

# István Bibó after 1956

## Johanna Granville

**Source:** Johanna Granville, “István Bibó after 1956,” [Bibó István a november 4-iki események után], paper delivered at the conference “István Bibó and the History of Hungary in the Twentieth Century,” Centro Studi sulla Storia dell’Europa Orientale, Trento, Italy, October 26-27, 2001.

[https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CDAQFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.csseo.org%2FPapers%2FpaperGranville.rtf&ei=cDqjUa2MH4uqPIOagOAD&usg=AFQjCNH59Xc80fIkLRZijDYt\\_BQoMJqUhg&sig2=NmIphQ-OU-XR4SNMcx3F1Q&bvm=bv.47008514,d.ZWU&cad=rjt](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CDAQFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.csseo.org%2FPapers%2FpaperGranville.rtf&ei=cDqjUa2MH4uqPIOagOAD&usg=AFQjCNH59Xc80fIkLRZijDYt_BQoMJqUhg&sig2=NmIphQ-OU-XR4SNMcx3F1Q&bvm=bv.47008514,d.ZWU&cad=rjt)

The influence of István Bibó (1911-1979) has steadily increased since his death, not only in his native Hungary, but worldwide. His essays address a wide range of issues, from the problems of democratic transformation in Hungary (including a radical administrative reform of the county system), European history with its *cul-de-sacs*, nations and their proper place in the modern world, international law and the problems of war and peace. This paper will discuss István Bibó’s actions and writings during the Hungarian Revolution, his actions after his release from prison, his views toward the Soviet Union, and some key themes in all of his writings.

### Bibó’s Actions During the 1956 Revolution

In forming the new coalition government, Imre Nagy---the Chairman of the Council of Ministers---appointed István Bibó as Minister of State. Bibó was already serving on the executive committee of the newly reconstituted National Peasant Party (renamed the Petőfi party). This appointment was made very late--- November 3, just one day before the second Soviet intervention. On the morning of

November 4 Bibó calmly continued typing in his office in the national parliament while Soviet troops occupied the building. They must have thought he was some minor clerk carrying on with his work regardless of the incumbent regime.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, he was writing a proclamation that some later would call the quote-on-quote “Constitution” of the resistance. Having signed the proposal as Minister of State, Bibó had copies duplicated, then calmly walked out of the building through the troops surrounding it, and had the copies distributed, by one means or another. Bibó was thus the last Hungarian politician in the Nagy government to leave his post. For the first time Bibó achieved international fame. According to György Litván, István Bibó was one of the personalities who typified the national democratic tendency in 1956 which gained ground in the second period of the revolutionary process, in the "rear-guard action." Another Hungarian scholar said, if Imre Nagy became the symbol of the Revolution in his martyrdom (he was executed in Budapest on June 16, 1958) then István Bibó must certainly be considered the symbol of intellectual resistance.<sup>2</sup>

### Bibó's Writings on the 1956 Revolution

Bibó in fact stayed in the Parliament for two more days, leaving only on November 6 when the quisling János Kádár arrived from Szolnok with a Soviet escort. At his home Bibó continued writing a proposal [*Tervezet*], which he finished

---

<sup>1</sup> Bernard Crick, “Introduction” in *The Paralysis of International Institutions and the Remedies: A Study of Self-Determination, Concord Among the Major Powers, and Political Arbitration* (NY: John Wiley & Sons, 1976), p. vi.

<sup>2</sup> Sándor Szilágyi, “Postscript: István Bibó, Central Europe’s Political Therapist,” in István Bibó, *Democracy, Revolution, Self-Determination* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 541.

on November 9, and distributed as a small pamphlet, entitled *Proposal for a Compromise Solution of the Hungarian Problem*.<sup>3</sup>

In the proposal, Bibó stated that if the Soviet leaders would gradually withdraw their troops and allow the Nagy government to reestablish itself, then the latter would not pursue counterrevolutionary policies and would not attempt to revive the Horthy era. However, having already resolved to overthrow the Nagy regime, the Kremlin leaders simply ignored Bibó's suggestions. During November Bibó's Proposal was plastered on walls and trees throughout Budapest, and the Central Workers' Council of Greater Budapest adopted it as a basis for their negotiations with the Kádár government.<sup>4</sup>

Bibó wrote or contributed to at least three other documents pertaining to the Hungarian Revolution. On November 19 the Petőfi Party and other non-communist parties and organizations sent a letter to Prime Minister Neru, asking for India's mediation in the "Hungarian question." India was popular in Hungarian intellectual circles in the 1950s because of its leading role in the nonaligned movement and condemnation of aggression and force.<sup>5</sup>

On December 8 Bibó and other leaders of the Petőfi Party prepared and signed the so-called "Declaration about the Fundamental Principles of the State, Social, and Economic System of Hungary and about the Ways of Overcoming the Political Crisis." They asked K. P. S. Menon, India's Ambassador to Moscow—who was then visiting Budapest—to convey its contents to the Soviet leaders. A letter to Ambassador Andropov dated December 21, 1956 was found in Bibó's

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> See István Vida, "Levél Nehruhoz, Indiaminiszter—elnökéhez," *Historia* (1998), no. 1, pp. 23-26.

archive. When Bibó and the others found out that the Soviet Embassy in Budapest did not receive a copy of the Declaration, they sent the Embassy another copy. In the letter Bibó and the others also informed Andropov that they had sent another copy of the Declaration to the Indian Embassy in Budapest. <sup>6</sup>

Finally, in March 1957, Bibó wrote another article about the Hungarian revolution, entitled “The Situation of Hungary and the World.” [*Magyarország helyzete és a világhelyzet*]. He distributed the article informally inside Hungary and arranged for it to be smuggled out to the West with the request that it be published “without regard to the person and situation of the author” in a neutral press organ, preferably in India. In the end, *Die Presse* of Vienna printed the essay in its September 8, 1957 issue.<sup>7</sup>

In this piece Bibó characterizes the Hungarian Revolution both as a tragedy and scandal, and as an opportunity and source of hope. He chastised the United States as well as the Soviet Union, pointing out that U.S. nonintervention exposed the hypocrisy of the “liberation” policy. He explained that the Hungarian Revolution and its defeat had a detrimental effect on the West’s image. He wrote, “The point has been reached whereby the policies and propaganda which the Western powers have been pursuing for ten years, invoking principles and moral

---

<sup>6</sup> M. Csicskó and A. Körösényi, “Levél a Szovjetunió nagykövetéhez,” *Századvég*, no. 1-2, p. 164. Also published in E. D. Orekhova, V. T. Sereda and A. S. Stykalin, *Sovetskii Soyuz i Vengerskii Krizis 1956 Goda: Dokumenty* (Moscow: Rosspen, 1998), p. 729.

<sup>7</sup> Sándor Szilágyi, “Postscript: István Bibó, Central Europe’s Political Therapist,” in István Bibó, *Democracy, Revolution, Self-Determination* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 541.

considerations, may be questioned by many people as to their meaning and honesty.<sup>8</sup>

The Soviet crackdown, moreover, was a tragedy in that it was completely unnecessary, Bibó explained. The teenage freedom fighters did not want to restore capitalism; they wanted to improve the socialist system. The violence was abating.

He wrote:

The expropriation of large fortunes, which was achieved in Hungary with the help of the communists, though certainly not solely through them, has become such a final and accepted fact during the last decade that nobody, least of all the revolutionaries, has any thought of undoing this.<sup>9</sup>

For Bibó the suppression of the Hungarian Revolution was also tragic because it signified a failed attempt to return to a popular front, and Bibó considered the popular front in general as “the only feasible and fruitful way of social reform in a Europe in which there is no practical prospect of the popular masses carrying out a revolution in supreme desperation.” He believed: “History would take a straight course if it were realized at last that the formula of a popular front is not just a transitional tactical experiment.”<sup>10</sup>

Finally, the military crackdown represented a tragedy and scandal because it stained the Soviet image in the international communist movement. The Soviet Union could have acquired greater prestige if it had been able to demonstrate to the countries in the Nonaligned Movement that small states like Hungary could enjoy substantial freedom within the Soviet bloc.

---

<sup>8</sup> István Bibó, “The Hungarian revolution of 1956: Scandal and Hope” in *Democracy, Revolution, Self-Determination* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 333.

<sup>9</sup> Cited in George Schöpflin and Nancy Wood, eds, *In Search of Central Europe* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1989), p. 53.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

Always careful to look at both sides, Bibó also mentioned the positive lessons of the suppressed revolution: 1) that it is not just the victims of one-party rule who demand change and greater freedom, but the youth of the one-party regime as well; and 2) that, generally, no people should be written off as lacking the desire for freedom. Bibó also maintained that the suppressed revolution offered hope and an opportunity to the world. Because world peace concerns both superpowers, he argued, the Hungarian situation provided a chance for both powers to compromise and make concessions. Hungary could be a test case for whether the world powers could “jointly guarantee the creation of a socio-political system that neither preferred but both recognized as the only solution.”<sup>11</sup>

#### **Bibó’s Activities Between 1956--1958**

Bibó was arrested in 1957 and received a life sentence in 1958 for "high treason" (together with Árpád Göncz, who later became president of the Hungarian Republic). He barely escaped execution. In 1963 he was freed by an amnesty. In the last fifteen years, Bibó stuck to a private vow that he would never compromise with the Kádár-regime which he called “born in blood and steel,” despite the fact that he considered its leaders more intelligent than those who had served in the Rakosi regime. He said at one point “I consider it my own personal responsibility clearly to state certain political and social truths that I have recognized, and concession and compromise are the gestures least compatible with this task.”<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> “The Hungarian Revolution of 1956,” p. 350.

<sup>12</sup> Bibó István összegyűjtött munkái, p. 940, cited in Sándor Szilágyi, “Postscript: István Bibó, Central Europe’s Political Therapist,” in István Bibó, *Democracy, Revolution, Self-Determination* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 543.

Bibó lived very quietly, working as a librarian in the National Statistical Office until his early retirement in 1971. He produced several important works, although nowhere nearly as much as he could have, had he not suffered from high blood pressure and a kidney disease. Bibó was politically rehabilitated in 1978, but died a year later, on May 10, 1979 of a heart attack, just before a *Festschrift* in his honor could be published.<sup>13</sup>

### Bibó and the USSR

Bibó's adamant rejection of the Kádár regime can no doubt be traced to his earlier views about the Soviet Union, Communism, and the Soviet leaders' rejections of his proposals written in the aftermath of the Soviet crackdown.

In his essay entitled *A kelet-európai kisállamok nyomorúsága*, or „The Distress of the East European Small States,” published in 1946, Bibó listed „the final and lasting assimilation of Soviet Russia” as one of the five tasks that the “peacemakers” were advised to keep in mind. He didn't consider the Soviet Union as part of civilized Europe, apparently.<sup>14</sup> He sharply condemned the Marxist thesis of the dictatorship of the proletariat, because it substantiates the mechanism of a single, indivisible dictatorship that excludes any kind of democracy and terrorizes the mass population. He also pointed out that Marx and his followers were wrong to claim that the ruling classes had to be overthrown by revolutionary violence.

To this day, there is very little information on Bibó in Russian in the Russian Federation. I just spent seven months in Moscow on a research grant. I looked in the card catalogue of the Lenin Library. There were only two entries

---

<sup>13</sup> Sándor Szilágyi, “Postscript: István Bibó, p. 543.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 533.

between “Biblyi, Konstantin Nikitovich” and “Biboletova, Merem Zabatovna.”

One of these entries was in German, written by a Hermann Bibó and the other book was in Magyar about Hungarian architecture during the Habsburg Empire. I then asked the librarian, who led me to another card catalogue listing books from a “fond” that was closed until 1992. I found one book by the right Bibó. This was *The Paralysis of International Institutions and the Remedies*. However, it was in English. Thus a Russian citizen who does not know English has little access to Bibo’s works. From my colleagues at the Russian Academy of Sciences, Vyacheslav Sereda, Aleksandr Stykalin, and Tofik Muslimovich Islamov, I acquired the Hungarian journal published in Russian as *Vengerskii Meridian*. This is a special issue published in January 1990 devoted solely to István Bibó. It contains the two works written in 1956 that I mentioned above (the “Proclamation” and “The Situation of Hungary and the World.”). It also contains “The Distress of the East European States” and then two important works written after his release from prison, “Reflections on the Social Development of Europe (1971-72)” and a short excerpt from “The Paralysis of International Institutions and the Remedies” (written in 1972 and published in England in 1976) dealing with the Arab-Israeli conflict.

As is well-known, Bibó’s work “Reflections on the Social Development of Europe” was actually a six-hour-long lecture entitled “Az európai társadalomfejlődés értelme” that was tape-recorded in 1971-2. We have István Bibó, Junior and István Vida to thank for preparing it for publication.

## Main Themes in Bibó's Writings

Bibó's essays address a wide range of issues. In addition to those mentioned above, Bibó argued against both the false idealism of 'world government' and the false realism of exclusive national interests. He believed that self-determination is essential for democracy. He advocated toleration in Hungary, a multi-national state.

He also believed that revolutionary violence in and of itself does not have a liberating, creative effect. He explained that the two most unproductive human types are the revolutionary and the reactionary, that the Stalinist and Fascist are deformed versions of each, and that these two adversarial human types live off each other.

One idea that I find especially interesting is Bibó's argument that the fundamental defining characteristic of human beings is fear, which he says results from the knowledge and expectation of death. Fear, he said, is the root cause of all conflict in society. He claimed that nature is not an arena of warring relationships, and that intra-species aggression is confined to the fearful human race.<sup>15</sup> One wonders what Bibó would have said about the terrorist hijackings of September 11. What kind of fear could suicidal terrorists have? Could the ringleaders fear Americans as a threat to the Islamic World? What course of action would Bibó suggest we follow at this point?

## Conclusion

---

<sup>15</sup> R. N. Berki, "The Realism of Moralism: The Political Philosophy of István Bibó," *History of Political Thought*, vol XIII, no. 3 (Autumn 1992), p. 519.

In any case, Bibó 's influence has grown steadily since the late 1970s and continue to help smooth the transition in Hungary in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. To quote the late Professor Berki, "If Bibó's political thought is to be epitomized in one succinct phrase, it is the 'realism of moralism,' or the almost flawless synthesis of a deeply radical, morally infused *vision* and value-system with the hard-nosed, unsentimental realist's *insight* into enduring problems of politics and society."<sup>16</sup> Whatever advice Bibó would have given regarding the terrorists, it would probably be both moral and realistic.

#### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Bibó, István, Károly Nagy, and András A. Boros-Kazai. *Democracy, Revolution, Self-Determination*. NY: Columbia University Press, 1991.

Bibó, István. *The Paralysis of International Institutions and the Remedies: A Study of Self-Determination, Concord Among the Major Powers, and Political Arbitration*. NY: John Wiley & Sons, 1976.

Bibó, István and Tibor Huszár. *Bibó István: beszélgetések, politikai-életrajzi dokumentumok*. Budapest: Kolonel Lap- és Könyvkiadó, 1989.

Huszár, Tibor and Gábor Hanák. *Bibó István (1911-1979): életút dokumentumokban*. Budapest: 1956-os Intézet and Osiris-Századvég, 1995.

Laignel-Lavastine, Alexandra. *Esprits d'Europe: autour de Czeslaw Milosz, Jan Potofcka, István Bibó*. Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 2005.

Romsics, Ignác and Béla K. Király. *Geopolitics in the Danube Region: Hungarian Reconciliation Efforts, 1848-1998*. Budapest; New York: Central European University Press, 1998.

---

<sup>16</sup> Berki, "The Realism of Moralism, p. 513.