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# Introduction. Intellectual Life

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## and the First Crisis of State

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### Socialism in East Central

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Europe, 1953–6

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The Hungarian revolution of 1956 was a crucial event in the history of state socialism in Eastern and East-central Europe. Its ramifications reached well beyond not only the geographical boundaries of Hungary but also the chronological limits of late autumn and early winter 1956. Indeed, it was the culmination of the crisis of state socialism in Eastern Europe, following upon Stalin's death and resulting from the antagonistic conflict between the ever broader popular desire and demands for sweeping economic, social and political reforms and a short-sighted, hesitant nomenklatura (or class of functionaries) showing little if any willingness to compromise even with the modest revisionism gaining adherents among their own ranks. The crisis of 1953–6 brought to the political agenda a whole array of vast problems of economic, social and political modernisation that the Stalinist strategy of transformation, prevalent throughout the region from 1948–9 onwards, had been unable and/or unwilling to face successfully and could only exacerbate. The Stalinist modernisation project pursued a large-scale programme of industrialisation without due regard to social needs, economic rationality or longer-term social and economic feasibility. The apparatus of central economic planning executed gigantic development projects employing hundreds of thousands of new industrial workers for whom not even the minimum of urban infrastructures had been provided and whose efforts produced goods for which there existed neither needs nor markets. The industrialisation efforts laid claim to an increasing part of the agricultural workforce, while the agricultural population, radically reduced in numbers and harassed by centrally administered violent collectivisation campaigns and merciless taxation, had to cope with shortages of the most elementary food supplies.

The region's intellectual life had been exposed to demands of ideological purity, political expediency and alleged socio-economic utility. Whole academic fields/disciplines were purged from the old 'class-alien' intellectuals and replaced by new, young, inexperienced and uneducated but loyal party-soldiers. In the first years of the triumphant Stalinist revolution from above, even literature had annual plans enlisting the themes to be treated in the output of writers. There was hardly any area of social-political life that went untouched in the days of triumphant Stalinism and subsequently avoided the breakdown and crisis experienced around the mid-1950s,

and no social-political groupings during these years could escape being profoundly affected by the experience acquired and the choices made through the post-Stalinian 'new course' era to the anti-Stalinist revolution of late 1956. Indeed, one may say that the experience of those years had been formative for several national state-socialist regimes in East-central Europe and that all of them had been considerably affected in their general political style and make-up for the rest of their life-span.

Historical research within and without the region itself, especially since the collapse of communist rule, has made a great deal of progress in exploring especially the *political* dimensions of the period under discussion. In Hungary, the publications of the Institute on the 1956 Revolution and of the Institute of Political History constitute valuable contributions.<sup>1</sup> Important works saw the light of day during the 1980s on the economic history and the history of economic ideas of the 1950s. A major piece on the historical anthropology of Czech artistic life in the 1950s has recently been completed in the Netherlands.<sup>2</sup> Three papers in Hans Henning Hahn and Heinrich Olschowsky's book, *Das Jahr 1956 in Ostmitteleuropa*, discuss various aspects of the artistic life of Poland and the DDR.<sup>3</sup>

The workshop to which the articles in this theme issue were originally submitted was organised to provide a forum for the most recent results and findings of international research into some as yet unexplored social and political dimensions of the changes in intellectual life brought about (and brought to light) by the crisis and revolt(s) of 1953–6 in East-central Europe.<sup>4</sup> The political and social dynamics of

<sup>1</sup> To take only the latest important items in what is a long series of highly valuable publications, we should mention here János M. Rainer, *Nagy Imre. Politikai életrajz* [Imre Nagy: A Political Biography], I: 1896–1953 (Budapest: 1956-os Intézet, 1996); Éva Ständeisky, *Az írók és a hatalom, 1956–1963* [The Writers and the Power, 1956–1963], (Budapest: 1956-os Intézet, 1996); or the three-volume handbook of the 1956 revolution: András B. Hegedűs, Péter Kende, György Litván, (eds.), *1956 kézikönyve*, I: *Kronológia*; II: *Bibliográfia*; III: *Megtorlás és emlékezés* [Repression and remembering], (Budapest: 1956-os Intézet, 1996). In the context of the present discussion, the most important item published in the series of the Institute of Political History is Zoltán Ripp, *Belgrád és Moszkva között. A jugoszláv kapcsolat és a Nagy Imre-kérdés (1956. november–1959. február)* [Between Belgrade and Moscow: Relations with Yugoslavia and the Imre Nagy Question], (Budapest: Politikatörténeti Alapítvány, 1994, 'Politikatörténeti Füzetek', V.)

<sup>2</sup> Maruška Svašek, *Styles, Struggles, and Careers: An Ethnography of the Czech Art World, 1948–1992* (Academisch Proefschrift; Amsterdam: Universiteit van Amsterdam, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Aleksander Wojciechowski's, Heinrich Olschowsky's and Jan Prokop's papers in *Das Jahr 1956 in Ostmitteleuropa*, ed. Hans Henning Hahn und Heinrich Olschowsky (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> The workshop entitled '1956 and the Intellectuals', the first of what is planned as a series of Trondheim Seminars on the Intellectual Life of Eastern and East Central Europe, was held between 17 and 21 August 1996. Participants were as follows: Lee Congdon, John Connelly, Krystyna Kersten, Paweł Machcewicz, György Péteri, János M. Rainer, Éva Ständeisky and Maruška Svašek. The participants' thanks are due to Professors Kathleen Burk of University College London and Peter Pastor of Montclair State University for the generous intellectual assistance they rendered us by acting as rapporteurs to our seminar. We are also indebted to the Faculty of Arts of the Norwegian University of Science and Technology and to the Royal Air Force Academy of Norway for the support and hospitality which was so crucial for the success of our seminar. The assistance of research students Erik Ingebrigtsen, and Aleksandra Witczak and of Professor Gudmund Stang should be credited here, too, as it constituted the solid foundation upon which smooth organisation and a most conducive and pleasant social atmosphere depended.

intellectual life, academic professions (disciplines and/or research communities) and various artistic fields were our central concerns. In certain cases, as in the case of the DDR, it is the conspicuous lack of a longer-term impact of the intellectual foment of 1956 that demands explanation and which is one of the main tasks undertaken in John Connelly's paper. Throughout the Soviet bloc, the period of post-Stalinian thaw witnessed the emergence of a wide gap between the political discourses (aspirations and objectives) prevalent among the mass movements taking to the streets and the anti-Stalinist (but Marxist and communist) intellectuals: this is ably demonstrated in Pawel Machcewicz's paper on the Polish case, while János Rainer's biographical essay on Imre Nagy provides a highly sensitive analysis of the values and attitudes that isolated communist anti-Stalinism from popular revolt. The efforts of the state-socialist regimes to establish and maintain far-reaching controls over intellectual/cultural life collided inevitably with the increasing needs for trained expertise in a large number of areas connected to the economic modernisation project and with the high level of interventionist ambitions which characterised all major policy areas. The tolerance of and/or efforts to promote professional development, manifest in many policy areas of the post-Stalinian thaw, brought by necessity to the agenda a whole array of problems considered as highly sensitive and inconvenient by the *nomenklatura*. Professionalism as well as artistic autonomy imply a particular type of societal organisation within which *trained expertise* is the central value and *selection and reward by merit assessed by similarly educated experts* is the rule for recruitment to and advancement in occupational fields/hierarchies. Indeed, the distinction between 'critics' and 'experts' (between critical *intellectuals* and the *intelligentsia* consisting of well-educated professionals and experts) has been blurred in several countries and intellectual fields in our period. As is shown in the paper on Hungarian economics, for the young communist intellectuals revolting against the Stalinist regime, professionalisation (the conscious cultivation of a new identity as professional academics) was a major strategy pursued in order to emancipate themselves from the role of party-soldier and to enable themselves to 'provide a critical, transforming challenge to the cultural assumptions and political powers' of high-Stalinist society.<sup>5</sup> In other cultural/intellectual fields (as Maruška Svašek has shown in her paper on the Czech art world), the establishment of a 'hidden discourse', a second (partly underground) artistic field, seems to have been the dominant strategy which, in the short run, provided refuge for forms of artistic expression that were officially oppressed but which, in a longer perspective, could result in effectively transforming the official or public discourse of artistic life itself.

In contrast to the autonomous artist or professional academic, the ideal of the *party-soldier intellectual* defined loyalty and political-ideological reliability as the

<sup>5</sup> For an interesting discussion of the conceptual distinction between *intellectuals* providing a 'critical, transforming challenge' to prevailing cultural assumptions and political power, and an *intelligentsia* providing 'a legitimating, technical support for the cultural and political systems that define and dominate our society', see Lloyd Kramer, 'Habermas, Foucault, and the Legacy of Enlightenment Intellectuals', in Leon Fink, Stephen T. Leonard and Donald M. Reid (eds), *Intellectuals and Public Life. Between Radicalism and Reform* (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1996), 29–50.

central value, and implied the presence of a politically controlled *cadres administration* as the way of recruitment and promotion even (or, especially) in occupations of high complexity and demanding educational prerequisites. The clash between these diametrically opposite cultures and modes of societal organisation may be claimed to have been the major issue around which the conflicts and negotiations between the *nomenklatura* and the practitioners of various cultural/academic fields developed in 1953–6. One of the most intriguing questions in this regard is how it came that certain groups even within the ‘new’ party-intellectuals adopted professionalist strategies in the new era with demands for autonomy, freedom of intellectual inquiry and artistic expression, in strong contrast to their own former party-soldier identity and credo. As János Rainer’s paper demonstrates, in Imre Nagy’s case the transformation of the party-soldier (and high functionary) into an autonomous intellectual was not a feasible option, and yet this did not prevent Nagy from going a long way during the autumn of 1956 to accept and satisfy the demands of the revolution. Important questions pertinent to the changing agenda and aesthetic criteria of arts in the post-Stalinian thaw are raised and discussed in Maruška Svašek’s paper. After the upheavals of 1918–19 and 1944–8, the revolution of 1956 and the terror that followed encouraged a third major wave of intellectual emigration to an already existing Hungarian intellectual diaspora – among them a number of outstanding or prominent scholars and artists, such as the philosopher Imre Lakatos or the composer György Ligeti. To what extent and in what manner had their experience before and during the developments of 1956 shaped their intellectual/artistic trajectory in the emigration? This is one of the issues raised and discussed in Lee Congdon’s essay on Imre Lakatos.

The essays collected in the present theme issue are offered to the readers as a contribution and encouragement towards further comparative study of various intellectual/cultural fields in the countries of state socialist East-central Europe.