

# Remember when Soviet tanks crushed Hungary?

by Rachel Douglas

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## **In the Name of the Working Class**

by Sandor Kopacsi

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As the ouster of Janos Kadar from the Hungarian communist party leadership has occurred at the moment of greatest turmoil in Eastern Europe, since he was installed in the wake of Soviet tanks over 30 years ago, it is appropriate to review the circumstances of the beginning of his tenure. The publication of an English edition of Sandor Kopacsi's memoir provides a good opportunity to do so, especially for the growing number of young adults for whom the crushing of the Hungarian Revolution is an event from the dim past "before their time."

Col. Sandor Kopacsi was Budapest's chief of police in 1956. A communist party activist from the industrial north of Hungary, a veteran of the resistance movement during World War II, Kopacsi was 34 years old. For refusing to put his forces at the disposal of the invading Russians, against the population of Budapest, he was arrested by Soviet KGB boss Ivan Serov and later stood trial alongside deposed Prime Minister Imre Nagy, who was executed for treason. Released from prison in the general amnesty of 1963, Kopacsi finally left Hungary with his wife in 1975, to join their daughter in Canada, where he wrote this book. It was first published, in French, in 1979.

His narrative sketches the behavior of Soviet Ambassador Yuri Andropov, of various KGB officers (although he did earn his spurs in 1956 Budapest, today's KGB boss, Victor Chebrikov, is not among them), of the ousted Stalinist party leader Matias Rakosi, of Imre Nagy, and, finally, of Janos Kadar. We learn that the nickname bestowed on Kadar by the AVO (Hungarian secret police), whose prisoner he had been in 1951-54, was "Janos the Sh\*\*." We witness Kopac-

si's bewilderment as he realizes that Kadar, who as a member of Nagy's Politburo, "only three days earlier declared in the presence of Ambassador Andropov, 'If your tanks come back, I'll go down in the street and fight them barehanded,' " had given his services as the new, Soviet-approved boss of Hungary.

The Hungarian rebellion, it should be recalled, not only happened in tandem with the demonstrations in Poland that led to the replacement of Stalinist Boleslaw Bierut's regime with Wladyslaw Gomulka's. It also coincided with an explosion in the Middle East: The United Nations Security Council was in session as the Soviet tanks rolled and Imre Nagy radioed to the world his proclamation of "counterrevolution," but at the top of the council's agenda was the Suez Crisis. After that, when Britain sought a Security Council meeting in November, the United States voiced suspicions that London was seeking to divert attention from Suez.

How Hungary was crushed and the great powers stood by, wrapped in their leaderships' own pursuits, has been related elsewhere (e.g., in Janos Radvanyi's *Hungary and the Superpowers*, Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1972). Kopacsi's on-the-ground perspective gives a special poignancy to the tale of how Hungary was sacrificed to the interests of great power understandings, not unlike the "New Yalta" arrangement of today. While rank-and-file members of the revolt against Soviet power "lived in hope that perhaps the Western powers . . . might come to our rescue after all," Imre Nagy "was better informed than any of us on the international situation. He knew, as we didn't at the time, that while world opinion was on our side, the Western governments wouldn't lift a finger to help us."

Nagy he describes as a man with "no more illusions." Nagy called Russia "an immense Byzantine empire where the manners of the former great landlords are strangely mixed with revolutionary traditions. Sometimes also with barbarism." Nagy "had spent more than fifteen years in the Soviet Union [and] knew that with the Russians there was always a difference between words and acts."

Sandor Kopacsi recounts how he learned this personally, in the most chilling fashion. On Oct. 30, 1956, after the first round of fighting in Hungary, Moscow declared that its forces were retreating from the country. Ambassador Andropov stuck by this story, while Hungarian Defense Minister Gen. Paul Maleter (later to be executed with Nagy) went to Soviet military headquarters for negotiations on the withdrawal. On the night of Nov. 3-4, the Hungarian government lost phone contact with Maleter. Kopacsi describes the dispatch of a Hungarian Army tank carrying a white flag and "mediators" to Soviet headquarters at Tokol. Kopacsi heard, live, the radio dispatches of the young major in command, as the tank progressed through Budapest in the middle of the night, passing landmarks until it met a Russian detachment and its radio, too, fell silent—the tank crew was taken prisoner alongside the defense minister they were sent out to find.