's representatives, "we should adopt a declaration today on the withdrawal of troops from the countries of people's democracy (and consider these matters at a session of the Warsaw Pact), taking account of the views of the countries in which our troops are based."¹⁹

The participants unanimously agreed with his proposal. Molotov himself agreed with this stand, adding Hungarians must be urged to start the negotiations on withdrawing the Soviet troops. On his turn, Voroshilov said Moscow is making self-criticism, "but on good grounds".²⁰

The minute of the session on October 30 leaves the impression of general panic among the Soviet leadership, doubled by a defensive, resigned position. This was probably the most difficult moment of the entire crisis and one of the most important in the history of world communism. The Soviet leaders were willing to "search for other modes of relations with the countries of people's democracy" (Furtseva), to acknowledge "it's impossible to lead against the will of the people" (Saburov) or that "Anti-Soviet sentiments are widespread" (Shepilov) and that "we should withdraw troops from Budapest, and if necessary withdraw from Hungary as a whole", as well as the Soviet counselors (Marshal Zhukov). Kaganovich showed a different stance, being reticent towards the "principles of Pancha Shila" and claiming no self-criticism is required.²¹

For the first time since the burst of the Hungarian revolution, Moscow acknowledged the stake was no longer to solve the crisis and to maintain Hungary in the Soviet orbit, but to keep the stability of the entire communist block. The events in Poland, the Hungarian riot, the uncertain stance of Tito's Yugoslavia and the Chinese shock all led to this effect. The session

mainly resulted in enacting the declaration on equal relations between the socialist states asked by Mao's representatives.

In parallel with the drama from the CPSU Presidium, the representatives of the Communist Party of China met Pavel F. Yudin, the ambassador of Moscow to China, who discussed about the statute of the Soviet counselors in the socialist states. Liu Shaoqi believed they should be withdrawn for not knowing the features of the respective countries and because their presence could have negative meanings. The situation between Poland and Hungary was finally analyzed, the Chinese delegate saying this should be "a serious lesson for the entire communist movement." He said nothing about a way to settle the conflict.²²

According to the minute of the Soviet Presidium's session on October 30, Yudin joined the other Soviet leaders whom he presented the content of the discussions with Liu Shaoqi. He said the Chinese asked him who is Nagy, if Nagy could be trustworthy and whether Hungary abandons the socialist camp. This proves that China had little knowledge on Hungary.²³

During the same session, after Moscow passed the declaration proclaiming the adherence to the principle of full equality in the relations between the states that belong to the socialist family, other discussions followed on the Hungarian issue, joined by the Chinese emissaries. Meanwhile, they had received several information on the events, based on which they acknowledged the Hungarian phenomenon was not triggered by Soviet chauvinism, and unless ceased, it might generate "reactionary restoration."²⁴ Their analysis was alike Mao's who had given them new instructions. Liu Shaoqi subsequently expressed the point of view of the Presidium with the Communist Party of China, according to which "troops must remain in Hungary and in Budapest."²⁵

On October 31, the Soviet Presidium witnessed a dramatic change. The new reports from Mikoian and Suslov warned upon the rapid deterioration of the situation in Hungary. The information overlapped with those regarding the operations started by the French and British in Egypt. Moreover, the Hungarian revolution menaced with contaminating other satellite countries. Thus, only the public opinion in Poland and Yugoslavia as well as the communist media in these countries started to support the

Hungarian cause. The Soviets had found out that in Romania, the students in Bucharest and Timisoara had organized solidarity manifests towards the Hungarian revolution, similar events taking place in the Czechoslovakia.²⁶ In evaluating the situation, the Soviets took into account the vision change of the Chinese.

The session of the Soviet Presidium consequently took the opposite turn. Thus, Khrushchev proposed the situation in Hungary should be solved by using military force, giving as example the events in Egypt. Everybody agreed and Marshal Zhukov was charged to draw up "a plan of measures on Hungary, which was due to inform CPSU Presidium."²⁷

During the session, marshal Konev reassured the Soviet leaders that in three-day period, "the counter-revolution forces will be crushed."²⁸ Moreover, Khrushchev and Malenkov were charged to "negotiate with comrade Tito."²⁹ Immediately after the session, Khrushchev went directly to the airport to inform the Chinese delegation coming home about Moscow's decision.³⁰

Khrushchev said the Chinese unconditionally supported the Soviet plan, and Liu Shaoqi was confident the sending of the Red Army's troops is correct and Mao will approve it.

The question is how much did the Chinese strategy-change influence the Soviet military intervention. Shen Zihua believes that Mao's influence was the "key factor" in Moscow decision to strangle the Hungarian revolt.³¹

Zhu Ankang, former Chinese ambassador in Hungary and Yugoslavia has a more detailed point of view: "When the Liu Shaoqi delegation was about to leave Moscow, the Soviet politburo held a meeting and decided to send troops to Hungary. We were informed of the decision under these circumstances, and we supported the decision. Later the story would be distorted as if we insisted on Moscow's sending troops to Hungary. This is not right. Our analysis of the situation led to a different perspective of the Hungarian development. In retrospect, at the time we did not know the whole process of the Hungarian incident. But even if we had not supported use of force, the later development of the Hungarian situation would probably still have caused the Soviets to use force."³²

This could seem a paradox but the thesis according to which China made the leaders of Kremlin to use force in solving the Hungarian

issue was officially supported by Beijing in the 60s, when the Chinese-Soviet breakup got worse. On September 5, 1963, "Renmin Ribao" (People's Daily) published a devastating article against Khrushchev and USSR. Within the "indictment" drafted by the the Chinese against Moscow, the defeatist attitude towards the Hungarian revolution held an important place: "(...) The two events were different in character. But the leadership of the CPSU made grave errors in both. By moving up troops in an attempt to subdue the Polish comrades by armed force it committed the error of great-power chauvinism. And at the critical moment when the Hungarian counter-revolutionaries had occupied Budapest, for a time it intended to adopt a policy of capitulation and abandon socialist Hungary to counter-revolution. (...) We insisted on the taking of all necessary measures to smash the counter-revolutionary rebellion in Hungary and firmly opposed the abandonment of socialist Hungary."³³

The Chinese leaders subsequently presented this version of the events. On October 8, 1964, Mao himself, during a discussion with Gheorghe Maurer, who led a Romanian delegation in Beijing, stressed upon the same point of view: "Western countries realized that Khrushchev fears his people. The events in Hungary are an example in that respect. At Imre Nagy's counter-revolution, Khrushchev was confused. The entire Political Bureau with CPSU believed the Soviet troops should be withdrawn from Hungary. This was against our party's belief, against the opinion of Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping' comrades who had been to Moscow in that respect. We thought it was necessary to maintain our positions there and to strangle the rebellion. The Soviets wanted the Soviet troops to withdraw from Hungary. In this case, Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping's comrades decided to leave the next day. The following day, all members of CPSU's Political Bureau came to the airport and announced their intention not to withdraw the troops from Hungary but on the contrary, they threatened with sending reinforcement. All these actions happened in two-day period. The first day they said one thing, the second they changed their minds."³⁴

This interpretation constantly supported by Chinese leaders³⁵ is very different from Khrushchev's, who ignored the Chinese inflow in his memoirs, undertaking the entire responsibility

for the decision.³⁶ Vladislav M. Zubok analyzed these differences, and explained them through the subsequent disputes between Beijing and Moscow.³⁷

In Conclusion: Beijing displayed a contradictory stance towards the Hungarian revolution in 1956, which influenced the decisions of the Soviet leaders. Thus, on one hand, China had in a first stage the role of inhibitor factor of a military settlement of the

Hungarian crisis. CPSU Presidium consequently enacted the famous declaration on October 30. In a second stage, after Beijing was briefed upon the events in Hungary, Mao has formed a firm opinion regarding a real danger of Budapest "escaping" from the socialist camp and about the necessity of using force. Even if it was not the "key factor" in Moscow's intervention, we believe that Beijing played an important role in making Kremlin to end the Hungarian revolt.

NOTES:

¹ B  l   Kir  ly, "The Hungarian Revolution and the Soviet Readiness to Wage War", in B  l   Kir  ly, Barbara Lotze, and N  ndor F. Dreiszyger, (eds.), *The First War Between Socialist States: The Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and its Impact*, New York, Brooklyn College Press, 1984, pp. 3-30.

² Johanna Granville, *The First Domino. International Decision Making During the Hungarian Crisis of 1956*, Texas A&M University Press, College Station, Texas, 2004.

³ A. S. Stykalin, *Prervannaia Revoliutsiia: Vengerskii Krizis 1956 Goda i politika Moskvy*, Novyi Khronograf, Moskva, 2003, pp. 157-158.

⁴ Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill & London, 2001.

⁵ Shen Zhihua, "China's Role and Influence in the Revolts in Poland and Hungary in 1956", in Dan Catanus, Vasile Buga, *Putere  i societate. Lag arul comunist sub impactul destaliniz rii - 1956*, Romanian Institute for the Study of Totalitarianism, Bucharest 2006.

⁶ P  ter V  mos, *Evolution and Revolution: Sino-Hungarian Relations and the 1956 Revolution*, Cold War International History Project, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Working Paper no. 54, November 2006.

⁷ Chen Jian, *cit work* pp. 63-65.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 147.

⁹ Vladislav M. Zubok, "«Look What Chaos in the Beautiful Socialist Camp!» Deng Xiaoping and the Sino-Soviet Split 1956-1963", in *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, no. 10, p. 152.

¹⁰ Chen Jian, *cit work*, p. 151. Also see Shen Zhihua, *cit work*, p. 352.

¹¹ "The «Malin Notes» on the Crises in Hungary and Poland, 1956", Translated and annotated by Mark Kramer, in *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* no. 8/9, Winter 1996/1997, p. 389.

¹² Chen Jian, *cit work*, p. 153.

¹³ Shen Zhihua, *cit work*, p. 352. Also see J  nos Radv  nyi, *Hungary and the Superpowers. The 1956 Revolution and Realpolitik*, Hoover Institution Press, Stanford, California, 1972, p. 21.

¹⁴ Shen Zhihua, *op. cit.*, p. 350.

¹⁵ Chen Jian, *cit work*, pp. 153-154.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 153-154.

¹⁷ Strobe Talbot, *Khrushchev Remembers*, Andre Deutsch, London, 1971, p. 418.

¹⁸ Csaba B  k  s, Malcolm Byrne, J  nos M. Rainer (ed.), *The 1956 Hungarian Revolution: A History in Documents*, Central European University Press, Budapest, New York, 2002, p. 290.

¹⁹ "The Malin Notes", p. 392.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 392.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 392.

²² P  ter V  mos, *cit work*, p. 14.

²³ "The Malin Notes", p. 393.

²⁴ Chen Jian, *cit work*, p. 155.

²⁵ "The Malin Notes", p. 393.

²⁶ For the events in the autumn of 1956 in Romania please see Ioana Boca, *1956. Un an de ruptur  . Romania intre internationalismul proletar si stalinismul antisovietic*, Foundation Civic Academy, Bucharest 2001. Also, Mihaela Sitariu, *Oaza de libertate. Timisoara, 30 octombrie 1956*, Polirom, Iasi 2004. For the situation in Czechoslovakia, see for example Juraj Marusiak, "Slovakia and the Hungarian Revolution of 1956", in Alexandru Zub, Flavius Solomon (ed.), *Sovietization in Romania and Czechoslovakia*, Polirom, Iasi, 2003, pp. 95-111.

²⁷ "The Malin Notes", p. 393.

²⁸ Strobe Talbot, *cit work*, p. 419.

²⁹ "The Malin Notes", p. 393.

³⁰ Chen Jian, *cit work*, p. 157.

³¹ Shen Zihua, *cit work*, p. 359.

³² Xiaoyuan Liu and Vojtech Mastny (eds.), *China and Eastern Europe, 1960s-1980s. Proceedings of the International Symposium: Reviewing the History of Chinese-East European Relations from the 1960s to the 1980s, Beijing, 24-26 March 2004*, Zürcher Beiträge zur Sicherheitspolitik und Konfliktforschung Nr. 72, Zürich, 2004, p. 50.

³³ "The Origin and Development of the Differences Between the Leadership of the CPSU and Ourselves". Comment on the Open Letter of the Central Committee of the CPSU by the Editorial Departments of Renmin Ribao (People's Daily) and Hongqi (Red Flag), September 6, 1963, from the collection *The Polemic on the General Line of the International Communist Movement*, Foreign Languages Press, Peking 1965, p. 69.

³⁴ Romulus Ioan Budura, *Relațiile româno-chineze, 1880-1974. Documente*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Archives, Bucharest, 2005, p. 597.

³⁵ Ciu En-Lai: "In 1956-1957 I sent two delegations to the Soviet Union, led by comrade Liu Shao-qi and Deng Xiaoping. I counseled then Khrushchev to make peace with the Polish, not to send the armed forces to Poland and not to interfere in their internal affairs. On the other hand, I advised him to strangle the counterrevolution in Hungary, as on the contrary reactionary troops from those countries could enter Hungary. Under these conditions, the Soviet government published a Declaration in which it recognized the Soviet Union witnessed great power chauvinism and that will undo this mistake, particularly improving the relations with the fraternal parties and countries. This declaration was published on October 30, 1956, and on November 1, our Government answered through a public declaration supporting the Soviet declaration. Both declarations were published in "Pravda" newspaper, but now Khrushchev stopped talking about them and claims he never proved great power chauvinism." Dan Catanus, *Intre Beijing si Moscova. Romania si conflictul sovieto-chinez*, vol.1, National Institute for the Study of Totalitarianism, Bucharest, 2004, p. 374.

³⁶ Strobe Talbot, *cit work*, pp. 418-419.

³⁷ Vladislav M. Zubok, *cit work*, pp. 153-155.