

REVIEW ARTICLE

Béla Kun: A Fateful Life

*Peter Gosztony**

György Borsányi, *Kun Béla, egy politikai életrajz.*
(Béla Kun: a political biography) Budapest:
Kossuth Kiadó, 1979. 450 pp.

The noted Swiss historian, Jakob Burckhardt remarked in one of his works that occasionally a person's life incorporates into it history itself. Béla Kun was such a person. He made a mark not only on the history of the communist party of Hungary, but also on the development of the whole communist movement. His life was full of dramatic turnarounds and was not free from contradiction.

Béla Kun was born in 1886 in a small town in Transylvania. His father was an assimilated Jewish notary. The First World War and Russian captivity catapulted him from the obscurity of the journalistic profession and provincial social democratic politics onto the national scene. He became the leader of the 1919 Hungarian Commune and later, a high-ranking official of the Comintern. He met his demise during Stalin's purges; he fell out of favour in 1936, was arrested the following year and died two years later under circumstances that remain unclear even today. Characteristically, members of his immediate family were also interned. For twenty years, party histories, both in the U.S.S.R. and in Hungary, denounced him or denied his role. It was only during the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union that he was posthumously rehabilitated. Another two decades had to pass before a detailed, scholarly biography could appear about him in

* *Translated from the Hungarian by N.F. Dreisziger.*

Budapest. Not surprisingly, the book on Kun was a source of controversy from the very beginning.

The massive volume, subtitled "a political biography," is the result of ten years of research. Its author is a leading member of the Institute of Party History in Hungary. There can be little doubt that the author has undertaken a difficult task in trying to free the figure of Kun from the myths and accusations which have become attached to it through the years. It must be kept in mind that Kun, a quarrelsome, impatient and dogmatic man, had never been popular even among his associates, and had made many enemies for himself in his lifetime. The author's task was made more difficult by the fact that he could make only limited use of records pertaining to Kun's career in Russian exile, which are held in Soviet state or party archives. In fact he had access only to pre-selected documents or to those put at his disposal by individual Soviet historians. Borsányi several times refers to this fact and expresses regret that due to the lack of documentation he had to leave certain questions unanswered in connection with Kun's life or activities.

The seven chapters of this biography offer many exciting, hitherto little or hardly known details. The first chapters introduce Kun's youthful years, his work in the Social Democratic party, his military service in the war, and his capture by the Russians. In the spring of 1917 he greets The Russian Revolution in an article published in the *Népszava* (People's Voice) in Budapest. He hails Kerensky and the Provisional Government, in complete ignorance of Lenin's "April Theses" which called for the destruction of that government. Kun appeared in Petrograd in January of 1918 to work as a revolutionary functionary in the Bureau of Prisoners of War. It was here that he met Lenin, and became a "bolshevik," and "internationalist."

Borsányi outlines in detail Kun's journey from Russia to Hungary. He describes how in March of 1918 the Hungarian branch of the Russian Communist (Bolshevik) party was organized, with Kun as its leader. His return to Hungary in the fall of the same year served the purpose of spreading the world proletarian revolution to the banks of the Danube. After receiving their instructions and money, the communists destined for Hungary formally established the Communist party of Hungary, in Moscow's Drezda Hotel on November 4, 1918. The

party became a member of the newly-established Third International, the Comintern. Kun came to his homeland in secret. He had an important mission to accomplish on orders from Lenin. He was to convince the noted Austrian Social Democrat, Friedrich Adler, to join the ranks of the Communist International. Kun's mission failed. He was more successful in his next task however, which was the organization of a Communist party in Hungary, and the preparation of its bid for power.

Borsányi offers much interesting detail about the history of the Hungarian Communist party during 1918-19. The party's leading figures are described regardless of whether they remained loyal communists or became "renegades." We learn among other things that in 1919 the Communist Party of Hungary (CPH) was "great" in "words" only rather than in numbers. At best, the party had only 10,000 members in a country of twenty million! Accordingly, Kun could hardly have had any illusions about achieving power through parliamentary means. In fact, the CPH did not struggle for parliamentary democracy. It hoped to wrest power from the Károlyi government through the use of force, through a "people's uprising." Borsányi admits that in January and February of 1919 the party's demands had no real foundations and only served to whip-up popular sentiment against the government. Kun conducted a separate struggle against the social democrats as well. He considered them part of the ruling class, the enemies of the people whom he would continue to hate throughout most of his life. It was as a result of this struggle against the social democrats that bloody clashes occurred between the followers of the two late in February which resulted in popular opinion turning against Kun and governmental measures against his party. Borsányi outlines at length Kun's arrest and mistreatment, as well as the event which led to the collapse of Hungary's republican government on the 21st of March. Kun's rise to power in Hungary was occasioned by the well-known ultimatum which the Entente powers presented to the country's government*

**Editor's note:* On this subject see Peter Pastor's article in Vol. 1, No. 1, of this journal (1974).

Borsányi does not discuss the question of Károlyi's surrender of power, but correctly outlines Kun's doubts whether, under the circumstances, the compromise with the social democrats, did indeed represent a "socialist revolution" in Hungary. He had reported to Lenin his "victory" already on the afternoon of the 22nd. From Moscow he was warned about the influence of the social democrats. But four days later Kun declared: "My personal influence for the revolutionary council is such that it assures the proletarian dictatorship, the masses are behind me!" Was he overconfident? Did he really believe that he could deceive his socialist partners and impose Soviet-style government on Hungary? Borsányi does not avoid giving answers to questions. He outlines Kun's moves made in the interest of a "socialist" Hungary, as well as the "world" (i.e. European) revolution. Kun thus helped Soviet Russia, and sent his agitators to Vienna to promote revolution there too. By this time Bavaria was also communist, and Lenin could dream of a communist bridgehead into the heart of Europe.

But the setbacks came as early as April. In Vienna an "insurrection" (riots in front of the Parliament) was put down within hours by police acting in support of Austria's social democratic government. In Hungary, the majority of workers became disenchanted with the Commune by the end of the month. Borsányi writes that when Rumanian and Czech occupation forces began descending on Hungary, the country certainly did not defend itself like a lion its den. In fact, the Hungarian villages received the enemy with apathy rather than antagonism; and the Red Army had to resort to the most drastic disciplinary method — decimation — to prevent the disintegration of its units. By the end of the month Kun had to appeal to the Austrian government for refugee status for the "people's commissars" and their families. In other words, he was ready to give up.

But then he changed his mind. Emotional and intellectual vacillation was characteristic of him. Borsányi describes all this in a forthright manner. He outlines the remaining days of the Commune and strips it of much of its "official" and "heroic" image. He portrays Kun as the real leader of the Commune who did Sisyphean work to preserve his regime. He negotiated with the representatives of the Entente powers, looked after the organization of the army, the mobilization of the economy

and tried to take care of problems on the home front. In addition, he worked for the spreading of the revolutionary flame abroad, and tried to relieve pressure on Soviet Russia. Perhaps it is precisely because of these latter efforts that Kun was doubly grieved by the facts that the military help Lenin had promised to him never arrived, and that during the entire life span of the Commune, for what reason we do not know, the Soviets never established formal diplomatic ties with their Hungarian "brothers."

The reasons for the Hungarian Commune's demise are well known to us. Borsányi outlines in great detail and accuracy Kun's last hours in Hungary. It is probably for the first time that the contents of the minutes of the "Workers' Council" meeting of August 1, 1919 have been revealed in Budapest. Kun bitterly admitted that it would be proper to make a last stand on the barricades, but saw no meaning in this without mass support. He therefore concentrated on arranging the details of the flight to Austria, but not without taking time to inform Lenin of the developments in Hungary:

August 1. Today in Budapest a right-wing socialist government was formed, consisting of the union leaders opposed to the (Communist) dictatorship. This turn of events was caused partly by the disintegration of our army, and partly by the anti-(Communist) behaviour of the workers themselves. With this the situation became such that all efforts to sustain the unadulterated but alas, sinking dictatorship would be useless.

The stay in Vienna was a watershed in the life of the Hungarian Communist emigration. Various factions emerged whose views differed both in judging the past and assessing the future. Kun's initial pessimism soon yielded to excessive optimism. Notwithstanding his comrades' opinions, already in December of 1919 he wrote to Lenin that the prospects of the revolution in the West were improving "hour-by-hour." He considered the "White terror" in Hungary "useful" (sic!). "The worse the fate of the working class, the sooner comes the Second Proletarian Dictatorship!" By now Kun was not willing to learn from past mistakes; he was blaming the social democrats and others for the demise of the Commune.

In August of 1920 Kun arrived in Soviet Russia. He was

received by Lenin, among others. According to Borsányi, no record was kept of their conversation (or so the author might have been told in Moscow). Accordingly, it is not possible to know to what extent Lenin reproached Kun for his actions in Hungary. Borsányi calls reports that the Soviet leader did reproach Kun, "emigré fabrications."

Kun remained in the Soviet Union. First Lenin sent him to Baku as a representative at the Congress of Eastern Peoples, and then made him a member of the Military Council of the Southern Front. Here he served as a kind of a political chief-commissar in the forces of Mikhail Frunze, which were engaged in liquidating the remnants of the White Army. His activities were many-sided and also misdirected. After the occupation of the Crimean Peninsula by the Reds, Lenin offered an amnesty to the enemy forces who had not left Russia and were hiding in the mountains. Kun ignored Lenin's orders. No doubt fuelled by a desire to avenge the defeat of his Commune, he staged a bloodbath among captured White officers. This deed, along with the Hungarian Commune, made Kun's name infamous in all of Europe. Even in international Communist circles, Kun's Crimean activities remained a subject of controversy for many years. Borsányi does not condemn Kun, voicing the need for "Red terror," and noting that Lenin did not reproach Kun for his acts but sent him on a mission to Germany. We know that Lenin disapproved of Kun's bloodthirsty acts, however, and sent him to do illegal work in Germany precisely to let him atone for his deeds.

Kun arrived in Saxony in the spring of 1921, where he was to prepare an uprising against the local government. Borsányi describes in detail the "March uprising" and blames Kun above all for its failure. His impatience, his disregard for the views of local communist leaders, led not only to the premature eruption of the revolution in Saxony, but also to a crisis in the German Communist party.

Next Borsányi outlines Kun's work in the Comintern, as well as the factional struggle among the exiled Hungarian communists. It is probably here that, for the first time, readers in Hungary can learn about the inside story of the Comintern and read about its leaders in some detail. The picture painted of Kun the Comintern official is not endearing either. He appears as an emotional, quarrelsome intriguer — he even quarreled

with Lenin. Borsányi emphasizes the anti-intellectual tendencies of Kun and his faction. He also describes the struggle that Kun conducted against the faction led by Jenő Landler in Vienna.

During the mid-1920s Kun became a director within the Comintern. For five years he was to head the division of agitation and propaganda. He became a friend of Zinoviev, the Comintern's Principal Secretary, a fact which would not prevent Kun from siding with Stalin against Zinoviev later, during the power struggles of the late 1920s. When Landler died in 1928, Kun received a free hand to direct the Hungarian communists. He wanted to revive the movement in Hungary and for this purpose he moved to Vienna. Although he arrived with false papers and disguised appearance, he was apprehended by the police. Although at his trial he was impetuous and arrogant, he received a three-month sentence only. He was allowed to return to Moscow after serving only a month in jail.

The chapters describing the affairs of Sixth Congress of the Comintern, are very interesting, along with the bitter struggle which the organization waged against the socialists. Kun was really in his element here as he had recognized the need for such struggle already in 1919 and had advocated it long before Stalin endorsed such policy. As the head of the Comintern's Balkan Secretariat, Kun could devote time to "Hungarian affairs" as well from 1929 on. Once again, Kun's quarrelsome character becomes evident. His vengefulness knew no limits. He did not like Hungarian "comrades" nor could he get along with them; he would denounce them to the Soviet secret police as "Trotskyists" or "agents of the (Hungarian) police." Writes Borsányi:

It was obvious. Whoever opposed Kun was an agent of the Horthyite police. And police agents had to be disarmed. In the second half of 1932 Sándor Szerényi, József Bergmann, Hugó Kiss, Károly Házy, Márton Lovas, and János Krieszl were arrested and were convicted on trumped-up charges. Two of them became the victims of these illegal measures. Four survived...

Kun's demise was occasioned by a change in Comintern policy. The rise of Hitler and various fascist movements in Europe forced the Soviet Union to revise its strategy. The 7th Congress of the Comintern in July of 1935 announced the policy of the

“popular front” against fascism, and offered to cooperate with social democrats against the common enemy. Although Kun accepted the Congress’ decision, he was not elected to the presidium of the organization. He was pushed out from the leading organ of the CPH as well. Borsányi has examined the causes of Kun’s eclipse. He mentions the case of Lajos Magyar. He was a one-time teacher of the Soviet student who, in December of 1934, assassinated S.M. Kirov, the leading Communist official in Leningrad. In the course of the investigation, Magyar was expelled from the party and arrested. As Kun had vouched for Magyar’s loyalty only half year earlier, he was accused of smuggling the “Trotskyist, imperialist” teacher into the party. But his fact was not the real reason for Kun’s descent, according to Borsányi. Rather, it was the fact that higher-ups in the Comintern did not wish to keep him on. Another factor was that Kun became an embarrassment now that the Comintern wished to collaborate with social democrats. With Kun’s demise from power, the whole of the CPH became suspect in Soviet eyes.

The year 1936 began ominously for Kun. On the occasion of his 50th birthday, not one Soviet newspaper greeted him. His friends began to stay away. In May, he was summoned before the Comintern’s Control Commission. The minutes of the meeting are “unknown” according to Borsányi, but the text of the decision exists. Kun was accused of “sectarian deviation” among other things, and he was relieved of all his duties in connection with the Comintern and the CPH. When Kun left the discussion room, he must have known that his political career had come to an end. Although he was given the directorship of a publishing house, and was granted an audience with Stalin (at Kun’s request), his days were numbered. He must have known it, after all, he had been familiar with life in the Comintern. In 1937, his one-time friend and boss, Zinoviev was executed. Kun’s wife wrote in her recollections: “When (Kun) returned from work, he would neither talk nor read. He just sat on the couch for hours... When I asked anything, he did not reply.” The police came for him on the 29th of June. “Don’t worry. It is a misunderstanding. I’ll be home soon!” he told his wife. He was not seen again. Borsányi knows nothing of his time in prison or his possible trial, as he had no access to reliable documents. He has only seen the official Soviet document rehabilitating

Kun, and on this only his name and date of death (30 November 1939) are given. Borsányi consoles his readers: “The details of Kun’s death are in the last analysis unimportant. He had ceased to be a historic personality already in the fall of 1936...”

Borsányi’s book is a dramatic biography. It is an objective portrayal of a controversial and complicated life. The book should have been a great success in Budapest. Alas, it was not released for sale to the public. The authorities, perhaps frightened by the negative image of Kun, or for another reason, vetoed the book’s distribution. Consequently, Borsányi’s biography of Kun, the result of ten years’ work, appears only on the shelves of “specialized” libraries. *Habent fata sua libelli...!*