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Imre Nagy: A Biography

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Author:

János Rainer

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Zoltán Csipke

Imre Nagy is undoubtedly one of the towering figures in 20th-century Hungary, having had a significant impact on the current of history twice within his lifetime and again 31 years after his death. Owing to the drive for silence over the recent past by Nagy's successor János Kádár, in an attempt to depoliticise society and therefore prevent questions about his own rise to power, Nagy's name remained absent from the public discourse in Hungary for the 30 years following his execution, even if the opposite was the case west of the iron curtain. Thus, it transpired that no comprehensive biography of Imre Nagy was written in Hungary until János M. Rainer undertook the task following the system change in 1989. As Rainer wrote in the preface, what spawned this was that after writing a brief biography for the Spanish language journal *Hungría*, he realised that Nagy's life was largely unknown (p. xix).

Over the following decade, Rainer produced a two volume biography of Nagy, one covering his life from 1896-1953 published in 1996 (1), and another from 1953-1958 published in 1999 (2), totalling just under 1000 pages in length. In 2002, Rainer condensed this into a single volume under 200 pages in length, which while still useful to the scholar, is much more accessible to a non-academic audience.(3) Since its publication, Rainer's biography has generally become considered the definitive work on Nagy's life. The condensed version was first translated into Polish in 2004 and then into German in 2006, with the current English edition being translated from the German. Until this book was published, there was no biography of

Nagy available in English published since Soviet and Hungarian archives opened with the fall of communism and system change in 1989. The work also makes use of Nagy's own unfinished autobiography, as Rainer states that much of Nagy's early life was unavailable from other sources.

This shortened work wisely condenses the period from 1896-1953 to approximately 60 pages, as this time in Nagy's life is unlikely to be of much interest to most readers. Those with a specific interest in this period who are likely to be knowledgeable of Hungarian are advised to consult the original full-length biography. Nonetheless, this section makes it clear that Rainer does not intend his work to be a hagiography. In fact, Rainer's goal of presenting a biography as objective as possible resulted in his being sued by Nagy's daughter Erzsébet in 1996 over a television documentary for which he provided the historical background, because she felt it might tarnish his image.⁽⁴⁾

Rainer's biography of Nagy's early life shows the path that Nagy took from belonging to a lower-middle-class family in Kaposvár (a small city in south-western Hungary) through becoming a prisoner of war in Russia where subsequently the October Revolution and Russian Civil War took place. After returning to Hungary in 1921 and participating in the communist underground, Nagy again left for the Soviet Union in 1930. As Rainer reveals in the work, more often than not, Nagy's travels within the communist hierarchy, be they vertical or horizontal, were not the products of Nagy's own planning or manoeuvring but rather what might even be described as being in the right place at the right time. Observing just that, Rainer wrote of Nagy's promotion in the communist hierarchy in 1944: "Nagy's rise to ministerial status is attributable less to his special competence than to the special political circumstances" (p. 36).

Nagy, a firm believer in the communist system, was nonetheless not one to stand up to a challenge to his views, as Rainer repeatedly illustrates. While at times this was a reflection of Nagy's own tendency to avoid conflict or at other times acts of self-preservation, he was certainly not of an assertive disposition in public. Although he would stand by views in private waiting for the opportunity that they would be applicable or proven correct, he was still willing to perform the customary act of self-criticism. What becomes more remarkable about Nagy as one reads Rainer's biography is just how unremarkable he was.

Rainer discusses Nagy's short terms as a popular Minister of Agriculture and ineffective Minister of the Interior, adding that in light of what Nagy's successors László Rajk and János Kádár "achieved" in the latter post, Nagy's unremarkable tenure shines a more positive light on him (p. 43). Rainer also includes quotes from non-communist politicians in the 1940s, who observed that Nagy was the most "Hungarian" of the Muscovites who returned to Hungary after the war (p. 47). In contrast to Hungarian Communist Party First Secretary Mátyás Rákosi's plans of hyper-industrialisation, Nagy advocated a slower transition to communism. The result of this conflict was that Nagy resigned his government posts and moved to university positions, where he continued his examination of the "agrarian question" in Hungary through the lens of Marxism-Leninism.

In 1950, however, Nagy again became a member of the government as the Minister of Requisitions, which oversaw collections from the rural peasantry. Following bad harvests and increasing quotas, the agents of this ministry made life miserable for the majority of farmers. Nagy, frequently at odds with the Planning Office nonetheless did not enjoy total control over his ministry, the agents of whom generally responded to orders from higher up. Even as he ineffectively opposed these ideas, Nagy remained in his post. Rainer argued that as a veteran of the Soviet purges in the 1930s, Nagy knew the best way to guarantee his survival was to remain in the public eye and wait for Stalin to disappear (p. 57). Whether or not it was Rainer's intent, the image this paints of Nagy is a man loyal to his convictions but spineless to do anything about them, passively waiting for a chance to put forth his proposals.

What is also interesting about this part of Nagy's life is that it is the section that is overlooked in contemporary Hungary. Today, Nagy is remembered primarily for his role in 1956 so that even mainstream parties of the Right will only offer mild criticisms, even if they distance themselves. Most of his life prior to 1953 is overlooked or forgotten, as if his actions in 1956 absolved him of this period. Rainer's inclusion of this part of Nagy's life, which of course could not be dismissed in a thorough biography, highlights how a

selective memory developed around Nagy in post-communist Hungary.

Nagy's life changed forever in 1953 when he became prime minister, and it is from this year forth that the majority of Rainer's biography is concerned with, which is also the most well known period of his life. It was during this time that Nagy slowed the pace of industrialisation and stopped collectivisation with the intent of improving living standards, as he sought a more gradual and Hungarian road toward socialism. As Rainer repeatedly mentions, Nagy was a firm believer that each country's path toward socialism or communism would have to incorporate that nation's peculiarities, so that no two paths could be identical. Nagy's ouster from the position of prime minister in 1955 was something of a watershed in Nagy's adherence to the party, for although resigning (which was also prompted by heart problems) for the first time, Nagy did not practice the customary self-criticism.

Rainer makes it clear that Nagy was quite reluctant to become involved in the revolution, and for the first days remained passive. Although Nagy was appointed prime minister the morning of October 24 1956, Stalinists surrounded him, and it was only days later that he began to fulfil the role that history will always remember him for. Even then, Nagy was responding to the street, not leading the charge, which is why some historians have questioned to what degree Nagy can be considered a revolutionary. Rainer himself observes:

It was not Imre Nagy who shaped revolutionary Hungary in 1956; rather he came increasingly and through a gradual process to resemble it ? until the two became virtually synonymous (p. 138).

While it is assumed that Nagy's execution after the revolution was a foregone conclusion, Rainer makes clear that it was not the Soviets who wished to see Nagy executed, but János Kádár, whose legitimacy would never be settled so long as Nagy lived, for Nagy refused to resign as prime minister (p. 150). At his trial, Nagy was not permitted to challenge the accusations levelled against him, despite repeatedly illustrating the farcical nature of the trial, and only allowed to speak at the end, at which point he stated that his trial had not been fair. After Nagy was sentenced to death, he used the opportunity to ask for clemency to deliver his final words, in which he stated his belief that the trial was a 'miscarriage of justice' and that one day, his conviction would be overturned 'by the Hungarian people and the international working class', concluding that he did not ask for clemency (p. 163). One cannot help but think of Arthur Koestler's Rubashov as he or she reads Rainer's biography of the man who stuck by his ideals as the party he obediently served transformed around him, eventually devouring him.

Indeed, it was in death that Nagy for the third time changed the trajectory of Hungarian history in 1989. Since he had never received a proper burial following his execution, the increasingly organised democratic opposition forced a public memorial service upon the government, which at first resisted but eventually tried to co-opt it. This moment not only undermined the tenuous credibility of the socialist state, but as Rainer wrote:

The ugly details ? that the corpses were wrapped in tarpaper and laid face down in the graves, that the grave had no identification, or, in Nagy's case, was identified by a false name in the burial document ? allowed people to recognize the vileness of the Kádár regime (p. 193).

If Kádár killed Nagy, Nagy can be said to have posthumously destroyed Kádár's system, and perhaps even Kádár himself, for on 6 July 1989 as Nagy's conviction was being overturned in court, Kádár died at home.

The period of Nagy's life that has traditionally received the most attention is from 1953-1956. It is the periods before and after those four years, however, that scholars already familiar with Nagy will find the most interesting in this work. While some details of Nagy's life prior to his return to Hungary after the Second World War were known, the detail that Rainer provides helps explain why Nagy acted the way he

did in the defining moments of his life and paints a fuller picture of the reluctant leader. This work synthesises into one coherent book the many twists and turns of Nagy's life in English for the first time, and is the first biography to include material about Nagy's final days that were only made available to the public after the system change.

It is the end of the book that differs the most from the Hungarian edition, in that the final chapter from the Hungarian edition has been expanded and broken into two chapters. The first of these chapters, 'Post Mortem', focuses on the treatment of Nagy in western historical accounts from the time of the revolution to 1989. Rainer traces the various different interpretations taken by those who wrote about Nagy, from associates who wished to praise him, to books that focused on Nagy's relationship with communism, and through works that relied heavily upon theoretical frameworks. This section is in essence a short literature review.

The truly new chapter is 'Resurrection'. In the Hungarian editions (both original and abridged) Rainer closes his biography with Nagy's reburial. In the English edition, the account of Nagy's reburial and the events leading up to it are expanded upon, but what is genuinely new is the fate of Nagy's and the revolution's memory in post-communist Hungary, which given the publication date of 2009 somewhat oddly cuts off at the turn of the millennium. Those wishing to know more about Nagy's symbolic use in post-communist Hungary are advised to turn to Karl P. Benziger's *Imre Nagy, Martyr of the Nation: Contested History, Legitimacy, and Popular Memory in Hungary*. This work is not mentioned in Rainer's biography, although the likely explanation is that Benziger's work was published in 2008.

Rainer only half dips his toes into politics in this section. The reason this has its problems is because although alluding to various political jousting over the memory of 1956 and to a lesser extent Nagy, Rainer avoids specifics, in contrast to the rest of the work which is lush with detail. Perhaps this is because unlike György Litván, his predecessor as 1956 Institute director who was willing to wade into the political debates over 1956, Rainer has sought to confine himself to scholarly differences of opinion. Indeed, one of the striking features of Rainer's other works has been his ability to avoid becoming entangled in the frequently messy political arguments that surround 1956 in contemporary Hungary, and to a lesser extent, the figure of Imre Nagy. While this section in no way mars the book, it is disappointing, and in many respects, given its half-hearted nature, would have been better left out or added as an afterword.

Additionally, Rainer's treatment of Nagy's status as an informer is better explained in the full-length biography. In the Soviet Union in the 1930s, Nagy had an informer file opened on him under the name of Volodia (given in other texts as Volodya or Vologya). As Rainer notes, the 'Volodia Dossier' was released in 1989 by the Soviets to discredit Nagy as communism crumbled in Hungary. In the English translation, the Volodia issue receives one long paragraph, but receives ten pages in the original edition published in 1996. It is clearly established that Nagy was not really in a position to resist becoming an informer, and that it was an act of self-preservation more than anything else. As a further way of explanation, it includes how Nagy discovered that he was being followed around at this time, and even instructed his daughter on what to do should he and his wife disappear, having her memorise a number that she in the end never had to call. This reveals the paranoia of late 1930s Moscow and why Nagy acted the way he did, which unfortunately does not come across in the condensed version.

As noted at the beginning of this review, this work is a translation of a translation, and with that, several problems arise. Any errors possibly made whilst the book was translated into German would be carried over into the English edition. Likewise, it is a further departure from Rainer's original manuscript. This makes it uncertain if any mistakes in the work are Rainer's or a translator's, even if Rainer stated in the introduction that minor changes were made with the subsequent editions (p. xx). One particular example is the treatment of the mob justice at Köztársaság Square during the revolution when several secret police officers were lynched. Since Rainer's work is a biography of Nagy, who was not present at the scene, it understandably receives only a brief mentioned in the original biography and in the condensed Hungarian edition. In the English edition, however, the lynching receives more space, and the paragraph closes with the observation 'These events seriously worsened the situation and significantly harmed the image of the uprising' (p. 121).

Even ignoring the use of the word 'uprising' in place of 'revolution' (*felkelés* as opposed to *forradalom*, which is the word Rainer uses in the Hungarian edition) to describe 1956, itself a matter of debate in Hungary, this new sentence is incorrect. While no doubt this was the darkest moment of the revolution, and the events arguably had an impact on the decision making by those wavering over how to respond to the revolution (Kádár later claimed it to be one of the reasons he turned against the revolution after initially supporting it), paradoxically, it did not harm the image of the revolution. The lynching at Köztársaság Square was acknowledged as an unrepresentative isolated incident (except where 1956 was intentionally mislabelled a counterrevolution) and it has for the most part been expunged from the memory of the revolution in Hungary today. As much as it was the one part of 1956 that could be discussed in Kádár's Hungary, today it is the most frequently omitted.

Lastly, the book could have used one more read through by an editor. For a published work, the book featured more than a handful of typographical errors, missing prepositions or punctuation marks and awkwardly phrased sentences that could have been fixed before publication. This is not a criticism of Rainer, but it does not reflect well upon the publisher.

Nonetheless, despite these criticisms, for those wishing to learn more about Imre Nagy, one of the few individuals to have gained enough power to provide communism with a human face in Central and Eastern Europe, this work is an excellent starting point and deserves its place in either a personal or university library. For those wanting to learn more about Nagy's tortured path to martyrdom, however, they are better served reading Rainer's original extended biography of the man who refused to compromise his ideals despite the avalanche of evidence to the contrary.

Notes

1. J. M. Rainer, *Nagy Imre, Politikai Életrajz, Első Kötet 1896-1953* (Budapest, 1996). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. J. M. Rainer, *Nagy Imre, Politikai Életrajz II, 1953-8* (Budapest, 1999). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. J. M. Rainer, *Nagy Imre* (Budapest, 2002). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. K. P. Benziger, *Imre Nagy, Martyr of the Nation: Contested History, Legitimacy, and Popular Memory in Hungary* (Plymouth, 2008), p. 127. [Back to \(4\)](#)

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