

János Horváth

The 1956 Hungarian Revolution in the Eyes of Ronald Reagan*

President Ronald Reagan had a great interest in and knowledge of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, and this knowledge helped to shape his world views and contributed to his morally firm statesmanship. Contrary to the conventional wisdom of his time, he understood that the Soviet Union was not the strong, stable superpower and the wave of the future that it pretended to be. Moreover, he was aware that the smaller nations that had been engulfed into its colonial empire strongly resented the yoke under which they were held. As President of the United States, these convictions helped to shape the foreign policy of his administration – a policy designed to further weaken the USSR.

I became acquainted with Ronald Reagan in 1974 when he was Governor of California. At the time I was head of the Department of Economics at Butler University in Indianapolis. Governor Reagan came to Indiana repeatedly during the early months of that year to help in the Republican primary election campaign his friend and colleague, Governor Edgar Whitcomb, who aspired to become a U.S. Senator. I was Chairman of Economic Advisors for Governor Whitcomb, and in that capacity I accompanied the two men on many campaign trips throughout the state.

Beyond my professional activities I was also known in public life for leadership roles I had taken as a young man in Hungary, my native country. During World War II I had an active role in the patriotic independence movement in opposition to the Nazis. In December 1944, I was arrested, interrogated, and came within hours of execution when I was saved by the advance of the Soviet Army into Budapest. After the war I joined the Independent Smallholders Party and was elected to the Hungarian Parliament in 1945 at the age of 24. In January of 1947 I was again arrested, this time by the Communists, who charged me with being an “enemy of the people.” I was convicted in a show trial and imprisoned for four years. Years later I became a political leader in the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. After leaving Hungary, I was a founder of the Hungarian Revolutionary Council, an international organization of exiled Hungarian leaders.

As the two governors and I criss-crossed the state of Indiana during the primary campaign of 1974, the presence of Ronald Reagan always caused a great deal of excitement. Whenever the former filmstar and television personality stepped out of the automobile or strolled the street, a crowd would gather around him. We would greet the people, urge them to vote in the primary for Governor Whitcomb, and listen to their concerns.

Sometimes we would go to a playground or stand at the entrance of a shopping center. There were scheduled speeches, too, addressing everyday topics. Often we used a question and answer format. The number of participants might be as few as eight to ten or as many as 200. When no audience was at hand we would drop in on the local radio station, offering a chat around the microphone. By the side of the two prominent governors I was supposed to talk about political economy. Since taxation, inflation and unemployment reappeared as frequent topics, the questions were often directed to me, the expert. Sometimes I got entangled in professorial lecturings, and Reagan would pick up the topic and give a short, concise answer. He did so very effectively. Afterwards, when we were riding in the automobile or sitting in a restaurant munching on a sandwich, I would meticulously elaborate on the theoretical as well as the institutional background of the question. Reagan repeatedly redirected the conversation to other topics. Almost always he reached back to the 1956 Hungarian revolution and fight for freedom, and he revealed a surprising acquaintance with the details.

Governor Reagan during those months repeatedly questioned me about the events and circumstances of the 1956 revolution. Frequently, he interrupted my explanation of economic matters with an unexpected question. "János, you were there. Tell me about the demonstrations on the Parliament Square. Who brought the the 300,000 people to the square? Why did the ÁVO open fire on the crowd on October 25th when it hadn't on the 23rd? Is it really true that the demonstrators did not possess weapons initially?" And he had further questions regarding the Kilián barracks and the heroic resistance at Széna tér (Haymarket Square). When at one of our subsequent luncheons I began to elaborate about one of the monetary-fiscal concepts – because I believed he would certainly feel a great need of such things – he listened for about ten minutes. Then he switched the conversation to the Soviet tanks defeated on the streets of Budapest. At another occasion the future president of the USA turned to me and said, "János, my attention span in matters of economics hardly extends ten minutes and you are belaboring it for much longer." Then, as if it were the world's most obvious topic, he posed the question: "Why did János Kádár call for negotiations with József Dudás, who was hanged just a few days later?"

I asked questions of Governor Reagan, too. I asked why he knew so much about the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. Was it because he was contemplating the future outlook of the Soviet Union? What would he do in the role of making foreign policy? From his responses and comments it became crystal clear that he was quite close to the position that had evolved during the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, namely, that the Soviet Union and communism in general were not as stable as they had appeared to be.

Reagan's interest in the revolution and his concern about the spread of communism had led him to learn more about Hungary and its history. He was aware that in 1945 free elections had been held in Hungary. Voter participation was greater than 90 percent, and the Communist Party received only 17 percent of the votes. Reagan was aware that in February 1947, in the words of President Truman, a "shameful Soviet putsch in Hungary" destroyed parliamentary democracy and replaced it with a communist dictatorship. As a result of this breach of the Yalta Agreement President Truman started to build the NATO military alliance.

In 1981, when Ronald Reagan assumed the presidency of the United States, the cold war tension and the atomic war horizon forecasted the shadow of nuclear disaster. Within these circumstances the President's self-confidence became decisive. He did not hesitate to brand the Soviet Union an "evil empire" and to emphasize that "in the arsenals of the world there exists no such weapon as the moral courage of free men." Then he continued with these sentiments: "I call upon the nation's scientists, who had created the nuclear weapons, that this time they turn their talents to the service of humanity and world peace, and create those instruments that render nuclear weapons ineffective." During the subsequent years it happened that in the "Star Wars" competition the Soviet Union fell so far behind that the whole colonial empire went bankrupt and fell apart. In this way the rockbed fortitude and moral statesmanship of Ronald Reagan led, in 1989, to the freedom and independence of Hungary for which the freedom fighters of 1956 had fought so valiantly.

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Dr. János Horváth, a distinguished emeritus professor of economics, has been a Member of the Hungarian Parliament since 1998, in the ranks of the FIDESZ-Hungarian Civic Party. He first entered public life as a university student via the Hungarian Independence Movement against Hitler and the Nazis. In December 1944 he was arrested and cruelly interrogated by the Hungarian branch of the Nazis, the Arrow Cross, and was saved from execution by the advance of the Soviet army into Budapest. A few years later he was again imprisoned, this time by the Soviet imposed Communist dictatorship. Meanwhile he had been elected Member of the Hungarian Parliament in 1945, where he served until his arrest and imprisonment in 1947. He became a political leader in the 1956 Revolution against the Soviet occupation and communist dictatorship. Thereafter he lived in the USA for 41 years, where he was also active in public life. In 1998 he repatriated to Hungary and was elected to the Parliament a second time, and in 2002 he was reelected. As a lawmaker his focus is political economy and world affairs.