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Puccs vagy összeomlás?

8 interjú a Kádár-korszakról volt MSZMP PB-tagokkal.

(Coup d'état or collapse?

Eight interviews with former MSZMP Political Committee members about the Kádár era)

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Why did the semi centennial Hungarian authoritarian regime collapse in 1989? "Coup d'état or collapse?" – questions the author, Simon János. The answer is given by the eight interviewers in 1989, who were members of the single-party state's highest plenum, the Political Committee of the MSZMP. The book, which was written from the audio-cassettes recorded 25 years ago, is not only an exciting book, but a unique scientific and professional source in the entire post-communist region as well. The first book out of a series of books published by the Institute and Archives for the History of the Hungarian regime change (Retörki), established in 2013 in Budapest, will rightly experience great success among those who are interested in this historical era.

The short lived multi-party democratic parliamentary system, which evolved in Hungary after the Second World War, came to an end in 1948 with the establishment of the single-party communist regime. After crushing the 1956 revolution and freedom fight, the single-party system was re-established, a new government was formed by János Kádár, who was appointed in Moscow as the leader of Hungary. Kádár "de facto" ruled the state under different political titles between November 1956 and May 1988, therefore he became the denominator of that historical period that started after the 1956 revolution and lasted until the regime change. In the Kádár era, the MSZMP's Political Committee had an outstanding role in the decision making mechanism, it made the supreme decisions, so literally their decision meant life or death. We can claim with certainty that until 1989, the Political Committee was the ruling party's legislative authority, which overshadowed, due to its role and influence, even the Hungarian National Assembly, which only had two sessions a year! "If a member of the Political Committee stood up, and declared: two multiplied by two equals four-and-a-half, this was treated as party resolution" – stated one of the book's interviewed subjects, about the importance and power of the Political Committee.

In 1989, during the eve of the democratic regime change, Simon János, back then a young researcher, started an exciting endeavor when he – and his fellow associates – decided to visit the Kádár-era's still living former members of the Political Committee, as part of his scientific research analyzing the regime-change of 1989. As the result of two dozen

letters – probably following Gorbachev's then "fashionable" principle of "glasnost" and "perestroika" – many have agreed to open themselves sincerely. Among the eight interviewed subjects, we can find György Aczél, who was the undisputed ruler of culture and science; Mihály Korom, who was the head of the judicial system and Ferenc Havasi, who was responsible for the economic system. The interviews done with Valéria Benke, Sándor Gáspár, Lajos Méhes and István Sarlós are interesting as well; the self-critique content can be viewed as some kind of confession. We can obtain an instructive view about the functioning of the decision mechanisms, the tensions between the leaders and the divisions amongst them.

Reading the book we can have the feeling that the interviewed subjects wanted to grab the opportunity and would be sending a message to history as well, because they prepared for the interviews with papers, notes and documents, and they insisted on reading them during the recordings. We can get a picture that in the single-party leadership, who and how much could maintain its personality, who was sympathizing with whom, we can get acquainted with the decision-making mechanisms, what they thought about the Hungarian reforms started in 1968, about the invasion of Czechoslovakia, and about the constant political pressure from Moscow. The important lesson of the book is that even the highest level politicians had no knowledge of the indebtedness of the state, which proves that the banking system had a broad autonomy from quite early on. The interviewed subjects revealed who had respected János Kádár and why, according to their vocabulary the "Old Man", when they believed he should have gone into retirement, but the subjects also stated that they were all – except one – avid hunters, and what kind of fights were generated inside the party's leadership by the ranking of the roads' winter snow-relief.

One of the main virtues of the book is that it maintains the fidelity of the texts, the editor didn't alter the texts, only minor stylistic corrections were made, without damaging the content. The editor took regardful care about leaving out certain parts, appearing as dotted, in case there were unverifiable libels, such as alcoholism or gossip, which could violate the dignity of other people. The other virtue of the book is its readability due to its genre. The readers aren't examining a dry analysis full of statistical data for over 300 pages, but a readable text with anecdotes here and there; sometimes multi-person dialogues told by the interviewed subjects, so we can obtain information almost unnoticed things. The "Coup d'état or collapse?" book is not the history of the Kádár era, but the reminiscence of eight individuals, who had completely diverse habits, and were at completely different levels and platforms of the single-party system. Their reminiscence describes the way they saw the Kádár-era, in which they had an active role during the 1970s and 1980s. This is what gives a unique nature to the book, which enables eight emblematic communist former politicians to speak for the first time after 25 years in a single book, something extraordinary not only in Hungary, but in the entire post-communist region as well. We have to mention here that among the interviewed subjects, there was Valéria Benke, who was among the 3 women who were ever members of the Political Committee, and she was the longest serving and the longest in retaining her dominant leadership position.

The 25 years which passed after the recording of the interviews, is appropriate to locate the words of the interviewed subjects into a historical perspective, which enables us to analyze in an objective way the thoughts that characterized the political elite of the Kádár-era. For

those who already lived during the Kádár-era, the book gives an opportunity to compare their experiences gathered during the authoritarian regime with the written statements, while for those who haven't lived in that era, the book is an excellent political document from that historical epoch.

Finally, let's quote from the editor's preface: "let the book serve as a source for sociologists, historians, political scientists, economists, and let it be instructive to everybody else who is interested in the extinct Kádár-era.

Summary

With the title of "Coup d'état or collapse?", a special book containing the interviews of eight former members of the MSZMP's Political Committee, prominent representatives of the Hungarian communist political elite, has been recently published, edited by Simon János¹. The interviewed subjects assumed important political positions in the 1970s and 1980s in the leading political power body of Hungary's single party system. The book, due to its genre, cannot be considered a scientific description, but a collection of subjective self-confessions. The subjects present through their experiences, opinions and sentiments the functioning of the dictatorship, the agony of the single-party state, and the period preceding the democratic transition, when Hungary was under the influence of the Soviet Union, in the way the "members of the inner-circle" saw it.

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