



**Endre Kukorelly**

## Ruin: A history of commonism

*An excerpt*

(1)

Only the red of the flags has not faded.  
Only the Party does not age.  
Sándor Kányádi, "Flag Budding"

Do I love the party or the peasantry more?  
Erzsébet Galgóczi

We were forced to come to the conclusion that  
during the period when socialism was being  
constructed class war within the country would  
intensify or die down, depending on various  
circumstances  
Dezső Nemes<sup>1</sup>

What is general?  
Béla Biszku

The Bolshevik putsch is almost ninety years old.<sup>2</sup> Or has shat its pants, as they say. That's what is general.

The head is trembling.

As when a senile Nazi is dug up from South America, someone guilty of murdering hundreds, and he is shown on TV, a dotty old buzzard in front of the cameras, he can barely stand up, his tears flowing into the dribble of his spit: that's him, but is it really him?<sup>3</sup> The same person, or who the hell? Totally, and not a bit. What should be done with him, all the same. What's right, and is there such a thing.

There's no right. Time shows. It shows, I don't know what that means: I see it and don't understand what in the heck time is. Time carries on past everything.

Apparently, according to serious studies, the power system that for the sake of simplicity is usually called communism has one hundred million victims. One hundred million people, and the task for us would be somehow to grasp how large an amount that is. The number was put down first by Dostoyevsky<sup>4</sup> round about the middle of *The Devils*: "*by adopting the radical measure of chopping off a hundred million heads we should ease our burden and be able to jump over the ditch with much less trouble.*"<sup>5</sup> Radically jump over it.

"It's an excellent idea, but one at any rate which is as incompatible with reality as" — as what? Killing people quantitatively. It's impossible to grasp numbers as large as that.

Not that many, in truth none, you can't take it in. Quotas are given, the quotas are fulfilled, in district Y a total of X inhabitants are liquidated for political reasons as per edict. They murder out of political considerations, social formations come into being in which they kill people, it's a customary story, and that is the custom, you manage to follow up to here. But the numbers, that bunch of boring zeroes, you ought to let go to hell. But you don't. 100 000 000.

"It's as difficult to cut off a hundred million heads as it is to change the world by propaganda. Much more difficult, perhaps, especially in Russia," divines Dostoyevsky back in 1872. "It is quite impossible, even in the most favourable circumstances, to complete such a massacre in less than fifty, or at most thirty years, for they are not sheep and they wouldn't allow themselves to be slaughtered," says one joker, a lame man of forty-five, a secondary school master. Says the lame man.

Said Fyodor Dostoyevsky, he thought it up. But where did he get the idea that it would be like that? "A mysterious index finger is pointing to" Russia "as the country most suitable for accomplishing the great task." How did he know so accurately? "He proposes... to divide humanity into two unequal parts. One-tenth is to be granted absolute freedom and unrestricted powers over the remaining nine-tenths. Those must give up their individuality and be turned into something like a herd." Like that somehow: sheep, lame teacher, brimstone fairytale.

Because the whole thing, along with the one hundred million, is just a novel. "An atheist can't be a Russian. An atheist at once ceases to be a Russian," Stavrogin said to Shatov; that's poetry, and the opposite of poetry as well: "If someone dies without a prayer and the cross, then he is Russian for sure."<sup>6</sup> A novel, romantic, lyrical vision, published stitched and bound. "And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword," Rozanov quotes from the scriptural Book of the Apocalypse about Jesus. "We should get together and organize groups with a view to general destruction" — that is Dostoyevsky, but no smell of blood. These, on the other hand, are my sentences.

They have nothing to do with what happened.

The person setting this down has no idea what that smell is like. He doesn't really know what it means to carry people off and kill them. Off and kill, one person, two, a few dozen, numberless masses, where is the boundary, what is the truth?

Not knowing whether it is true, because in what sense is it true or not that after the Hungarian uprising the Russians carted children off from here by the wagon load, emptying orphanages and reform schools. Whether or not it is fact, whether or not it is substantiated, is neither here nor there.

It's not as if it was only possible to keep stumm back then. Keeping stumm for sure, if you say nothing, you won't lie, or not lie like that.

Like a flowing tap. But everyone says his piece, and one thing holds, what's more the one thing that holds is you should not give too much credence, not even to yourself, that you will set down the truth in your own language.

On television they showed an old Hungarian who had spent forty–six or fifty–six or however many years in Soviet concentration camps. This chap tried to explain.

I've forgotten how many it was, ten years here or there is no matter. I wasn't paying attention properly. He mumbled under his breath, his eyes kept shifting in and out; I don't think it was from fright. But that's what he had got used to. Constant, deadly terror. He tried to recount that thingumajig. He has a passport with Cyrillic lettering: he clutches his bumazhka, produces it, puts it away then yanks it out again and thrusts it in your face.

Does he speak any Hungarian at all?

What could he say, for crying out loud? What do you know, old fellow, that anyone else doesn't? You trot out your years, the places they carried you off to, your utterly incredible life, you mumble away till one could curl up and die, meanwhile staring at me with those jumpy, terrified eyes of yours. You recite the names of the people you were together with, you don't know what became of them — well, what's likely, what do you think, they all croaked a long, long time ago, dead and buried. You'd be better off keeping stumm.

Better off snoozing, gramps.

Jump over the ditch.

*Translation of Chapter 10 of Rom. A komonizmus története [Ruin: A History of Commonism]. Bratislava: Kalligram Könyvkiadó, 2006, 59–62.*

## (2)

*Where gloomy was the appearance of the Sun when  
it came up,  
And gloomy when it went down, seeing no living  
thing around  
Whither the oldster shuffled off with heavy feet of  
lead,  
What was illumined before leaves behind nothing  
more  
To wonder at - that is where Ruin wished to dwell.  
Mihály Vörösmarty: Ruin*

In 1956 I was five years old. And a little bit. There is this and that, I have fragmentary memories. I saw or was told, dreamed or imagined — I recollect. To me, '56 is a sort of odour, or perhaps rather flavour, a dry mouth, a gut reaction. Sounds too, my mother's voice as she reads from a book of fairytales, the sound of shooting, the strange whistling noise of a radio broadcast picking up and fading in waves. Something fairly precise. Indescribably precise. A tank from above, from a third–floor window, as soldiers toss into a round hatch bread from the bakery on the other side of the road. A recollection of a demonstration, watching it with Dad in front of the Peace Hotel. A row of collapsed houses.

Collapsed house walls, dwellings thrown open to the Grand Boulevard. The air raid shelter in the cellar, the bits of my play doctor game. There was a cellar smell, that was good. My little sister's illness, that must obviously have been

weeks before, but anyway then. And the fact that we didn't leave after all. We stayed. At the time, of course, I had no idea about that, but still there was something. It's quite a good situation, this. I do nothing, look out of the window, but it's not me who opens or closes it, all I do is take a game with me down into the cellar. Due to the tanks firing over towards the Grand Boulevard from what used to be called Shock-Worker Bridge, we are moved into the spare room, it's not so dangerous there. That I do have, which is good. I did nothing at all, I have no story, yet 1956 is somehow still strong inside me. If you do anything it immediately starts to write its history. Those who did something, took part or lay low, that is to say, what they did was to lie low — they have a story.

Stories are good, every one of them, maybe even stories that are not true. '56 belongs to those who took part in it. Any part. Those who didn't — theirs, sadly, are not, it's not something that can be done after the event, warmed up. Any precise, objective knowledge and consummate recollection, however much one may breathe on it, is somehow ice-cold. What brings this to mind is that I read a historian's article about some old man's book on '56 — an expert's somewhat distasteful piece of writing about, let's put it this way: an active participant's story. In the historian's opinion the old man can't express himself properly, spells names incorrectly, gets dates muddled, lifts things from books that he knocks, he distorts, lashes out, is full of malice and anti-Semitic into the bargain, practically a fascist — and all this is praised by another newspaper. I can well believe it. Every story can have its uses from a political point of view, it's a fairly well-worn subject, I can well believe that it's in bad taste, but I'm just saying that, I haven't read the book (or the press reaction to it), and haven't the least intention of doing so. Obviously I would also find it distasteful, and I have no wish to *deliberately* disgust myself, I'm in no great hurry to do that. All the same, I think that stepping back a little bit further from actualities, if that is permissible, I would not be so ready to criticise. Somehow, putting even my distaste aside, I would not pass judgement on these malicious, cold-hearted old codgers. Here, whatever "history teacher" guise it may be concealed in, however distasteful the current political arena it is dragged into — it's a matter of a wretched, well let's just say "not normal" man speaking out, obviously barely articulately, to other wretches. Others who are likewise none too normal.

Including myself, it's just that at the worst I'm not listening, but in any case one can't hear *everything* out purely out of sympathy. Who does that hurt? Why would it be better if he did not speak out? Because things weren't the way he describes? I'm sure they weren't.

For a start, these people simply had too big a share.

They've got too much to shoot their mouths about. Then again, anyone who plays a part in something with others of course picks out their own part, sees the others' parts from that angle, and of course this story is not "the truth", it doesn't correspond to reality, doesn't give an account of reality. Only about the person whose story it is. My story speaks about me. It's like — or rather is — what I am.

My mother once recounted what New Year's Eve of 1956 was like on the streets of Pest. They were coming home from somewhere, and what it was like the way people formed into groups as they walked silently along the barely illuminated Grand Boulevard and blew their cardboard trumpets. A group of people. Bitterly cold. It's always roughly New Year's Eve, or whatever. Or

after New Year's Eve, but only a bit after. That stays. They are going along in the icy cold, blowing their cardboard trumpets, no-one speaks, no-one laughs.

- 
- <sup>1</sup> Dezső Nemes was a member of the Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party and a Party ideologist; Béla Biszku was a Minister of the Interior, though it makes absolutely no difference who they were. Empty ciphers. This book is full of named empty ciphers. The quotes have been taken from speeches made to the investigational organs on 15 May 1961. In: György Gyarmati, (ed.): *Trezor 1. A Történelmi Hivatal Évkönyve*, 1999 [Safe-Deposit 1. Yearbook of the Historical Office, Budapest, 1999].
- <sup>2</sup> A true spectre. "A *spectre is haunting Europe -- the spectre of communism*." The opening sentence of Engels and Marx's *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. Published in February 1848. Really well-known, really ghastly. Motto: *Working men of all countries unite!*
- <sup>3</sup> Being stuck in this metaphor, it is a far from tight chain of logic which says that those who wielded power resigned voluntarily, just because Gorbachev yelled at them, and *therefore* it is morally questionable to pick on them. That a negotiated revolution is not a revolution (cf. Robespierre: There is no revolution without revolution, and József Antall: You were kind enough to make a revolution), *therefore* while doddering old fascists can be dragged out, because fascism is forever young, it is in order for communist striplings to effect a smooth salvaging of power, seeing that communism is on its last legs. A typical "Western" double standard. There were many protests against Czechoslovakia's privacy law, Alexander Smolarek writes, on the grounds that it was McCarthyism. See *Ügynökök és akták* [Agents and files], ed. Gábor Halmai. Budapest: Soros Foundation, 2003.
- <sup>4</sup> And a "second" time by Albert Camus in *The Plague*: "*some thirty of so great plagues known to history had accounted for nearly a hundred million deaths. But what are a hundred million deaths? [...] a hundred million corpses broadcast through history are no more than a puff of smoke.*" The plague at Constantinople, according to Procopius, caused ten thousand deaths in a single day: "*about five times the audience in a bigish cinema. Yes, that was how it should be done. You should collect the people at the exits of five picture-houses and make them die in heaps if you wanted to get a clear notion of what it means.*" (From the translation by Stuart Gilbert.)
- <sup>5</sup> Translation by David Magarshack. Dostoyevsky modelled the character of Pyotr Verkhovensky on Sergei Nechayev. "*A revolutionary is a lost soul from the outset. He has no special needs, private concerns, feelings, individual attraction, wealth, not even a name. He is not a revolutionary if he feels pity towards anything at all in this world. This rotten society needs to be split into various groups. In the first of them would be those who should be condemned to death forthwith... In the second would be those individuals whom we would allow to live for the time being in order to spur the people to the inevitable revolt by their atrocities.*" (S.G. Nechayev: *Principles of Revolution*, 1869).
- <sup>6</sup> Vassily Rozanov: *The Apocalypse of Our Time*. Already then, in 1917, we see the appearance of what Dostoyevsky envisaged, the Apocalypse. "*Russia collapsed in two days,*" Rozanov also envisages: "*Well then, what are we to do: death has come along, so we have to die. Death and a burial mound for one-sixth of the land.*"

---

Published 2006–10–25

Original in Hungarian

Translation by Tim Wilkinson

Contribution by Magyar Lettre Internationale

© Endre Kukorelly/Tim Wilkinson

© Eurozine