

Diplomacy and Disregard. The Hungarian Revolution and the United Nations, 1956–1963. By András Nagy.

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The subject of András Nagy's book is the globally best-known event of the thousand-year Hungarian history: the 1956 Hungarian Revolution and the 'Hungarian question' discussed in the United Nation (UN) Security Council and, following its suppression, also in the General Assembly. It is a rare historical moment for a small nation to be so strongly in the focus of international interest and world politics.

The author's unique moral stance takes the UN Charter as its starting point. The world organisation is confronted with the noble principles it lays down. Nagy has simultaneously produced a thorough scholarly piece, a brilliantly documented polemic, a dramatic historical chronicle, and a reconstruction of events that is as precise as possible. One of the key figures in the UN investigation of the Hungarian question, UN employee Povl Bang-Jensen, represents the dilemmas formulated in the book through his moral stance and dramatic struggle for justice. The contradictions, suspected abuses, and compromises regarding the handling of the Hungarian question at the UN coalesce into an evocative drama of fate through the presentation of the Danish UN diplomat's destiny. Nagy examines how the institutional system of the UN—which articulates such lofty goals in its Charter—specifically the General Assembly and the Secretariat among the principal organs, related to the 1956 Hungarian Revolution suppressed by the Soviets and to the subsequent bloody 'consolidation'.

Nagy holds the world organisation accountable for the implementation of its proclaimed noble principles. He regards the results of his investigation as tragic. At the same time, it is important for him to provide justice—at least posthumously—to the victims of the contradictions: the heroes representing the idealistic principles of the UN. Nagy deems the question significant also because in 1956 broad sections of the Hungarian population cherished an 'illusion' regarding the potential positive role of the UN in relation to Hungary. His ultimate conclusion, repeatedly foreshadowed in the book, is that the world organisation's proceedings regarding

the Hungarian question failed to meet the values and expectations formulated in its fundamental documents. At the end of this carefully constructed and documented study, there is a bitter moral conclusion: “For Hungarians, what remained was survival and self-pity. Mohács. Világos. Trianon. New York. Hope dies last. But die it did.” According to the author, the UN institutional system did nothing of substance to alleviate the suffering of the population under the Kádár terror.

Regarding the UN history of the Hungarian question, Nagy has written the first scholarly work with monographic intent. However, certain aspects of the case have already been discussed in the literature. In his 1996 book, Csaba Békés was the first to examine the global political context. In his interpretation, the discussion of the issue in the UN General Assembly was similar to a courtroom trial staged by the USA, where the goal was to win over the ‘swing jurors’—the Third World countries entering the stage of international politics from the second half of the 1950s following the liquidation of the colonial system—by demonstrating the ‘true face’ of the Soviet Union. In 2006, Csaba Békés and Gusztáv D. Kecskés jointly edited a volume with a detailed chronology of the Hungarian question, General Assembly resolutions concerning Hungary, and other documents (e.g., UNHCR statistics on the movement of Hungarian refugees). More recently, László Borhi has discussed the Hungarian question at the UN in the context of Hungarian–American relations, which played a decisive role in removing the case from the General Assembly agenda in 1962. Kecskés has also written studies on the fundraising and press campaigns organised by the UN for the 1956 Hungarian refugees, as well as the role of the International Red Cross. András Nagy’s own 2005 volume on Bang-Jensen was an important precursor to the monograph presented here.

In the volume reviewed, Nagy takes into account the results summarised above. However, using precise references, his study vastly expands the knowledge base previously uncovered by the literature, thus it becomes the primary reference for the topic. He utilises his extremely diverse and abundant source base with expertise and source criticism, based on more than a quarter-century of persistent and particularly extensive research, which enables an analysis of the processes described against a truly global background. Among his most important sources—besides official UN documents—are the internal secret papers of the UN Secretariat, of which the materials concerning the Bang-Jensen case have only recently become researchable. The records of the intelligence services, which were of decisive importance in the functioning of Hungarian diplomacy, are highly significant for reconstructing the activities of the Hungarian UN Mission in New York and the emigrants. Australian foreign policy documents (from the home country of one of the members and rapporteur of the Special Committee established by the UN General Assembly in January 1957 to investigate the ‘Hungarian question’) also provide important contributions.

The same applies to UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld's personal notes and diary. The exceptional diversity of the source base enables the reconstruction of many small yet important puzzle pieces of the story: for instance, that the Hungarian secret service had access to the coded messages of the French Legation in Budapest and could follow French intelligence regarding the Secretary-General's planned visit to Hungary.

The volume is edited with great care. Nagy's decision regarding the chronological framework—ranging from the precursors of Hungary's 1955 admission to the UN to the removal of 'the Hungarian question' from the General Assembly agenda and Secretary-General U Thant's 1963 visit to Hungary—is logical. Thus, the story is truly complete. To understand the events at the UN, it was necessary to offer a brief sketch of the revolution, especially of its international context, a task the author solved with great intuition. Nagy summarises complex processes in appropriate length to maintain the proportions of the content (e.g., regarding the outflow of Hungarian refugees).

The book uses a fluid, exciting, and captivating style. The message is strengthened by the fact that the author is not only well-versed in literature but is a practicing writer himself. He manages to reconcile scholarly requirements with a tension that helps sustain the reader's attention. Subtle irony is frequently applied: for example, regarding the propaganda campaign organised by the Kádár administration against the UN report.

"Not only were the details unfailingly cynical but the whole affair was perfectly absurd: peasant women, miners, rabbis, academics, sportspersons, and writers all registering their protest, in a strictly supervised fashion, to a document they knew nothing about" (pp. 179–180).

Occasionally, Nagy writes with laughing mockery to illustrate how grotesque the situation was. For example, regarding the small reception given by UN Envoy Leslie Munro upon the expiration of his service:

"Despite the small number of guests, Munro ordered three crates of alcoholic beverages, all of which, according to the documents in the UN Archives, he had taken to his office »unopened«. This would have meant that each of his former colleagues consumed two bottles of spirits to celebrate the Hungarian question being removed from the UN's order of business—or perhaps the rumors of the Special Representative's alcoholism were not unfounded." (pp. 329–330)

The text is made particularly interesting by the author weaving in the micro-histories of a number of controversial personalities—e.g., painter György Szennik, who turned from a *nyilas* (Arrow Cross) propagandist into a communist secret agent;

Tamás Pásztor, with an agent's past, who tried to break free from his handlers in emigration; Miklós Szabó, who played the role of the disillusioned émigré leader; and secret agent foreign policy leaders: János Péter, Károly Szarka, Pál Rácz. This makes the era much easier to understand and relate to the reader than if it were merely about global political connections.

The story is divided into parts through chapters and subchapters in a proportional, moderate, logical, and easily comprehensible manner. The individual chapters are of uniform quality. One of the further positive features of the book is that, while reconstructing the events, the author goes to the limits of exploratory possibilities using his particularly rich source material. He does not fill the natural gaps in knowledge with his imagination but formulates questions and honestly states what is currently still unknowable (e.g., the case of 'UN spies' in Hungary, sabotage at the UN Secretariat, and the circumstances of Bang-Jensen's death). Wielding his thorough knowledge of the historical context, he subjects the actors' statements to critical examination. Thus, Nagy offers a synthesis of an impressive amount of relevant knowledge and facts.

Nagy provides and organically integrates numerous significant new details into the fabric of the story. Here are a few examples. The precursors to Hungary's admission to UN membership and the establishment of the Permanent Mission in New York are presented. Attention is drawn to the decisive importance of the intelligence services, and the secret agents involved in the case are introduced. The decisive role of the Hungarian secret service in the later handling of 'the Hungarian question' is also referred to. We get a vivid picture of the repulsive world of agents in the Kádár regime: the crippling of masses of people and the killing of many. It is also considered a novelty that the book offers the most detailed exploration to date of the interactions (telegram exchanges) between the UN Secretariat and the Hungarian government regarding the revolution and the following months. The author juxtaposes facts that point to sabotage actions by relevant UN Secretariat officials against further steps by the Special Committee, which obviously served Soviet interests. The critical presentation of the activities of the UN General Assembly 'rapporteurs'—Prince Wan Waithayakon of Thailand and Sir Leslie Munro of New Zealand—is likewise a novelty.

Another novelty is the sketching of the main and several supporting actors of the investigative committee. Nagy inserts vivid portraits of Special Committee members, flashing their personality traits and clarifying their roles. The factual yet analytical presentation of UN Secretariat employees involved in the Hungarian question—especially Secretary-General Hammarskjöld, Under-Secretaries-General Dragoslav Protić and Andrew W. Cordier, as well as William Jordan and Klára Héderváry—also adds value to the volume.

The exploration of Hammarskjöld's news sources and attitude is particularly instructive. A detailed analysis of the UN and international reaction to the execution of Imre Nagy and his fellow martyrs, as well as the reaction of Hungarian foreign policy also feature for the first time. The same applies to the antecedents of Secretary-General U Thant's 1963 visit to Hungary.

Created with profound historical knowledge but with a writer's sensitivity and flair for composition, András Nagy's *Diplomacy and Disregard* is a captivating yet horrifying tableau of both the 'everyday life' of international relations and the inner workings of the early Kádár regime. Beyond a narrow professional audience, it may be relevant for those interested in international organisations, the UN, secret services, and the Cold War era.



