

# Protesting, Destroying Symbols, Lynching, Onlooking, and Rallying

## Figures and Functions of the Crowd during the 1956 Hungarian Revolution\*

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Received 8 February 2024 | Accepted 26 July 2024 | Published online 16 September 2024

**Abstract.** The paper discusses the activities, the behaviour, and the function of the crowd of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. Based on contemporary documents, the study shows the characteristics of the mass movements of the 1956 Revolution. The main question is how the crowd, already explored theoretically by social psychology and other sciences, functioned in different settings: what types of gatherings and demonstrations emerged, how the local context and the social composition of the crowd influenced its behaviour, and how this was perceived by bystanders.

**Keywords:** mass phenomena, crowd, mass movements, revolution, mob, demonstration, mass psychology

*“The crowd is everyone, you, me, all of us.  
All men, when they come together,  
become a mass, and there are no distinctions in this matter.”<sup>1</sup>*

Who was the crowd of fifty-six? How can we distinguish between different forms of mass manifestation? What role did the lack of democratic education play in mass mobilizations? There is no doubt that the masses were the protagonists of the twentieth century. Political movements of people seeking new points of reference multiplied. Searching for a place in politics, the masses also expressed their demands in marches and demonstrations. Gustave Le Bon, Gabriel Tarde, Sigmund Freud, and

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\* An earlier version of the study was published in Hungarian: Ständeisky, *Népralom ötvenhatban*.  
1 Moscovici, *The Age of the Crowd*, 87.

others had already noticed these new phenomena in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and in the 1920s and 1930s the number of people interested in the dynamics of the masses continued to grow, before becoming the subject of research in philosophy, sociology, and psychology after the Second World War.<sup>2</sup>

According to social psychologist Serge Moscovici, “[...] when individuals congregate in crowds their intelligence is weakened and their sense of reality becomes blurred.”<sup>3</sup> The person who seeks shelter in the crowd not only escapes from oppressive freedom—individual responsibility—but finds an effective substitute for his previous lack of freedom.<sup>4</sup> However, the crowd of 1956 seems to have *also* been a manifestation of the “Great Courage” (the philosopher Kierkegaard considered the “Great Cowardice” the essence of the crowd).<sup>5</sup>

### Mass phenomena in the first days of the revolution

Revolutions usually begin with euphoric mass demonstrations and the frenzy continues until unflinching signs of chaos appear, until the quality of life and the security of people’s property are threatened by events that have become opaque and uncontrollable.<sup>6</sup> The street is the place of mass scenes.<sup>7</sup> In the early stages of the revolution, the street resembled a kind of primordial fog, a chaos of beginnings from which groups and individuals capable of articulating the revolution slowly emerged. The active characters and consolidators of the revolution mostly gave shape and a framework to the chaotic events in people’s assembly, held in a closed space.

Revolutions generally start in a similar way: the masses take to the streets, chanting slogans and waving flags. They berate the hated regime, tear down its symbols of power, wreak havoc on them. The crowd tries to make its demands public (occupying the printing press, freeing political prisoners). The demonstrators are mixed with curious people, adventure seekers, and tramps. People are gripped by a mass psychosis: their personalities become part of the mass body, and they are narcotized by the shared experience. Somewhere a slap is thrown, a fight breaks out,

2 Le Bon, *The Crowd*; Tarde, “The Public and the Crowd”; Freud, “Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego.” Research on mass psychology was summarized, for instance, by Alice Freifeld in her monograph on mass phenomena of the 1848 Hungarian Revolution; Freifeld, *Nationalism and the Crowd in Liberal Hungary, 1848–1914*.

3 Moscovici, *The Age of the Crowd*, 157.

4 Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*.

5 Szilágyi, Ákos. “A Nagy Gyávaság” [The Great Cowardice]. In *Népszabadság*, 15 April 2006.

6 Klicperová, Feierabend, and Hofstetter, “Nonviolent Conflict Resolution”; Kubik, *The Power of Symbols*.

7 See on this topic Horváth, “Kollektív erőszak és városi térhasználat 1956-ban.”

a shot is fired. Rumours get a foothold. Demonstrators are on the edge of sanity and frenzy, and rush to listen to a speaker, to topple a statue.

As the theoretical literature around the concept of the crowd echoes: the moral brakes are released.<sup>8</sup> Strangers embrace, the prospect of liquidating evil makes the crowd optimistic. Time is the enemy of mass frenzy: there is no exalted enthusiasm that does not end in a few hours. The beginning of the 1956 Revolution is a more or less organized celebration by university students. It is launched by relatively homogeneous groups—students, factory and company workers—and then joined by onlookers on the streets and individuals and groups who rush to the procession. The celebration is accompanied by rites: by chanting slogans, toppling statues, hammering stars. As the poet, writer, and painter Lajos Kassák puts in his diary:

“It is this spontaneity, this wonderful coordination that gives this movement its great psychological and moral significance. For the moment, it has neither a spokesman nor a distinctive political leadership. Everyone seems to be acting according to their own individual discretion, and there is no disunity.”<sup>9</sup>

It goes without saying that there is no homogenous mass, so the participants in the persisting revolution become divided. The upheaval is an opportunity to rehash old grievances, a chance for spontaneous compensation. The exalted solemnity spills over into liberality. The number of disturbances multiplies. Marchers break into the premises of the authorities, throw documents around, take them away, burn them. In the days of upheaval, attention turns to strong, well-organized people, and from among them, seemingly at random, new leaders are chosen.<sup>10</sup> While the revolution in the Hungarian capital is remembered as a solemn and exalted event, little is known about the revolutions in the countryside. The municipalities have increasingly blurring memories of the local changes of power, but few can be proudly accepted as heartwarming snatches of the past. Memories of confusion, fear, and uncertainty mostly remain, while the joy and the sense of liberation have left fewer lasting marks.<sup>11</sup>

It is well known that in October 1956, the masses also changed in space and time. On 23 October, in Budapest, a peaceful, organized demonstration turned into

8 Cf. Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, 59.

9 Kassák, *Szénaboglya*, 422. It is worth comparing this depiction with the urban historical analysis of another of Kassák’s mass descriptions in Gyáni, *Budapest – túl jön és rosszon*, 132–33.

10 Tomka, “Erőszak a történelemben”; Gyáni, “Fővárosi zavargások a dualizmus évtizedeiben”; see also my detailed analysis in Standeisky, *Népralom ötvenhatban*, 341–80.

11 For the best-known literary representation of the atmosphere of the crowd, see Nádás, *A Book of Memories*, 481–83.

a multi-centre popular uprising and armed struggle (the siege of the radio, the toppling of statues, and a mass rally in front of the Parliament). In the following days, similar demonstrations took place in the big cities, each with its local characteristics.<sup>12</sup> The first week of the revolution consisted almost exclusively of mass demonstrations, marches, public meetings in closed and open spaces. In contemporary sources on the demonstrations, one extreme is represented by enthusiastic press reports, the other by internal party reports reflecting a mood of despondency.<sup>13</sup> The local party reports received by the headquarters of the ‘Hungarian Laborers’ Party’ or *Magyar Dolgozók Pártja* (MDP), give a vivid, albeit one-sided picture of the mass demonstrations, since internal information could not be used to distort the party’s position in a dangerous situation. However, fear confounded the reporters’ judgement: it exaggerated the danger to their lives, and made their behaviour confused and unpredictable. The same event was perceived differently by those who lost power, and by those who got a taste of power. It differed for the journalist who deliberately coloured the events to appeal to emotions, and for the anxious police officer.

These approaches are illustrated by contemporary assessments of the events of 26 October in Zalaegerszeg.

“Even in the pouring rain of the morning, the crowd grew by the minute. [...] Power, tremendous power radiated from the crowd. When they arrived at the county council headquarters, the demand was unanimous: the employees of the council shall come with us! [...] The demands were repeated in the railway station’s microphone [...]. The crowd is cheering, surging, roaring [...], hammers are clattering, crowbars clanging, the debris of one of the symbols of the national shackle, the so-called Statue of Liberty, are crumbling. [...] Our people, our city, we do not need the statue”

—read the special edition of the Zalaegerszeg newspaper of 26 October.<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, the Ministry of the Interior’s duty officer reported on the evacuation of the state security offices.<sup>15</sup>

What these sources do not tell us is that a few hours later, the peaceful demonstration turned bloody: shots were fired into the crowd from the party committee’s headquarters. The dead and wounded were left in the streets. The report by *Magyar Távirati Iroda*, ‘Hungarian Telegraphic Office’, which intended to inform the party leadership rather than the public, paints a different picture:

12 For more details see Standeisky, *Népuralom* ötvenhatban, 360–65.

13 Urbán and Vida, “Jelentések a pártközpontnak,” 92.

14 “Nemzetiszín zászlók alatt a zalaegerszegi dolgozók, ifjúság” [Laborers, Youth of Zalaegerszeg under the Nation’s Flags]. In *Zala*, 26 October 1956.

15 Kajári, ed., *Rendőrségi napi jelentések*, 8.

“On Friday, there was a disciplined demonstration of several thousand people. The crowd marched to the county council headquarters demanding Dénes’s resignation. Dénes appeared on the balcony shouting: »If you don’t want bloodshed, get lost!« The crowd, with white handkerchiefs in their hands, sent a delegation to negotiate. At Dénes’s proposal, a workers’ council was established on the spot. Dénes resigned, but refused to demonstrate with the people, although he was promised no harm. The peaceful demand was met by firing into the crowd, resulting in two dead and many wounded. The police, the national defense forces and the *ÁVH* [*Államvédelmi Hatóság*, ‘State Protection Authority’] did not intervene. News about the new government arrived at the workers’ council meeting—thousands of people cheered the rollcall, while protesting against Apró and Bebrits. The armed forces of the *ÁVH* were disarmed on Saturday afternoon, [their members] turned in their weapons and handed the buildings over to the workers’ council.”<sup>16</sup>

The accounts quoted above do not give a fully coherent picture of what happened, but they do give a good picture of the confusion, the chaos, the lack of transparency.

In a small number of cases, the crowd was involved in conflicts with local or delegated units of enforcement power, and these incidents caused strong repercussions, precisely because of the injuries and deaths. In many places, soldiers and the police joined the marchers, which eased the demonstrators’ sense of threat. It was impossible to know how the commanders would react: whether they would obey a possible superior order to forcefully disperse the crowd or issue a fire order on their own initiative. It was not uncommon for the gunman to fire in excitement or to aim at the crowd rather than in the air. It was precisely here that the course of events was reversed: the armed authorities were unable to defend the disintegrating party state because of the instability of the leadership and the political and moral divisions, since they themselves were disintegrating. The masses of 1956 differed in their character, behaviour, composition, and dynamics, but they shared their anti-Sovietism and their hatred of the *ÁVH*. The two main characteristics of the people’s demands were the desire for independence and the need to reform the system. Both were accompanied by criticism of the party state leaders and their policies.

### The demonstrating crowd

Of the many types of political mass movements, in 1956 we can distinguish two: the demonstrating crowd and the agitating crowd. This division is related to Canetti’s notion of open and closed crowds. According to Canetti, the spontaneously growing,

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16 Litván, “Vidéki helyzetkép, 1956. október 23–27.,” 33.

natural crowd is the open crowd. Its opposite is the closed, “established” one.<sup>17</sup> In the first four or five days of the revolution, the demonstrating masses shaped the events in the capital and the countryside. The first week of the revolution was characterized by mass demonstrations and marches, while the second was full of rallies, with fewer gatherings of large crowds.

### Peaceful marchers and destroyers of symbols

It depended on local conditions—the size of the settlement, the nature of power—whether the series of peaceful protests would result in a peaceful transition (the beginning of a reform period) or a protracted, conflictual change of power. The later the news of the Budapest events reached a smaller municipality, the greater the chance that the local transition would be peaceful. The temperament of the messengers, individual grievances, the population’s division, the community’s wealth, its leaders’ past behaviour, and the local intelligentsia’s reaction to the events—all contributed to the revolutionary or relatively passive nature of a community. Peaceful marches were accompanied by singing and chanting slogans. The mass agitation that marked the beginning of a local revolution was almost always accompanied by the destruction of symbols.

While the toppling of the Stalin statue in Budapest can be considered a carnival scene, the series of simultaneous events in front of the Hungarian Radio can be regarded a mass struggle with destruction of human lives.<sup>18</sup> A soldier lad reported on the Budapest events to his parents in Pécs on 24 October:

“Since last night, I would say, we have been under siege here. [...] At the radio building, the state guards deceived the parliamentarians and fired into the crowd. That’s when the killing started. On hearing the news, many of us went from Stalin Square to the radio. By the time we got to Rákóczi Street, ambulances were carrying the wounded and dead young people with flags draped over them. The crowd went wild. Two policemen in trucks were handing the cars over to the crowd in front of me.”<sup>19</sup>

Little is known about the settlements where the change of power took place peacefully but following the choreography of the nationwide changes. News of the Budapest events, e.g., only reached Kokad on 28 October. Almost half of the population linked the demonstration with the Sunday mass. The peaceful crowd marched

17 Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, 17.

18 For the notion of carnival see Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, 59–73.

19 Tamási, “Forradalom alulnézetből”.

to the courtyard of the village hall, where some tipsy locals tried to disrupt the sublime atmosphere. A thirty-one-year-old worker, a former farmer, took control of the situation:

“Taking off my cap, I greeted the crowd with a bow of the head: ‘Dear marching crowd, comrades, friends! I strongly recommend that everybody preserves their full human dignity and consciousness. Since the police and the administration have been scattered in all directions, the municipality cannot be left to chance. [...] I therefore propose that the commune should choose here and now those who should serve as its national guard.’ [...] The village widely accepted my proposal, and the well-meaning, well-intentioned people, who wanted peace and not revenge, very quickly elected a national guard of thirty men, and together they proclaimed that I should be the commander of the national guard, since they knew me [...]. The village retired home peacefully, at this time of day it was about noon, around one o’clock.”<sup>20</sup>

This is how decades later, the locals’ appointed person recalled the past, making it somewhat legendary and folktale-like. In Kokad, the peace on Sunday was followed by unrest on Monday: the troublemakers were Gypsies, who were “disarmed” by the commander of the national guard with the help of the Gypsy voivode.

Because of the sensitivity to change, posterity pays attention only to those settlements where something extraordinary happened. But it would be worth examining how many settlements stayed still before the government’s 28 October coup, and how many rallied upon external pressure after the popular uprising had been recognized as legitimate. We suspect that hundreds of villages, small towns, farm centres, and former manorial hamlets fell into this category.

## The attacking and attacked crowds

The Soviet leadership hoped that the deployment of reinforced tanks would deter insurgents. Moving awkwardly inside the city, numerous armoured vehicles were blown up and burnt out by ingenious insurgents. The operation, which was intended to be demonstrative, caused heavier losses to the Soviets than to the insurgents. While the Soviet leadership hesitated, deploying its military units, and directing them here and there, a civil war situation developed. Some Hungarian internal affairs and military units, whose leaders took martial law seriously and were frightened by the possible shaking of power, clashed with the rebels. Both the perpetrators

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20 P. Nagy, OHA interview by Tibor Valuch, 1991, no. 367, 13–4.

and the victims of the enfilades were Hungarians. This extremely tense situation could have ended peacefully—through negotiations—or violently. In 1956, until the recognition of the revolution on 28 October, there were examples of both.

The outcome depended on several factors: the balance of power (the size of the crowd, its determination and the number of soldiers or police officers who could be deployed against them), the temperament of the commander(s), their assessment of the situation, their state of being, the leaders' willingness to compromise, chance, misunderstanding, rumours of terror, the state of mind of an actor, and various combinations of these. Feeling their waning power, the old local leadership acted against the demonstrators as long as it could.<sup>21</sup> But the police and army units sent in to retaliate increasingly sabotaged the orders from above, and even turned over entire units to the rebels. Much depended on their leaders' attitude: some complied with the martial law and fired into the midst of the peaceful demonstrators, others withdrew and waited.

In Debrecen, too, the revolution began as a peaceful demonstration on 23 October. To disperse the crowd, not only police and *ÁVH* units were deployed, but also conscripts. People insulted the *ÁVH* officers, the police, and the soldiers. The atmosphere, which had been happy and free, turned increasingly tense. In the heightened atmosphere, waiting for the order to fire, some soldiers wet themselves, some fainted—and shots were fired.<sup>22</sup>

In Budapest, the demonstration on the evening of the 23<sup>rd</sup> turned into a bloody clash in front of the radio building, with those besieging the building and those defending it with guns. A week later, a radio editor, who had been in the building during the siege, was mythologizing the events. The personification of the revolutionary people became the 'Red-Haired Girl', whose "face was glowing with anger" when the authorities refused to make the protesters' list of demands public. The reporting editor, who, in fact, was locked in his editorial room during the events, described the moments of the siege with picturesque details:

"The state protection forces in the radio building fired tear smoke shells amongst you. And the shell shower did not end. You tried to enter the building, and then the commander of the corps led the state guards in a bayonet charge. [...] We heard the scream of the first wounded man who had the murderous bayonet dipped in his body. [...] Then the barrels of the guns, turned to the sky, were targeted at you. The harvest of death began. We shouted and held the hands of the state guards to stop them firing. But the blindness of this caste that had been bred knew no bounds. And then

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21 From the extensive literature on this topic, see Szakolczai, ed., 1956.

22 Dávid Kókai's transcript of the recollections of a participant at the disbandment of the crowd.



you obtained weapons. [...] It was around half past two that you entered the building. You came first, you, Red-Haired Girl. Your face was burning with the fever of battle. In one hand you held our precious national flag. In your other hand you held the weapon of freedom.”<sup>23</sup>

When reading these lines, we might have the impression of a popular description of the 1848 Revolution with reminiscences of the poet Petőfi.

Much has been written about the bloody events of 25 October in Budapest, of 26 October in Mosonmagyaróvár, Eger and Miskolc, and of 27 October in Tiszakécske.<sup>24</sup> On 26 October Nagykanizsa protesters also demanded weapons: in the afternoon they entered the barrack and were forced out. However, in the town centre, a shot was fired, and a hand grenade was hurled into the crowd: a woman standing at the entrance to the cinema fell dead. The shooting was blamed on the local leadership. Armoured vehicles appeared, armed groups stormed the army ammunition depot, and the attacked responded with gunfire. Many people, including students, were seriously wounded.<sup>25</sup> In most settlements, however, the local force did not fire on the crowds, so there were no casualties. But in other places, the advice of the headquarters, urging self-action and discretion, was interpreted as an order to fire. In the early days of the revolution, it was up to the local military commander to shoot the demonstrators. The few officers who, out of a perceived sense of duty or fear, ordered the enfilade could expect retortion.

In Győr, on 25 October:

the “police entered the prison, but left the machine gun ammunitions and the hand grenades in their car. [...] A young girl, Mária Máté, climbed on the car, handed over the machine gun and started handing over the hand grenades and ammunition when she was shot from the building. The protesters scattered but returned almost immediately and laid siege to the prison. A regular fight broke out, with two more rebels killed and many of the defenders wounded.”<sup>26</sup>

There were, of course, borderline cases. In Eger, on 27 October, prisoners released from jail demanded weapons, which the representative of the army refused. The crowd, which did not know that the people who wanted to fight included criminals, sided with the demanders. First the prisoners fired, then the lieutenant under attack fired two warning shots, which drove the crowd wild, and they turned on

23 “Vöröshajú lány” [Red-Haired Girl]. *Szabad Magyar Rádió* [Free Hungarian Radio], 1 November 1956.

24 Hegedűs et al., eds, *1956 Kézikönyve I*.

25 Csomor and Kapiller, eds, ‘56 *Zalában*, 66.

26 Csurgai, “Fejér megye,” 85–140.

the lieutenant. The officer fled to the police headquarters. By his desperate act, he demonstrated to his attackers that he too belonged to the powers that wanted to strangle the revolution. The college students, organized to maintain order and perceived by the crowd as their own, acted differently. They isolated the fuglemen pressing for weapons: “We managed to get some of them to see sense; we arrested some of them, locked them up in the lyceum and the next day handed them over to the Ózd workers’ council,” one participant in the action recalls.<sup>27</sup> A military officer was taken to the party committee building; fearing a siege, the terrified party functionaries pushed the shirt-sleeved lieutenant out in front of the angry people. The officer, who looked like an *ÁVH* officer, was beaten, and someone hit him on the head with half a brick. The students eventually managed to rescue him and take him away.<sup>28</sup>

There are numerous descriptions, pictures, recollections, and analyses of the demonstration in front of the Parliament on 25 October and of the siege of the party building in *Köztársaság Square* on 30 October: these series of events are examples of attacking crowds.<sup>29</sup>

### A destructive lynch mob

During the first days of the revolution, telephone wires were cut in several places to prevent contact between representatives of the enforcement power, and attempts were made to occupy the main public buildings and disarm the police and military. In smaller towns with a population of a few thousand or less, events only escalated to the point of destroying documents, damaging council houses, or toppling monuments if there were no respectable locals who managed to reach an agreement with the demonstrators. Often, a destructive version of the masses emerged after the peaceful conclusion of the rally, either that evening or the next morning. The irrational behaviour of “a crowd intoxicated by its own multitude”<sup>30</sup> is exemplified by the retrospective account of two events at different times and in different places. One is that of a bystander, the other of a victim.

Miskolc, Búza Square, 26 October:

“I also started waiting. It gave me a sense of security to know that some of my classmates were not too far away. There was something fatal in this waiting. Like everyone else around me, I was longing for something that could be sensed in the atmosphere of the waiting crowd. I already knew that

27 Nagy, *Journal in-time, él(e)tem*, 186.

28 Nagy, *Journal in-time, él(e)tem*, 189.

29 Varga, “A főváros forradalma”; Eörsi, *Köztársaság tér 1956*.

30 Szokolczai, Á. Varga, eds, *A vidék forradalma*, 161.

I too was filled with the unforgivable anticipation of yet another spectacle. I should not have stayed there. Near me, in a low throaty voice, a leaner man in a shabby dark coat shouted out menacingly. Other voices, independently of each other, seemed to answer him. They came from different places in the crowd, there was no collusion between them, it was the percussive music of a starving state of mind ready to leap, expressed in voices. Then, at the gate, there was a sudden movement, some national guardsmen [...] escorting a short man in a dark horse-coat. [...] They had barely walked a few meters when the crowd moved imperceptibly. [...] The countless waiting bodies seemed to sway ever so slightly towards a predetermined point. [...] Slowly the crowd closed in completely around them, and there were ragged, angry cries. [...] Everyone was trying to get there, and the movements of those at the goal were being followed by those trying to get there. [...] An irresistible force had to be quickly satisfied by rhythmic, impetuous thrashing. [...] The sawing elbows and arms, the back and forth, the in and out movements of the bodies were concentrated into a single spatial something that could no longer be named. And then, like a rusty iron, even something like a bayonet rose for a moment above the heads only to fall one could only guess where; I could only hear a very short, scream-like sound from there, the kind a rabbit once made when we slit its throat at home.”<sup>31</sup>

Budapest, *Köztársaság Square*, 30 October:

“I feel a blow on my back, then a kick. This crowd is unarmed, they haven’t taken part in the siege of the party building, but now they are terribly belligerent with me. [...] They want to kill me. I look into those eyes. I have often heard the expression »Face death!«, but now I can actually feel it. I confess, I looked at them not with defiance, not with retaliatory hatred, but only with surrender and fear mixed with horror. I looked at their eyes, their hands, and feet. For they kick and punch incessantly. [...] Yet I do not put my hand in front of my face, but under my stomach, because that is mainly where they direct their kicks [...]. Vain hope, of course, that I could defend myself against the blows with almost animalistic, instinctive movements. Some guys would not leave my side—I cannot remember their faces, their clothes—until one hit me full on. My face is covered in blood, my lips are split, my coat and shirt are covered in blood. Crossing the Rákóczi Road, I fall on my face... My armed escorts turn from enemies to protectors. Protection consists in shouting: »No, he is not from the ÁVH! An editor!« They surround me and let me get up. I walk on. My escorts, seeing that I am covered in blood, decide to take me to the nearby Korányi Hospital in

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31 Ungváry, Rudolf, “A lincsz” [The Lynch]. In *Élet és Irodalom*, 22 September 2006.

Alsóerdősor Street. The distance from the party building to the hospital is, I think, about two hundred meters. But it was a long two hundred meters for me! It's easier to walk hundreds of kilometres than to walk a hundred paces through the lynch mob. In the party building, a shower of bullets poured into my room, and then the walls were shaking from the shelling, my bloody comrades lying beside me—I think I felt no fear, I resigned myself to my fate, I was calmly standing it. But when I am in a hotbed of bloodthirsty guys, maddened by mass hysteria, I am gripped by a deathly numbness that is more than fear. Not a sound comes out of my mouth. This short journey was the most difficult of my life.”<sup>32</sup>

The mass movements did not always remain at the level of loud demonstrations, but often turned into destruction or, rarely, into lynchings. Can these acts of violence be called ‘the people’s verdict’? The words have a positive connotation: they suggest that the perpetrators were avenging their legitimate grievances and that the extraordinary circumstances led to the angry people choosing a collective method of execution rather than a lengthy judicial process. ‘Lynching’ is a pejorative term: it is associated with animal instincts and drastic outbursts of temper.<sup>33</sup> The term ‘people’s verdict’ can only be applied in quotation marks to the emotionally-ideologically motivated murders of the 1950s: the perpetrators did not know their victims, who symbolized evil, mostly the *ÁVH*, the hated organ of communist dictatorship. A better neutral definition of the acts is “collective vigilantism,”<sup>34</sup> which is, however, too sterile to indicate the harassment of the time.

According to my current knowledge, the crowd lynched in seven municipalities: in Miskolc,<sup>35</sup> Ózd, Hajdúnánás, Kiskunmajsa, Eger, Bicske, and Budapest. In the capital and in Miskolc, people’s anger was directed against representatives of the communist enforcement power, but the victims brutally murdered at the party building in *Köztársaság Square* were mostly soldier lads. In Hajdúnánás and Kiskunmajsa the victims were Jews, and in Eger and Bicske the victims were officials of the enforcement power and the Hungarian Laborers’ Party (MDP).

In Ózd, on 29 October, one day after the official recognition of the revolution and the dissolution of the *ÁVH*, representatives of the units of enforcement power were lynched. The incident was triggered by accident. In a delirious state of sleep

32 Márton Lovas, “A Köztársaság téri pártházban” [In the Party Building of Köztársaság Square]. In *Élet és Irodalom*, 24 May 1957.

33 Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, 117.

34 Cohen and Weintraub, “Collective Vigilantism in Global Comparative Perspective.”

35 Éva Standeisky, “Elmismásolt antiszemizmus, elhallgatott múlt. Az 1956-os miskolci lincselés” [Antisemitism Hushed Up, Past Concealed. The Miskolc Lynch of 1956]. In *Élet és Irodalom*, 20 August 2004.

deprivation, the national guard commander, a former teacher, the well-meaning but weak-nerved leader of the local writers' group<sup>36</sup> clashed with police officers who were cooperating with the national guards in policing the area. In the police building, a shoot-out broke out between the police and the national guardsmen: they did not shoot at each other, but into the air. Two guardsmen ran to the loudspeaker room in desperation to ask for help. The factory sirens sounded, then, believing the guardsmen, the loudspeaker operator made a dramatic announcement about the riot among the guards and the police, and asked people not to go near the shooting. The call had the opposite effect. Workers on strike at the factory immediately grabbed iron drills and other tools and rushed to the scene to help their fellow workers, who they thought were under attack. By the time they arrived, the melee was over and the commander, who had suffered a nervous breakdown, was taken to hospital.

The outbursts of anger were directed at the police officers and the *ÁVH* officers, who had nothing to do with the shooting, but were assumed to be behind the 'vicious attack.' A manhunt was launched: they were arrested in the street and dragged out of their homes, several of them were beaten to death. An *ÁVH* officer became suspicious because he tried to run away. But he was spotted by a steelworker who had previously been a field gendarme. He stopped him and, to prevent him from escaping, he had him unbuckle his belt and pull off his trousers.<sup>37</sup> The procedure is reminiscent of the genealogical method of the Arrow Cross era and suggests antisemitism. The crowd that arrived beat the prisoner to death. As a deterrent, all three lynched men were hung upside down from chestnut trees outside the workers' council building.

"The city went on with its life, and the deaths of these three people were not particularly shocking. Perhaps the mood in Ózd was that the crowd was taking revenge on the representatives of a criminal regime, a murderous regime, who were at hand, and they were not seen as innocent victims, but as people who were unlucky at the time, but not entirely undeserving of the punishment people handed out to them"—as one witness describes the mood of the time.<sup>38</sup>

The local revolutionary leaders who gave credence to the rumour—including the president of the local revolutionary organization, József Antalköz, who had turned an anarchist nationalist communist in 1944 and was expelled from the MDP—asked the revolutionary organizations of the surrounding villages for help. Those who came helped to restore order after the lynching. By the evening, the Ózd workers' council had been reconstituted. From then on, the assembling and interrogation of

36 Szakolczai, *A vidék forradalma*, 167.

37 Albert Szakács, OHA interview by Istvánné Páczelt in 1991, no. 340, 54–5.

38 Albert Szakács, OHA interview by Istvánné Páczelt, 1991, no. 340, 56–7.

ÁVH members took place within a regulated framework. An investigative team was established in the national guard: this revolutionary judicial body directed the collection of the exposed network members.

In Eger, an officer accompanying a prisoner was lynched for inciting inmates that were transferred from prison. The prisoners “were rousing the crowd by shouting out of the car that they were revolutionaries and that the man accompanying them was a captain of the guard. So the crowd pulled this soldier off the car and started beating him. [...] I followed this lynching through the streets,” artist and art historian Gyula Kőhegyi recalled, who also made a linocut of the scene in 1959.<sup>39</sup>

“True, revenge knew no bounds. Members of the political police, the torturers of the people, especially those who fired on the people or committed antihuman crimes, faced inevitable death. It is also true that many people were lynched innocently or for personal revenge. But what was this number compared to the number of those who were killed by the ÁVH in the eleven years of its existence?”<sup>40</sup>

In revolutionary times, Canetti believes, society turns upside down, the repressed prevail and take revenge on their masters. The previously subjugated masses take out on representatives of the overthrown power the pain of the injuries they have suffered:

“Single people are hunted and, when caught, are killed by the crowd, with or without the formality of a trial. [...] Everyone tries to get into a position where he can free himself of his stings of command; and everyone has a large number of these.”<sup>41</sup>

—These general observations can be applied to 1956.

## Onlookers, priers

There is no crowd without observers, without bystanders.<sup>42</sup> The sight of the assembled, the marchers, is a magnet for those who either do not want to be part of the mass body or do not even know the purpose and motives of the mass manifestation: they are randomly confronted with the unconventional sight, or they try to witness the seemingly exciting event. The observer does not surrender to the crowd atmosphere but is usually able to control and analyse what he sees and hears: he behaves

39 Sümegi, *Kép-szó*, 131.

40 Letter from Tamási on 15 November 1956; Tamási, “Forradalom alulnézetből.”

41 Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, 59.

42 Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, 65.

as a theatre spectator who can comment on his impressions and share them with those around him, which can lead to rumours being spread. Public inaugurations, state ceremonies, mourning ceremonies, punishments, executions, carnivals, accidents, and disasters are all related to the broad category of onlookers, but so are those who watched the deportation marches in 1944 with regret or gloating. In 1956, many people joined the demonstrators and marchers out of curiosity: the hunger for information that inevitably arises in times of sudden change was also quenched by the exchange of views and conversation with mostly unknown people. It is not uncommon for the onlooker to become a participant. This is most often the case when the outsider is already sympathetic to the crowd's manifestations and is just waiting for a stimulus to dissolve into the crowd.

On the evening and night of 23 October, onlookers and piers must have composed the growing and increasingly heated crowds in front of the Parliament, at the Stalin statue, and at the radio building, the crowd in the demonstration at the Parliament which ended in a massacre on 25 October, or five days later, the groups present at the siege of *Köztársaság Square*. The streets and squares of the capital were alive with people even when streets were dangerous: some were driven into the open by a sense of adventure, especially young people, others by necessity, especially adults shopping food. Many may have sensed the whiff of mighty times and did not want to be excluded from extraordinary and disturbing events. A mysterious destiny must have been present in the squares, and it was difficult to resist its power.

In Pestszentlőrinc, the tragedy of the curious onlookers going about their business was linked to the sporadic local resistance. Like in other districts of the capital, the deployed Soviet tanks served as intimidation of the population. An eyewitness reported that

“[f]rom the window above the Red Cross office, a lad shot a Soviet soldier on a tank with a rifle. All hell broke loose. The tanks were roaring, the machine gun on the roof was firing at everything, into the grocery store, the Árendásy pharmacy, my colleague's apartment. The son of barber Szekeres left the shop and was shot dead. The baker Fröhling was baking all the time, a whole series of shots were fired into the crowd waiting outside. Twenty-seven people were wounded.”<sup>43</sup>

The wounded and those who helped them became part of this vulnerable crowd: the schoolteacher who, despite the curfew, went to the local factory's fire station to get blankets, the firemen who helped her carry them.<sup>44</sup>

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43 Heilauf, ed., *Kenyér és tank*, 129.

44 Heilauf, ed., *Kenyér és tank*, 130.

## The agoral mass: people's assembly

In September and October 1956, the participants of the mass assemblies, meetings, debates, and the strikers who demanded reforms and tasted the possibility of free speech could be called 'agoral masses'.<sup>45</sup> It was the agoral assembly of crowds that created the organizations of the revolution and, as long as they existed, they were their support. The behaviour of those who assembled in the agora—in free and closed spaces—and the way in which their decisions were taken depended on external and local circumstances, and tradition also 'interfered' in the way in which community's opinion was formed. After the exhaustion of mass energies and the disintegration of power, and because of the degeneration of mass phenomena, people's assemblies in enclosed spaces asserted the public will. Instead of marching crowds, the multitude consisted of groups of people, sitting and standing in deliberation. This form was reminiscent of the mass gatherings of the weeks preceding 23 October, but unlike in the pre-revolutionary period, the people who gathered were mostly different, they wanted something different, and organized themselves differently.

The demonstrating crowd becomes an agoral crowd when general demands are supplemented by local ones, or more precisely, when the crowd initiates the transformation of local power, the creation of new bodies.<sup>46</sup> This process takes place simultaneously with the additional effort to transform power, but with the opposite aim: the old leaders and those who fear the disintegration of order try to create new organizations of power in order to maintain, transform, and reform it, or to stay afloat by taking the initiative or asking for a role in the formation of revolutionary organs. All the revolutionary committees were legitimized by the assembly that created them and, not infrequently, their members were replaced during new mass meetings. The need to ensure public security curbed the already flagging mood for assembling and accelerated the process of organizing revolutionary committees. After their recognition by the government on 28 October, the provisional leaders of the municipalities convened a new assembly to have themselves legitimized by the public and to present their ideas for order, reparation, and the renewal of public life.

In more than one place, the decision to dismiss leaders was taken at a meeting. The contemporary description of how the Veszprém county council's leaders were revised is as follows:

"It was not some blind, raging hatred that led the creators of the 'people's verdict,' but sobriety, humanity and insight truly worthy of the people, in other words, a 'screening of the functionaries [*káderezés*]' was taking place in the great hall of the council, which we can never expect from the old power built on servile flattery, a system of espionage."

45 Pataki, *A tömegek évszázada*, 109.

46 Moscovici, *The Age of the Crowd*, 5.



It was not a general dismissal of leaders, but only of Stalinists: “the list included, above all, bullies, former ÁVH officers, inhumane, professionally unqualified boot-lickers.” “Citizen” S. was put on the list because of his unpopular occupation: he was a cadre, i.e., head of the personnel department. During the debate, several people argued in his favour, but criticized his predecessor who later came to Pápa. According to the report, great respect was shown by the audience for the agronomist proposed for dismissal, who refused to admit her “mistakes” and “said outright that she would continue to be a member of the Communist Party even after being betrayed by fraudulent leaders.”<sup>47</sup> Following the debate, the assembly left the decision to the revolutionary local authority of the provincial apparatus, the workers’ council consisting of twenty-nine members. The result was the dismissal of the two deputy chairmen of the former council, the council secretary, five senior officials, four or five department heads, and another group of twenty persons.<sup>48</sup>

In Békéscsaba, the crowd put pressure on the division commander, who, although a member of the local revolutionary committee, disbanded it by order of higher command and even detained some of its members. The reformist communist leader of the revolutionary committee went to the barrack to see him and, referring to the crowd waiting in the street and to the inevitable bloodbath if the army intervened, he got the commander to release the prisoners. To calm the crowd, the commander of the division and the head of the revolutionary committee embraced on the balcony of the town hall and were greeted with cheers from those gathered outside the building.<sup>49</sup>

In the capital, except for certain outlying districts such as Újpest, the time for agoral mass meetings came after the declaration of the ceasefire that turned the revolution around. Because of the armed conflicts, it would have been impossible to do this before. After 28 October, the change of power was not only enabled but was also simplified: those of the old regime who feared the consequences of the turnaround left voluntarily, and the vacant places were filled by volunteers chosen by the crowd. In the second district of Buda, a mass street rally calling for a meeting of delegates was followed by a takeover of power in the council chamber of the administrative centre, attended by around four hundred people.

The National Committee of Csepel, like the majority of the revolutionary bodies in the Budapest district, was organized relatively late, on 30 October, so there was no need for restructuring. The provisional leadership of the district wanted to gain recognition at the inaugural meeting and to strengthen and expand the committee

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47 *Veszprém Megyei Hírlap*, 2 November 1956.

48 *Veszprém Megyei Hírlap*, 3 November 1956.

49 Simai, “Fekete Pál,” 31.

with people directly elected by the locals. Thousands of people in Csepel were unable to elect leaders without demonstrating emotion. The situation was intractable from the outset. To avoid anarchy, the meeting had to be preceded by the nomination of candidates (in Csepel, this happened on the 29<sup>th</sup>). The candidates were immediately debated: either because they were known or because they were not known. The people of Csepel gathered in the local stadium. A solemn atmosphere characterized the gathering until the electoral process began. However, as the contemporary press reports, when the names were called, the thousands either cheered or booed.<sup>50</sup> Subsequent to the election, the National Committee of Csepel published the names in the local newspaper (indicating only their place of residence) and gave the opportunity for justified corrections, i.e., it was aware of the drawbacks of direct elections. We can only speculate what would have happened after the three-day deadline: would people have acquiesced, or would there have been more protests? The second Soviet intervention on 4 November put the story on hold.

It is difficult to draw a line between the agoral masses and the groups trying to consolidate the revolution. The articulation of people's demands, the initiatives to set up lists of demands for the government, and the legitimization of individual ideas can be linked to the agoral masses, but in most cases the demands were already finalized, and groups selected from the masses tried to implement them.

In 1956, those who enforced political demands by means of a walkout could also be classified as members of agoral crowds: they threatened to strike in order to put pressure on the Imre Nagy government. The communal revolutionary bodies were primarily concerned with creating forms of self-organization and paid less attention to the transformation of power within the government, which the strikers saw as their primary objective. The political strike was a double-edged sword: it slowed down the emergence of new power relations while seeking to speed up the transformation.

### The crowd and its leaders

The leader is inseparable from the crowd. According to Serge Moscovici, a crowd without a leader is like a man without a shadow or a wall without mortar.<sup>51</sup> Without a leader there is no crowd. The leader, a powerful, charismatic person, can inspire hope, create the illusion of belonging, create collective faith, by powerful phrases that appeal to the emotions. A strong faith makes all the members of the crowd

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50 Andor Kubicza, "A Nemzeti Bizottság választása" [Election of the National Committee]. In *Csepeli Újság*, 1 November 1956. Cf. also Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action*.

51 Moscovici, *The Age of the Crowd*, 5.

willing to sacrifice themselves, giving them boundless self-confidence. However, the prevalence of illusions and “collective idealism” inevitably goes hand in hand with an underestimation of dangers. The crowd longs for a leader, a role model, and the temporarily uniformized individual in the crowd longs to be led, to obey someone.<sup>52</sup> In general, chaos does not occur even if there is no authority—in the case of 1956, a party or government leader—who can immediately take over when the crowd emerges. The crowd automatically produces its leader, who, once the new order has been established and the necessary consolidation of relations has taken place, either becomes the political leader himself or gives way to another type of leader, adapted to the realities of peacetime. Leaders who emerge spontaneously from the masses generally lose their position once the revolution has ended, unless they become dictators in the event of a victorious revolution.<sup>53</sup> After a lost revolution, they fall victim to the revenge of the victors.

The development of crowd behaviour, even in the fifties and sixties, to a large extent depended on the person who dared to take the risk of appearing before the crowd, and stood up in front of it, and then, amidst uncertainties, took control of a larger or smaller community, a workplace, a municipality, a county, a region. The leader ‘produced’ by the crowd, the leader who spontaneously and randomly rose to the top, will be discussed in this section only insofar as it is unavoidable for the presentation of crowds. Hence, leaders of armed groups will be ignored.

The characteristics of mass movements are not easy to identify. To avoid the risk of oversimplification, it is important to examine the reasons that triggered the demonstrations, their duration, and the specificities of their possible recurrence, as well as their immediate consequences in terms of how spontaneous mass movements transformed into other forms of community expression, into conscious group activity. In 1956, the swirling mass impulses brought revolutionary leaders to the surface. They certainly had the personality traits that only emerge in exceptional situations: a spirit of initiative, a desire to act, perhaps even a sense of adventure. The leaders who stood out during the revolution were interested in public life, in politics, and had their own ideas. And of course, there was also a need for a situation in which there were many enthusiastic people ready to act, waiting to be led and guided.

In those first turbulent days, becoming a leader required less organizational skills and authority than boldness and eloquence: the ability to sense and verbalize mass sentiment, which gave ample scope for demagoguery and populist manifestations.<sup>54</sup> During the institutionalization of the revolution, only those newcomers

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52 Moscovici, *The Age of the Crowd*, 39.

53 Moscovici, *The Age of the Crowd*, 5–7.

54 Leopold, *A presztízs*, 349.

who could declaim and enthuse, and could bring groups together, build and maintain relationships, and resolve conflicts were the ones who succeeded and remained at the forefront. Only with restrictions could the communists who gradually sided with the revolution be classified as spontaneously elected leaders of the masses. They were temporarily placed at the head of the cities and provinces by the scramble in order for the collapsing state party to save power. They were obviously required to temporarily fill the vacuum between the disappearing old power and the victory of the revolution.

Naturally, the communist politicians who best met this objective were reformers within the state party and had some credibility with the masses. However, Attila Szigethy (Győr), Rudolf Földvári (Miskolc), and others—and Imre Nagy himself—faced a dilemma in the days following 23 October: they had to choose between supporting the party leadership (the “moving outward” politics of the Imre Nagy government), which was reluctantly trying to suppress the uprising, and the increasingly radical local demands. Many of them were able to surpass their former selves by accepting the mass demands they could still tolerate and trying to channel the chaotic events that were increasingly out of control. However, the initiative slipped from their grasp just as they approved the demands of most of the local rebels. Their decisions were often unwittingly taken against their own interests.

In 1956, József Dudás and Lajos Somogyvári were unknown to those who put them in the lead, while Pál Kósa from Újpest was known to many as the man who came to the forefront. Somogyvári did not go from being able to address the masses, to being able to excite them, to becoming a leader who was recognized by many, organizing and leading larger groups of people, unlike Kósa and Dudás, who were also tasked with consolidating the demonstrating masses. Pál Kósa was a local, independent communist functionary between 1946 and 1948; he was expelled from the party for criticizing his party and concealing the fact that in 1938 his father had joined the Arrow Cross party but when disillusioned with it, became anti-communist. Katalin Kósa recalls of her father:

“My father was very keen on politics, he read a lot. He was the agitprop secretary in Újpest in 1945–1946. He was an extremely good speaker. He could turn the mood from one side to the other in an instant. He left it all because of corruption. He told me that he got fed up with everything when a family of six was not allocated a two-room flat, while the same flat was given to a member of the party committee. He had such a strong sense of justice that he couldn’t stand such things.”<sup>55</sup>

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55 Katalin Kósa, OHA interview by Zsuzsanna Körösi, 1995, no. 658, [http://server2001.rev.hu/oha/index\\_hu.html](http://server2001.rev.hu/oha/index_hu.html).

A carpenter with eight years of primary school education, Kósa brought together, organized, and led the various local revolutionary organizations. He owed his prestige to his oratorical ability, his conceptualism, and his leadership skills. He became a charismatic leader: he took part in the local demonstration on 23 October and tried to persuade the soldiers of the Újpest flotilla to support the demonstrators. On 24 October, he was among those who brought down the Soviet monument and occupied the council house. He gave a speech at the funeral of the revolutionary envoy shot by the police, calling for a general strike. He organized a local revolutionary committee under the name of the National Committee.

Born in 1912, József Dudás, a former communist turned into a leftist democrat, had a political past, unlike Somogyvári, who was almost a decade younger than him and was anti-communist by family and personal experience. The people who took to the streets saw all three of them as leaders only because they were able to put the crowd's desires and ideas into words. In contrast to the hesitant, wavering government and the local leaderships of Budapest and Győr, which were trying to adapt to national power, they represented radicalism and had the oratory skills needed to strengthen themselves. Almost instantly, a bodyguard (in Dudás's case, an information group as well) was organized around them, so that they seemed capable of action. Motivated by their local patriotism, residents of Győr forced out of the city the Budapest-based Somogyvári, who had aspired to form a counter-government; on the other hand, in the capital, which was full of revolutionary hotbeds, the government wasted unnecessary energy on neutralizing the overestimated and misunderstood Dudás group. Dudás was legitimized on 29 October by a crowd that swarmed the streets, then gathered in the former council building of the second district, while for a few hours on 30 October, authenticated by a truckload of Budapest revolutionaries, Somogyvári became the idol of radicalized Győr residents. Somogyvári spoke effectively, not without refraining from clichés though, and wherever he appeared (the balcony of the town hall building, the bus station), there were microphones and loudspeakers (a public address megaphone), and above all hundreds of excited people who had no idea what was happening in their town, but who presumably all individually felt what they wanted, and certainly wanted someone to put their desires and grievances into words.

Somogyvári knew that big plans need big publicity, so he made a speech at Radio Győr (the recording was made but it was not broadcast), calling on people and soldiers living around Diósd to occupy the local radio station so that, on his return to Budapest the same day, he could provide the population with news. Somogyvári, who intended to institutionalize the revolution by forming a counter-government, presented himself as if he had "the whole country" behind him ("behind Imre Nagy there are only 15-20 000 brigands"): "organized thousands of soldiers, regiments

with supplies, equipment, the writers' association and other forums", a rhetorical device that the candidate leader with no background in public politics instinctively grasped. He wanted his listeners to believe that the existing, unconnected, divided revolutionary organizations would be united under his leadership, thus making it possible to end the chaos and preserve the gains made, which was everyone's wish but no one knew how to achieve.

In addition to his critique of the past, Somogyvári had a vision for the future: he could offer his audience hope, which also suggests an instinctive political ability. He promised that the country would soon reach the 1939 standards of living, which it could already have surpassed unless the wrong political decisions of the past twelve years had been taken ("today we could be the richest, happiest little country in Europe"). He offered a better life, not a redemptive ideology. He was sometimes stuck for words, but his phrases effectively masked a lack of coherence and did not make his audience suspect that his claims were made from thin air. Even if they had wanted to, they would have had no way of checking the credibility of the speaker's claims. Their desires were objectified in the person of the speaker, and in the absence of other forms of publicity, this was the only certainty available to the angry crowd. Somogyvári seemed to satisfy the crowd's demand for leadership. His populist rhetoric, laced with demagoguery, appealed to the disaffected, who were looking for guidance. The success of his performance is proof that there was a huge demand for political leaders at the end of October 1956. Since those who might have been able to acquire public experience and acting skills could not do so in the undemocratic years preceding 1956, there was ample room for enterprising spirits, and those who were able to exploit unexpected situations took advantage of this situation. And the man in the street did not represent the democratic public, but rather the impressionable, emotionally overwrought masses.

## Conclusion

A critical reading of contemporary sources to explore the crowd dynamics that emerged in the 1956 Revolution might reveal how the initial 'primordial fog of the streets', in which the random and unpredictable movements of the demonstrating and opposing masses played a particularly important role, gave way to various forms of organized masses, including the agoral crowd, which is understood as a more closed, controlled form of people's assembly. An important element of this dynamic was the size of the communities (particularly important in relation to the capital and smaller municipalities) and the role of violence, as well as the complex and conflictual process of becoming a leader.

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