

# Introduction

On June 16, 1989, in one of the most remarkable ceremonies of recent European history, the leader of the Hungarian revolution of 1956, Imre Nagy, and his closest associates, were finally given decent, public burials, just thirty-one years after they were executed. Three weeks later, on July 6 János Kádár died—on the very day when Hungary's Supreme Court declared the conviction of Imre Nagy to be null, void, and illegal. Shakespeare would not have risked such a cruel tragic irony.

The essays collected in this volume treat what we can now see as a distinct, closed era in Hungarian history: the Kádár era. Although in day-to-day politics that era may be said to have closed already when Kádár was ousted from the post of Party leader in May 1988, the events of June-July 1989 furnished an essential, and fitting, historical epilogue.

One of the particular strengths of János Kis's essays is that he, unlike most contemporary analysts, never lost sight of this historical perspective. Throughout, he insists that the revolution of 1956 is unfinished business, and that the Hungarian politics of the nineteen-eighties cannot be understood without reference to what he calls, in carefully chosen terms, the 'restoration' of 1956-57, and the subsequent 'consolidation.' In 1989 this may seem like a commonplace, but a glance at contemporary political analyses in the early nineteen-eighties shows that most analysts had forgotten this, just as most of Hungarian society had accepted Kádár's invitation to forget. In his detailed analysis of the 1956-57 restoration, moreover, János Kis offers a significant piece of careful and original historical research.

Most of these essays, however, concern contemporary developments in the years 1983-88. They were mainly written for the *samizdat* quarterly

*Beszélő* (a word which means both 'the speaker' and visiting hours in prison)—of which Kis was the leading editor. *Beszélő* was the first major *samizdat* journal to appear regularly in Budapest (the first issue appeared in 1981) and it will have a place in the political history of Hungary at that time. The influence of such journals is always difficult to assess, but many would agree that it performed a 'vanguard' function: addressing themes and advancing propositions that were subsequently taken up in academic, journalistic, and eventually even in official political discussion. *Beszélő* was, for example, the first place in which the demand 'Kádár must go' was plainly and publicly stated, although, as the author himself emphasizes in that essay, it had been in the air for some time.

Within this vanguard journal Kis was a vanguard voice. These essays show why. Their lucidity, breadth, and combination of detached, sober analysis with strategic (and tactical!) political thinking, suffice to explain the author's intellectual authority. A philosopher by training and inclination, a Lukács pupil who has more recently immersed himself in Anglo-American liberalism, Kis here ranges, where necessary, far beyond his philosophical home ground. Recognizing the centrality of the economic crisis to Hungarian political developments in the 1980s, he does not shy away from detailed economic and even industrial analysis. His concern for social justice does not rest at the philosophical level, but finds expression in detailed examination of social injustices: whether the effects of proposed tax changes, new laws on compulsory labor, or the situation of minorities inside the Hungarian state borders.

The author of an original short book on human rights, he also tackles the fraught and sensitive issue of the large Hungarian minorities beyond the state borders (e.g. in Transylvania and Slovakia), seeking answers in terms of universal rights and practical action rather than in nationalist rhetoric. Ranging further still, he makes two exceptionally clear and thoughtful contributions to the debate about the meaning of 'Yalta,' the paths to 'peace,' and the possibilities of reducing or overcoming, by peaceful means, the East-West division of Europe. These two essays, in particular, should be read by Western policymakers as well as by peace and human rights activists in East and West.

His central subject is, however, as the title indicates, politics in Hungary. One particular strength of his political analysis is that he is almost equally good on all elements in the political process or 'game': on the Party as well as the democratic opposition to which he belongs, on the parliament, and on the vital intelligentsia groups—writers, journalists, economists, lawyers, sociologists, political scientists—which came together precisely in these five years (1983–88) to form a growing, albeit still heterogeneous pressure

group for change. This is a rare quality, since very often those who write well about the opposition write poorly (if at all) about the Party, and vice versa. He is perhaps slightly less illuminating on the wider public, beyond the intelligentsia, which figures in these essays as a somewhat undifferentiated 'society' or 'people' about whose mood generalizations are tentatively ventured. Yet to some extent this was inevitable, since in this period other social groups did not have any clear political articulation; workers, for example, just did not belong to the 'political nation,' in the English sense of that term; and the object and achievement of Kádárism was precisely that they should not.

A fine example of Kis's sophisticated political analysis of developments inside the existing power structures is the chapter headed 'From "Reform" to "Continued Development".' Starting from the less than riveting text of the April 1984 resolutions of the Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party, Kis explains not only the 'missed opportunity' for embarking on radical economic reform, but also why, in the logic of historical developments since 1956, this Party—under this leader—was almost bound to miss that opportunity. The dramatic worsening of Hungary's economic predicament over the next four years—rightly predicted by the radical reform economists—was then the fundamental cause of Kádár's ouster and the rapid changes that followed. In this sense, Kádárism prepared its own nemesis.

This book does not cover the period since Kádár's resignation, in which developments have gone further and faster than anyone—including János Kis—predicted. Thus it is striking to find Kis writing as late as early 1988 that 'the time has not yet come, even outside the Party, to revive the 1956 demand for a multi-party system. *Just one year later* the Party itself formally embraced the goal of moving towards a multi-party system. In this new political situation, in 1989, Kis is present both as a leading activist of the Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ), an opposition party whose program owes much to the ideas advanced and discussed in these essays, and as an editor of *Beszélő*, which is due shortly to appear as a fully legal publication. At the time of writing, the 'democratic alternative,' for which János Kis was one of the first publicly to argue, seems more possible than at any time in the last forty years. But also, perhaps, more necessary.

With this volume, the Western reader has a chance to sample the work of an outstanding East Central European political essayist: a *spectateur engagé*, at once analyst and actor; and one who belongs in the company of Václav Havel and Adam Michnik.