Lipták's "A Testament of Revolution" - Book Review

Leslie Muray
Curry College, Milton, MA
BOOK REVIEW:

This is one of the finest books I have come across in my extensive research on the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. The part of the narrative that is memoir was for the most part written in a refugee camp in Austria, written by the author’s then 20 year “Öcsi” student-self (the word is a common one in Hungarian meaning “little brother;” p. 20); the postscript and some of the footnotes were written by his grandfather Béla-self. Lipták describes his middle class upbringing to his days as a student at Budapest’s Technical University, his social location at the time of the student demonstrations, joined by workers and people from every walk of life, on October 23, 1956 that was the beginning of the Hungarian Revolution of that same year. His description of the demonstration, his ensuing participation in the revolution, and escape to Austria following the suppression of the uprising is engaging, in fact downright riveting.

One of the best features of the book is showing how the personal story of one person can intersect with great events in history and how these great events shape, crush, or creatively transform people’s lives. Lipták does this in an unassuming way by telling his story - and Hungary’s.

Another extremely important feature of the book is his very fair and inclusive assessment and description of the major “players” involved. For example, he dedicates the book to two of the martyrs of the revolution, one a devout Christian, the other an agnostic Jew and proud communist (he also dedicates it to “the heroic children of Budapest” and to his grandchildren). The former, János Danner, died during the uprising while the latter, István Angyal, a survivor of Auschwitz, was hanged during the reprisals that followed the suppression of the revolution. The author became acquainted with both of them during the intense days of the revolution and speaks of both with obvious fondness. He speaks with a similar fondness for the memory of Imre Nagy, Prime Minister from 1953 to 1955,
and again during the revolution, before that 1953-55, - indeed it was Lipták who discovered his grave in 1985. He also has great admiration for another popular hero of the revolution, executed with Nagy, Colonel, then General, and eventually Defense Minister in the waning days of the uprising, Pál Maleter. He writes appreciatively of Cardinal Mindszenty, although the author did feel at the time that the Prince Primate’s radio address following his release from long years of imprisonment and house arrest was too negative.

I am making this point because, following the initial unity in 1989 surrounding the events of 1956, particularly at the time of the reburial of Nagy, Maleter, and their “martyred comrades,” major figures like Nagy, Maleter, Angyal, and Árpád Göncz, former President of Hungary have been the subject of attack by the right, including some of the organizations of former freedom fighters representing the poorest elements among them and the ones who suffered the most during the reprisals. Göncz has been accused (without evidence) of having been an informer during his six years in prison after the revolution; Nagy has been maligned for having been a Communist, Maleter for having had his troops shoot at freedom fighters. In the mid-90s, there was a controversy over a projected statue of Angyal symbolizing the freedom fighters because as a communist, although never a member of the Party, he was not representative of the vast majority of freedom fighters; he was eventually replaced by Peter Mansfeld, who was executed once he turned eighteen. In comparison to this quibbling and in-fighting, which often loses sight of the fact that those being maligned lost their lives for the cause of ’56, Lipták’s narrative is vibrant testimony that the “Revolution of 1956 is everybody’s,” not just certain segments of Hungarian society.

Some uncorrected errors are a weakness of the book, as for example the allusion to the execution of Imre Nagy by the Soviets (p.168). While this was believed to be true by some at the time of the announcement of the execution, it has certainly been known for some time that the trial and execution were carried out by the Hungarian government.
Lipták has some intriguing ideas on which one can only wish he would expand. For example, echoing much of the rhetoric of the revolution, he maintained at the time that:

“…not wanting to exchange the communist zoo for the capitalist jungle, not wanting to turn history back nor to concentrate on revenge. ..we did want justice. At a minimum, we wanted repentance from the traitors and we wanted the courts to decide the fate of those whose hands were bloody. On the issue of property rights I spoke against all forms of state ownership, because it breeds bureaucracy and corruption. I suggested that the homes, land, and small businesses should be returned to their rightful owners and that larger industry or collective farms could be given to their employees if the workers want that, or if they did not, could be privatized. I spoke about equal opportunity for all, while protecting the dignity of the less fortunate and poor. I ended up saying: ‘And most of all, we want liberty! We want our new society to be free and democratic.” (p.59).

One can only wonder what the author thinks today---especially about workers’ ownership of the factories. Other issues involve the fact that no Nuremberg-like trials were held after 1989 and that ex-Communists seemed to be the wealthy new capitalists. Once again, one wishes that the author had elaborated on what he would have liked to have seen, especially the implied “lustrace” laws and holding perpetrators into account for what amounts to “crimes against humanity.”

“Lustrace” laws literally refer to the “illumination” of those ex-Communists who were privy to information gathered by the security state agency(ies) and or actually worked for those agencies as informers. In Germany, the Czech Republic, and Poland, the lustrace laws were strict, at times used to harass ex-Communists (at least one prominent former dissident in the Czech republic went back into self-imposed exile after constant harassment for his father’s “confession” concerning his role in the “Prague Spring”). In Hungary, these laws were looser. Ex-Communist officials in Parliament or some branch of the government were called on to resign by lustrace courts if they did not do so voluntarily (former Prime Minister Gyula Horn and former President of the Parliament Zoltán Gál were in this predicament; they did not resign, with no public recrimination). It was not until 2002 that
Hungary’s “illuminations” were revealed in a more sweeping way, affecting politicians of the right as much as, if not more, than the left, as well as popular writers like Peter Esterházy whose aristocratic father, it turned out, had informed on his son. One wishes that Lipták had expressed an opinion about how he would have liked to see such issues handled.

The book has no separate treatment of religion. There are allusions to the arrest and trial of Cardinal Mindszenty along with horrified bewilderment at the drugging of the Cardinal and at the hanging of the journalist who uncovered this. The author also dissents vigorously from the confiscation and nationalization of church schools. It is fair to say that Lipták has a keen awareness of the significant role the churches have had in Hungarian culture and history.

The inclusiveness and eminent fairness of this narrative, along with its magnificent depiction of the intersection of personal and communal history, makes it an important resource for what I call the “forgiveness of the past,” the coming to grips with the horrors perpetrated by totalitarian and post-totalitarian regimes, as well as other forms of dictatorship, of the twentieth century.

Leslie Muray, Curry College, Milton MA