

APTHEKER'S "TRUTH ABOUT HUNGARY"

THE TRUTH ABOUT HUNGARY. By Herbert Aptheker. Mainstream Publishers. New York. Paper, \$2; cloth, \$3. 256 pp.

By **ROBERT FRIEDMAN**

What is the truth about Hungary? Herbert Aptheker, in his rather daringly titled book, makes a serious effort to get at the facts of the uprising last fall. As such it is far removed from simplistic explanations which paint its participants either as all patriotic saints or all fascist sinners. The historian, and Aptheker is one, is duty bound to seek out the complex of events and influences—as he has done here—the intricate relationships and rapid shifts whereby history defies man's efforts to compress it into neatly organized index cards.

Ultimately, however, it is necessary to determine prime causes and pass judgments. Aptheker, despite his searching examination of the failings of the Hungarian Communist government, places prime responsibility for the uprising at the door of imperialism.

I do not believe either his book, or life itself, sustains his judgment. Nor do I believe the evidence bears out his hopeful assertion that the present Kadar government is ending the repressions which Aptheker condemns and which the Hungarian people abhorred.

For this reason, despite much that is thoughtful and illuminating I do not believe the Truth About Hungary is the full truth about Hungary.

"The Truth About Hungary," although comparatively brief, goes thoroughly into the background of Hungarian society under the prewar Horthy dictatorship, explores the impact of the war on the country, details the political events following the liberation and comprehensively covers the economic difficulties of the postwar regime. The book also deals fully, of course, with the step-by-step events of the uprising. Aptheker details the long-range and sinister efforts of both the expropriated Hungarian ruling class and its friends in the U.S. to stir up counter-revolution in Hungary as well as the wretched record of the Hungarian Communist government as inter-related causes of the explosion.

It was a commonplace during the debate among American radicals over the Soviet intervention for some defenders of the Soviet action to ask why its foes were so horrified by it and by the misdeeds of the Rakosi-Gero government in the face of far worse crimes committed daily by imperialism.

I felt then, as I do still, that this was both an embarrassingly childish debater's device and an appalling distortion of socialist morality.

The friends of socialism have every right to expect far better of socialism and to be correspondingly grieved when they learn of crimes committed under its name. Isn't that what socialism is supposed to be all about? That is not say that we do not have every right to strip the friends of imperialism of all their arrogant pretensions toward moral superiority. One needs only read John Gunther's Inside Africa to learn how every colonial power, from Britain to Belgium, still abuses humanity on a colossal scale. For such as these to point the finger of scorn is the supreme hypocrisy.

But there are many other facets to the revulsion against such obscenities as were revealed in the Khrushchev report and in the Polish and Hungarian exposes.

Men and women drawn to socialism as to a crusade believed, unwisely perhaps, but completely nonetheless, in the implicit purity of their cause.

There are those, sad to say, who shed this belief almost with relief. To be a militant fighter for socialism for an entire life is a difficult and sacrificial role. People who give up the role are apt to suffer qualms of conscience and self-reproach. But conscience is ap-

peased when men can convince themselves, as a result of something like the Hungarian calamity, that the cause is compromised beyond their caring.

One may talk of the need to be realistic and practical in a jungle world of power politics all he wants. But socialism, even more than Caesar's wife, must be above reproach if it is to convince men that it is worth a lifetime of seeking.

We are quick to point to the titanic mockery involved when men invoked the sanction of their God for wiping out Hiroshima. Shall we then be blind to the sacrilege of those, who in the name of "socialism" tore the Widow Rajk from the five-month baby she was nursing?

Aptheker writes with genuine anguish of the crimes committed by the Rakosi-Gero government and Communist Party leadership. He speaks of the "terrible violations of human rights," of "frightful" actions, of the violation of "elementary considerations of humanity." We are reminded again in his pages of the enormity of the failure of the Hungarian party and regime and the tragic consequences of that failure . . . all the more tragic in that much that is good had been accomplished in remaking the old feudal Hungary.

Nevertheless, Aptheker believes that the imperialist plot against Hungarian socialism is the chief villain in the drama which rocked the world last fall. Certainly he piles up a convincing array of facts both as to the counter-revolutionary planning and the speed and efficiency with which these elements insinuated themselves into the situation and, in fact, into its leadership.

Yet I remain unconvinced. For what factor must have existed to evoke mass demonstration—not a coup, not a palace plot, not a general's putsch—but a popular uprising against a socialist government?

It could not have been the cold war. It could not have been the presence in Hungary of anti-Semites, former landowners, bitter aristocrats. It could not have been the plots of Project X. It could not have been any of these, no matter how real their existence, for otherwise not a single socialist government anywhere would be standing.

The decisive circumstance leading to the Hungarian uprising therefore could only have been that which made it possible for these other factors to come to the fore.

The very magnitude of the crimes and blunders of the Hungarian regime, however qualified by extenuating circumstances and motives, as thoroughly explored by Aptheker must make it clear that the foes of Hungarian socialism would have died dreaming impossible dreams had not Rakosi, Gero & Co. by their actions convinced large numbers of Hungarians—of all classes—that they could not continue living as they had.

Aptheker puts it this way:

"We repeat, the fundamental sources of the upheaval were the machinations and the pressures of imperialism, but decisive to the actual outburst of that upheaval were the errors on the part of those charged with building and safeguarding socialism."

I suggest that the use of the rather pallid word "errors," in striking contrast to the justly harsh characterization by Aptheker elsewhere of the dictatorial brutalities of the Rakosi-Gero regime, was dictated because otherwise the emphasis in the quoted sentence might well have to be reversed.

Of course, if we are speaking of original sin, certainly the machinations of imperialism were fundamental. But other socialist governments seem thus far impervious to imperialist intrigues. Here we are speaking of a government of which Aptheker writes: "To say that they violated elementary Marxist-Leninist principles of behavior is to speak moderately; they violated elementary considerations of hu-

manity."

It is in that context that one must turn to the rights or the wrongs of the Soviet intervention. First, one must establish that the Soviet Union itself bore partial but significant responsibility for the Rakosi-Gero government. Directly, because as occupying power it, admittedly, outraged the national feelings of a people already conditioned to dislike the powerful Slav neighbors. Indirectly, because the Rakosi-Gero regime was only aping its betters, acting out in miniature the excesses, the obsessive suspicions, the grandiloquent identification of self with state that marked the rule of Joseph Stalin. (With, of course, the noteworthy deviation from the norm that, whereas the Soviet society retains the support of its people because of its achievements, the Hungarian Communist Party fell apart in the first few days of the uprising.)

Much of the debate in the Left in the weeks and months following the Hungarian tragedy centered around the Soviet intervention. The energy might have been more usefully expended in discussing the form and character of a true socialist society and the changes required to prevent another Hungary.

For, such was the dilemma posed by the Hungarian explosion after years of misrule that both Soviet intervention and Soviet non-intervention offered only unhappy consequences.

Aptheker writes that the majority of Hungarians did not actually participate in the uprising, that the number of casualties in the fighting were deliberately and fam-

(Continued on Page 7)

Today's Best Bets on TV, Movies, Theatre

TV

- Yankees-Detroit (11) 1:55
- News (2) 7 to 7:30
- Disneyland (7) 7:30
- Father Knows Best (4) 8:30
- Greatest Fights—Ross vs Armstrong (1938) (9) 8:30
- Dodgers-Cincinnati (11) 8:55
- Kraft Theatre (4) 9
- Championship Bout—Joe Brown vs Orlando Zulueta—lightweights (7) 10
- Nightbeat—Guest: Dr. Jacques May, League for Emotionally Disturbed Children (5) 11
- Late Show: Black Narcissus with Deborah Kerr, Sabu, David Farrar (English) (2) 11:15

RADIO

- Yankees-Detroit WINS 1:55
- Dodgers-Cincinnati WMGM 8:55
- Giants-Milwaukee WMCA 8:55

MOVIES

- Garment Jungle, Kent, Surrey, Bronx
- 12 Angry Men, Luxor, Earl, Bronx
- The Forty-First, Cameo
- Young Stranger, RKO Albee, B'klyn
- Wayward Bus, Victoria
- Bachelor Party, Loew's Metropolitan
- Gold of Naples, Paris
- Naked Eye, Fifth Ave. Cinema
- Nana, Little Carnegie
- Lust for Life, Plaza
- La Strada, 52nd St. Translux
- Around the World in 80 Days, Rivoli
- Face in the Crowd, Globe

DRAMA

- Simply Heavenly, 150 W. 85th.
- A Land Beyond the River, Greenwich Mews
- Visit To a Small Planet, Booth
- Career, 7th Ave. South Theatre
- Purple Dust, Cherry Lane
- A Hole in the Head, Plymouth
- Long Day's Journey Into Night, Helen Hayes
- Good King Charles, Downtown
- Bells Are Ringing, Shubert
- My Fair Lady, Hellinger Theatre
- Diary of Anne Frank, Ambassador
- Three Penny Opera, Theatre de Lys
- Inherit the Wind, National

'TRUTH ABOUT HUNGARY'

(Continued from Page 6)

tastically exaggerated by the reactionary press, and that what had begun as a popular demonstration for reforms within the socialist structure had swiftly turned into a counter-revolutionary effort to overthrow socialism and restore capitalism.

Therefore, he believes, the Soviet intervention was necessary and justified. For its alternative would have been civil war and possibly World War III.

It is, of course, impossible to prove or disprove that last necessity. But there can be no dispute over the fact that the good name of socialism paid a heavy toll all over the world as a result of the Hungarian uprising and the Soviet intervention. It is a sorry example of workers' rule which must rest on Soviet arms for the support withheld by one's own people.

Aptheker makes a sober effort to come to grips with the reasons for the failure of the Hungarian government to retain the support of its people. He cites, among others, the vestiges of capitalism, the problems of transforming society, the "profound psychological problems," the tendency of "power per se . . . to distort and to corrupt."

He asserts, in his concluding chapter: "What is required is the institutionalizing of the right to dissent. What is needed is the institutionalizing of the protection of the full legal rights of each citizen."

I would, if I may, add to the "right to dissent" the "right to govern." It is precious little to ask of a socialist society, put forth as the best that man is capable of, that it lets its people speak. What is required, in Hungary or any other country which lays claim to the name of socialism, is that the people be allowed to govern.

Aptheker sees in Hungary after the storm a government which has learned its lessons from the past. I am not so sanguine. Russian has been restored as a compulsory second language. The right to strike is proscribed by death penalty. The Hungarian people have no more opportunity to recall Premier Janos Kadar by popular referendum at stated intervals than they had to demonstrate their dissatisfaction with Rakosi. The view seems to be that the fault of the regime was that the fault of the regime was not not rigid enough.

So the problem is one, as Apthe-

ker puts it, of "institutionalizing" the democratic process. Otherwise, the choice remains one—and it is wholly alien to socialism—between good dictators and bad dictators. And there are no good dictators. Aptheker is confident that socialism carries its own built-in correction of anti-democratic political aberrations because unlike capitalism it does not need and is in fact antipathetic toward them. At the same time he also endorses the view, held forth by the Chinese Communists, that antagonisms can and do exist between government and people within socialist countries.

That tyranny is alien to the principles of socialism is true. But the Stalin era is unhappy evidence of the fact that such tyranny can extend over many years without automatic correction. Worse, such was the state and party structure and ideology, both in the Soviet Union during the Stalin era and imitative Hungary, that no normal outlet existed for the denunciation and rectification of political crimes. On the contrary, to hint of crimes was itself a crime.

Instead of automatic self-correction, therefore, there was automatic silence. Aptheker is wholly correct, then, when he asserts that recognition of the existence of antagonisms between socialist governments and their people must be followed by steps to eliminate them.

While I part company with Aptheker at various crucial stages in his exposition of the truth, as he sees it, about Hungary, I view his book as a significant, if limited, effort to determine the truth about matters which ultimately will prove of far greater consequences to the cause of socialism in this country and throughout the world. I speak of course of the need for socialists, both in those countries where Communists rule and in those where socialism remains a minority trend, to formulate with absolute clarity principles and procedures guaranteeing democratic rule. These must include limitations on the duration and authority of office; checks and balances; popular referendum. They must provide for methods of persuasion and not coercion—the right of the people to choose to be wrong in matters of culture and opinion.

For the role of the benevolent-but-immovable guardian of the public interest leads inevitably to the tyrannies of Stalin and Rakosi.