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Failed Illusions: Moscow, Washington, Budapest, and the 1956 Hungarian Revolt

By Charles Gati

The 1956 Hungarian revolution, and its suppression by the Soviet Union, was a key event in the Cold War, demonstrating deep dissatisfaction with the communist system and old-fashioned Soviet imperialism. Now, fifty years later, Charles Gati challenges the simplicity of this David and Goliath story in his new history of the revolt. The Hungarian uprising began on October 23rd, 1956. However by Nov. 4th, Soviet tanks and troops had moved into the city, defeating the revolutionaries, who had hoped that NATO (or the United States) would come to their assistance.

Denying neither Hungarian heroism nor Soviet brutality, *Failed Illusions: Moscow, Washington, Budapest, and the 1956 Hungarian Revolt* (release date: September 12th, 2006) fundamentally modifies our picture of what happened during this 13-day period. The book finds that the young revolutionaries were brave and idealistic but that their expectations were unrealistic. It reveals that their leader, Imre Nagy, a reform communist who headed the revolutionary government, was uncertain of himself and of the limits of what could be achieved; at the least, he could not rise to the occasion by steering a realistic course between his people's demands and Soviet interests. Gati suggests that had the Hungarians coupled their valor with pragmatism, some of the revolution's goals could have been achieved.

The United States was all talk, no action, and offered mixed signals at best. They encouraged the revolutionaries with promises of "liberation" and the "rollback" of Soviet power from Eastern Europe, while American-run Radio Free Europe simultaneously backed the insurgents' excessive demands and opposed Nagy. The book exposes Washington's ambivalence by citing Vice President Nixon, who said at a top-secret NSC meeting in July 1956 that "it wouldn't be an unmixed evil" for the U.S. if the Soviets were to invade Hungary. (Interestingly, the CIA had only one officer in Budapest, and it did not have a single Hungarian-speaking agent in Austria.) So there was, to put it mildly, a gap between words and actions in U.S. policy.

One wonders why the U.S. and its allies did not encourage the Hungarian revolutionaries to pursue more constructive options that were available, such as the more limited goal of Titoism as a first step toward freedom. NATO could have pressed the issue with the United Nations before, and not after, the Soviet crackdown. There are valuable lessons here for our efforts to “democratize” or reshape distant lands.

Failed Illusions is based on extensive archival research, including the CIA’s operational files and transcripts of Radio Free Europe’s broadcasts, as well as interviews with participants in Budapest, Moscow, and Washington. The book relates new facts in a political thriller that combines the immediacy of a young eyewitness (the author was a 22-year-old reporter in Budapest during the uprising) with the experience and expertise of a scholar. As Gati remarked in a recent op-ed in *The Washington Post*, “The Hungarians need to hear what happened 50 years ago -- and Americans need to hear that in the future we will not say we seek clearly unattainable goals abroad for political ends at home.”

“Failed Illusions casts incisively a new perspective on three key dimensions of the historic drama that was the Hungarian Revolution: the unsavory background and the heroic epiphany of Imre Nagy, the revolution’s tragic leader; the confused, disruptive, and ultimately devious Soviet efforts to manipulate the Hungarian communists; and the impotent futility of U.S. posturing which masqueraded as ‘the policy of liberation.’ Riveting as a story, significant as a history.”

—**Zbigniew Brzezinski**, former US National Security Advisor

About the Author

Charles Gati is a political scientist who fled his native Hungary during the 1956 revolt, and is now Senior Adjunct Professor of European Studies at Johns Hopkins University. His previous positions have included teaching Central and Eastern European as well as Russian politics and foreign policy at Union College and Columbia University. He served as a Senior Adviser on the Department of State's Policy Planning Staff in the early 1990s. His publications include *The Bloc That Failed: Soviet-East European Relations in Transition* (1990), and *Hungary and the Soviet Bloc* (1986).

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