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## **The Hungarian Revolution and America's Decision Not to Intervene: A Personal Statement**

*By Thomas J. Torda, Ph.D., Fairfax, VA, November 2006*

[This is a summary of the author's 6000-word article on this subject submitted to the September 2006 conference in Budapest on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution. This and the full article are available on [www.americanhungarianfederation.org/publications.htm](http://www.americanhungarianfederation.org/publications.htm) and [www.hungary1956.com/publications.htm](http://www.hungary1956.com/publications.htm)]

As a 2<sup>nd</sup>-generation Hungarian-American, I avidly read Michael Logan's report "Hungary's Lesson for Democracy Advocates" (Christian Science Monitor, 23 October). I grew up in Cleveland with Hungarian immigrants who arrived both before and after the revolution of October-November 1956, and understood their plight. I vividly recall the intense shock and outrage I felt as a teenager in the 1960s watching on a TV show (Walter Cronkite's *The Twentieth Century*) home-made films of Hungarian Freedom Fighters tossing Molotov cocktails at Soviet tanks in the streets of Budapest. I also recall having dinner with a chess-playing young Hungarian immigrant who told me he evaded Soviet patrols by swimming across a river and escaping into Austria—a time and place captured in James Michener's *The Bridge at Andau*.

Mr. Logan's article is one of few to address the sensitive subject of the U.S. Government's decision not to directly intervene in the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. Mr. Logan quotes Olivier Roy, a French Foreign Ministry consultant, as saying that "The war in Iraq shows us, in retrospect, that the US was right not to intervene in the Hungarian upheaval of 1956. It would have unleashed a bloody and protracted war in Europe, even if it ended in victory. Thirty-five years after the failed revolt in Hungary, the whole Soviet bloc collapsed from inside without any bloodshed. The lesson to be learned is that democratization cannot be forced on a country, it must be the result of a domestic political process, even a lengthy one."

This is one opinion, and I agree with Mr. Roy that the possible loss of many lives—both European and American—from an intervention would have been devastating. On the other hand, like many Hungarian-Americans, I feel that the US Government made serious mistakes both in the years before the Revolution and during the Revolution itself.

Clearly, Radio Free Europe (RFE) and the Voice of America in the 1950s encouraged resistance to Communist oppression. In a 1998 interview with CNN, Hungarian Ambassador to the U.S. Geza Jeszensky, 15 years old at the time of the revolution, remarked: "I kept listening to Radio Europe like 10 million Hungarians did. . . . But it was not RFE which instigated the Hungarian Revolution. Perhaps the Hungarians were misled, not by the radio, but by the propaganda language by the U.S. administration. It spoke about liberation and rollback. Eisenhower kept speaking about liberation, but as a historian put it, it proved to be only a myth. Liberation was not meant seriously."

Some Hungarians were ambivalent about U.S. aid. Hungarian resistance leader Gen. Bela Kiraly, quoted in Michael Logan's article, discouraged a U.S. reporter from encouraging American intervention: "I told him I believed military intervention would end in nuclear war and Hungary would be the first to be evaporated."

Furthermore, a close look at the facts suggests ambivalence in the remarks of U.S. officials throughout the crisis. On November 1, 1956, Hungarian Premier Imre Nagy summoned Soviet Ambassador Yuri Andropov (none other than the future Soviet Premier), informed him of Hungary's withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact, and demanded the withdrawal of the Soviet forces. Nagy also issued a formal request to UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld to air the issue of Hungary's neutrality at the UN General Assembly, and formally requested the help of the Four Great Powers in defending Hungary's neutrality. That same day, U.S. President Gen. Dwight Eisenhower praised the brave Hungarians but left no doubt about the U.S. Government's stance: "The peoples of Poland and Hungary, brave as ever through all their history, have offered their lives to live in liberty. . . . We have always made it clear that we would never renounce our hope and concern for these lands and people. We have denounced before the world forum of the United Nations the Soviet use of force in its attempt to suppress these peoples' risings. *And we ourselves have abstained from the use of force—knowing it to be contrary both to the interests of these peoples and to the spirit and methods of the United Nations*" [italics added]. On November 2, as Russian tanks massed around Budapest and Premier Nagy pleaded with the U.N. for quick action, U.S. Ambassador to the UN Henry Cabot Lodge remarked at a Security Council meeting that "It is as plain as it can be that we cannot ignore such a plea," and proposed that Sec.-Gen. Hammarskjöld engage in a "fact-finding mission." That same day, President Eisenhower offered \$20 million in food and medical supplies to the embattled Hungarians. At dawn 2 days later, 200,000 Soviet troops—including 4000 tanks—invaded Budapest; at an "unprecedented" 3 a.m. Security Council meeting, Amb. Lodge's resolution demanding a Soviet withdrawal from Hungarian territory was vetoed by the Soviet representative. Hammarskjöld then called an "emergency" nighttime General Assembly meeting, at which a U.S. resolution denounced the Soviet Union for "wholesale brutality" in Hungary and ordered the immediate withdrawal of all Soviet forces from Hungary. The vote was 50-8, with the Soviet bloc casting the 8 negative votes. An 11<sup>th</sup>-hour "urgent and personal message" from President Eisenhower to Soviet Premier Marshal Nikolai Bulganin, expressing the "shock and dismay" of the Western world, likewise failed to stem the rapid Soviet suppression of the uprising.

Years later, in his memoir *In Review*, Gen. Eisenhower helped explain his government's caution in light of the sobering reality of Hungary's geography: ". . . I still wonder what would have been my recommendation to the Congress and the American people had Hungary been accessible by sea or through the territory of allies who might have agreed to react positively to any attempt to help prevent the tragic fate of the Hungarian people. . . . *Sending United States troops alone into Hungary through hostile or neutral territory would have involved us in general war. . . . [I]t was obvious that no mandate for military action could or would be forthcoming. I realized that there was no use going further into this possibility*" [italics added].

What are the lessons to be learned from the U.S. Government's fateful decision not to intervene in this crisis that cost some 2600 Hungarian lives, eventually including that of Imre Nagy, hanged by the Soviets in 1958 for "treason." Olivier Roy has stated his opinion. I feel first of all that Gen. Eisenhower made a mistake by failing to even attempt to airlift supplies to the embattled Freedom Fighters; plans had been readied for this contingency, and Gen. Eisenhower vetoed them. More importantly, the U.S. Government, by failing to live up to its "liberation" philosophy as promoted by Radio Free Europe broadcasts in the years leading up to the Revolution, tragically misled millions of hopeful and desperate Hungarians. I am a firm believer in UN debate and action, but when Eisenhower chose to rely on the UN—perhaps due to his preoccupation with the simultaneous Suez Crisis and America's grim experience in the Korean War that had ended only 3 years before—he was choosing to ignore the grim reality of the power of the Soviet votes in the UN and of the Red Army on the ground. Today, when the U.S. Government places so much emphasis on spreading democracy and liberation from tyranny throughout the world, U.S. leaders should give serious consideration to the effects their statements on promoting democracy and liberation have in the world community, and to the ultimate price that may have to be paid.

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**About AHF: The American Hungarian Federation** (AHF), founded in 1906 in Cleveland, Ohio, is the oldest and largest Hungarian American national umbrella organization in the United States. AHF is all volunteer, non-profit, non-partisan, and independent, representing the interests of its member organizations and the Hungarian-American community. Among the oldest ethnic organizations in the US, AHF was established as an association of Hungarian societies, institutions and churches to “defend the interest of Americans of Hungarian origin in the United States.” Over the past 100 years and with the tragic events unfolding in Europe in WWI, WWII, and then again in 1956, AHF's mission broadened to include support of people of Hungarian descent on both sides of the Atlantic and in the successor states in the Carpathian Basin. *The American Hungarian Federation strives to unite the Hungarian-American community through work that supports common goals.*

*Fidelissimus ad Mortem!*

"Híven Mindhalálíg!" - "Faithful Unto Death!"  
- Colonel Michael Kovats de Fabriczy,  
in his letter to Benjamin Franklin,  
Commandant of the Pulaski Legion,  
Father of the US Cavalry and fallen  
hero in the American Revolution,  
died in battle, Charleston, SC, 1779

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