
Revolution and repression of the Budapest University of Medicine in 1956

Forradalom és megtorlás a Budapesti Orvostudományi Egyetemen 1956-ban

László Molnár PhD

lmolnar@rekhiv.sote.hu

initially submitted October 20, 2010; accepted for publication November 5, 2010

Abstract:

Az SZKP XX. kongresszusa óta megnőtt politikai feszültség az országban, ami a Budapesti Orvostudományi Egyetemen is érezhető volt. Október 16-án újra megalakult a MEFESZ egyetemi szervezete, mely alternatívát jelentett a hivatalos kommunista ifjúsági szervezettel szemben. Az október 23-i diáktüntetésen az orvosegyetemiiek is tömegesen vettek részt. Aznap este zajlott le a Petőfi Kör úgynevezett „orvosvitája”, melyen az egyetem néhány vezetője is részt vett. A még aznap kirobbanó fegyveres harcban néhány hallgató is beavatkozott, a klinikákon azonnal megindult a sebesültek ellátása. Az egyetemen forradalmi bizottságok és nemzetőri egységek szerveződtek, részben az épületek védelme, részben a külföldi segélyek ideszállítása céljából. Ezek a szervezetek a szovjet csapatok intervenciója után még decemberig tovább működtek. A tömeges emigráció az egyetemet is súlyosan érintette. 1957-ben megindult a visszarendeződés és a kommunista megtorlás. Egy végzős hallgatót, Tóth Ilonát, koncepciók eljárás után kivégezték, több hallgatót bebörtönöztek, mások, köztük néhány tanár ellen az egyetemen folyt fegyelmi eljárás. Mindezen intézkedések célja a megfélemlítés volt. Az újjáalakuló kommunista párt népszerűtlensége jól lemérhető volt abban, hogy a korábbihoz képest elenyésző számban újították meg párttagságukat úgy az oktatók, mint a hallgatók.

Keywords: diáktüntetés, forradalom, sebesültek ellátása, koncepciók perek, kivégzések

Kulcsszavak: student demonstration, revolution, wounded care, show trials, executions

The organization of the university students didn't start in Budapest but in another university town, Szeged. The leftwing student union called MEFESZ (Association of Hungarian Students), liquidated by the communist dictatorship in 1948, was officially reorganized here on 16 October 1956. It was at the same time protest against the only, naturally communist, youth organization called DISZ (The Young Workers' Union), which was legally accepted by the party state.

The young intellectuals could express their discontent at another forum too, at the meetings of the Petőfi Circle, which had been working since March, and they had been criticizing the Stalinist regime more and more openly since the 20th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party.

Although the medical students in Budapest didn't play an initiative role in the preparation of the events, the atmosphere was hot among them too during 1956. The hunger strike that broke out in the working camp in Mohács in June was also a sign of this agitation. They joined the proclamation of the students of Szeged University and the Technological University when they put down their demand in 16 issues with the intent to submit it to the DISZ meeting of delegates. These issues, similarly to the other lists compiled at other universities, contained political ones (such as democratical elections, the freedom of the press, the restoration of the national holidays and traditions), and matters concerning the university life (the restoration of the autonomy of the university, improvement of the condition of the hostels, etc.)./9/

The demands the medical and dentist students itemized on 23rd October was similar in content but much more extensive. It already contained the election of the rector and the deans by secret ballot./3/ On 23rd morning, the DISZ leaders of the university, taking advantage of the tense political situation, sent a delegation to the minister of Health Care, Román József. Here they managed to get special support for the student hostels, which were otherwise working under appalling conditions. From the minister they hurried to the Kossuth College of Artillery not far from the university, to realize something that the leadership of the university hadn't been able to achieve for years. To obtain a part of the building of the army for a student hostel. The discussion with major general Janza Károly had a surprising result.

The medical university got the whole building complex. Unfortunately this impressive success could not outlive the revolution, although it could have solved the still existing serious problems of placement on the long run.



11. picture Demonstration at the Petofi statue

By that time the students had been coming together on the yard of the university for the afternoon demonstration. As a result of the Interior Minister's ban, which was announced in the radio, a long tag of war started, as the leaders of the university tried to prevent the students from taking part in the demonstration. In the meantime the students tried to keep in touch with the students of the University of Technology using messengers or telephones. Then, after two o'clock in the afternoon, with some delay they finally set off either towards the Statue of Petőfi or the Statue of Bem. They had met the crowd flowing in the direction of Pest at Margaret Bridge to follow their way with them to the Parliament.

Some of the medical students went back to the Gólyavár building of Eötvös Loránd University where the Petőfi Circle had its organized meeting, 'The Young Doctors and the Society'. The discussion that lasted more than four hours dealt with several relevant questions of Health Care. The speakers made serious critical remarks on the Doctors' Union, which replaced the Chamber of Physicians, but also on the Academy or the Hungarian Red Cross. The Minister of Health and the Rector of the University had been invited but did not go. Instead of him the Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, Antal Babics, a popular professor with the students, undertook to be the chair of the meeting. The discussion was stopped by the shooting at the Radio building nearby.



12. picture A. Babics A and Gegesi Kis

The Revolutionary Committee of the Medical University was formed the next day led by dean István Pataki, assistant professor Dezső Prágay and Béla Jankó medical student. They took over the direction of the university right away, which was easy enough as the Rector had not turned up in his office at all since the outbreak of the revolution but kept contact with it by phone.



13. picture D. Prágay

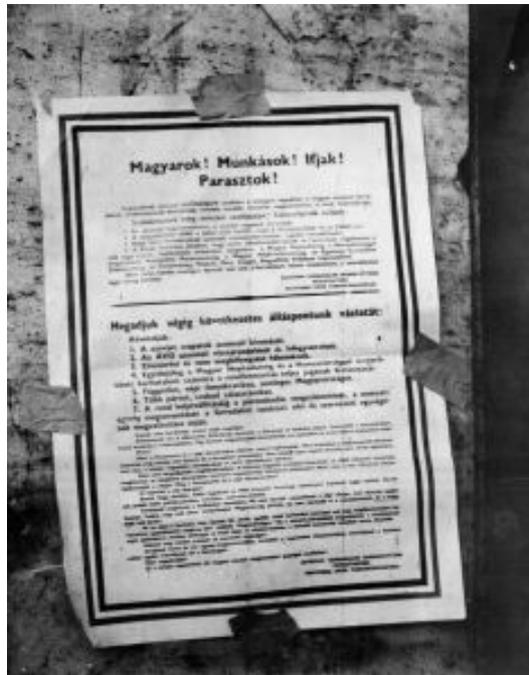
Similar revolutionary committees were formed elsewhere too (e.g. hostels, certain departments). These local authorities proved to be rather effective. The most urgent task was the organization of the medicine and bandage supply and help in the rescue operations. The latter was not a job without danger since on 23rd October reserves had been attempted to be sent to the ÁVH (State Security Department) guards encircled at the Radio, in ambulances, therefore the ambulance cars were regarded as targets on both sides from that time on, which demanded the lives of several ambulance crew members.

The revolutionary committee of the university arranged it that the medical shipments would be delivered from the depots of the International Red Cross in Nickelsdorf in Austria directly to Budapest. They were then distributed partly to the clinics partly to other hospitals from the university centre. Warehouses were created, the guarding of which was provided by and the accompaniment of the shipments given by a militia of disciplined armed students. The weapons first arrived from the Military Faculty of the University, from the Hungarian Defence Society and the Lenin Institute of Eötvös Loránd University, later they were either acquired or received from one of the barracks of the Army.

The committee dissolved certain departments formerly organized for political reasons, while it reorganized others. Thus the Marxist-Leninist Department was replaced by a department of social sciences, keeping some of the former lecturers. The Russian Language Department was made Foreign Language Department. The Military Medical Department was dissolved without legal successors as well as the rather military type Physical Education Department and the studies office, which originally had been created as the extended arm of the ministry.

Many students, mainly hostel residents took part in the fights as well. One of them was József Rácz second year student, who was later elected commander of the armed guards of the university. They either fought together with other rebelling groups or on their own. Opposite the central building of the university was the IX district party headquarters, which they occupied and converted into a youth hostel. They also produced leaflets on this base and ran a

red cross storage place, from where they even managed to distribute food supplies in the neighbourhood during the fights.



14. picture Claims of the University Students' Committee

But the most important task of the university was, certainly, to look after the injured. We only have scattered data about the extent of this, although each clinic took part in this work. The Surgery Clinic II in Baross Street had 378 injured patients between 23rd October and 9th November, with 37 Soviet soldiers among them./1/ At the Paediatrics Clinic II in Tűzoltó Street they treated 80 civilians, 14 rebels and 12 Soviet soldiers. At the Urological Clinic in Üllői Street there were up to 170 injured brought in, who were being looked after by not more than 4-6 doctors and nursing staff. Due to the uncertain traffic in town the staff was not full at most places, which made the burden on the people working at the venue even heavier. The dead were buried temporarily in the garden of the university.



15. pictur Evacuating of victims

At the second attack of the Red Army on 4th November, the university, especially its inner site of clinics, got in the middle of the fights. The neighbouring Corvin Alley, the Kilian Barracks and Tűzoltó Street made the university clinics targets as well. It was then that the number 25 ward of the Internal Clinic was hit by an artillery shot and all the patients in it died. The cellars got packed with hurriedly rescued in-patients, emergency operating theatres, while the irrational destruction was going on upstairs.



16. ábra Dermatology Clinic (1956.11.04.)

The right wing of the university building was destroyed, with the Dermatology Department in it, but a lot of other buildings were seriously damaged too. This happened with the Paediatrics Clinic II or with the buildings in Üllői Street. The Ophthalmological Department in Kálvária Square was taken in in a serious siege by the Russians although nobody had been defending it except for a three-meter-high flag of the Red Cross.



17. picture Ophthalmology Clinic

Besides the damage in the buildings emmigration meant a great loss. 104 doctors and 76 other staff members had left the university. A great number of the students had also gone. 315 of the 3085 students fled the country, 3 died, one was executed and many got in prison, so it was altogether a 11 per cent loss.

The revolutionary committees went on working until the beginning of December. The University was recruiting the older students for hospital and pharmacy work and the younger ones for cleaning away rubble, on the radio. The MEFESZ and the NÉKOSZ (National Association of People's Colleges) were still putting down requests and demands which reached the University Council in 1957 January. They emphasized the importance of issues of student welfare, the restoration of the Privatdocent lecture courses, making the non-professional subjects optional and the free choice of foreign languages.

One of the crucial point was the restoration of the university autonomy and the freedom of teaching./8/ The teaching staff dealt with not only the autonomy but the legal status of the University as a whole on its meeting on 12th December 1956. They discussed the matters of independence or returning to the Eötvös Loránd University as well as the question of authority. The committee chosen to put forward a proposal eventually suggested the maintaining the status quo. In the question of authority professor Imre Haynal made very serious critical remarks about the Ministry of Health for being professionally unsuitable, which most of the participants agreed with, and which was also in unison with what was heard at the discussion of the Petőfi Circle./6/

The communist power, restored by the Soviets, still made promises in January 1957 to meet the demands of the student organizations. As their power got firmer however, they forgot about them. The arrests were started already in November. All this was part of the intimidation of the university youth who had played a key role in the revolution. In the course

of it Ilona Tóth senior medical student was sentenced to death in a show trial and executed on 27th June 1957.



18. picture Ilona Tóth

By that time at the universities centrally ordered investigations and disciplinary actions had been going on against everybody who had been involved in the revolution. The committees did not deal with the cases of those who were being investigated by the authorities, only after the closing of these investigations and the release of the given person. During the procedures many times the committees were not interested in the activity of the investigated person but in their political views or attitudes towards certain current events. Their standard practice was that it was not guilt but innocence that had to be proved, which fit in the jurisdiction of the era.

Altogether eight professors and one associate professor were involved in disciplinary action. Three of them were acquitted for lack of evidence, 1 associate professor was dismissed and further four were reprimanded for different reasons. At a lower level of lecturers two doctors were dismissed and further six got lighter punishment./10/ From other employees nine members were dismissed or transferred. As an afterpiece of the retaliation came the dismissal of professor Imre Haynal./4/

The disillusionment and passive resistance after the suppressing of the revolution were reflected in the number of party members. According to a report made at the beginning of 1958, out of the 3114 students 2,3 % were MSZMP (Hungarian Socialist Worker's Party)/2/ members and 8,2% KISZ (Union of Young Communists)/5/ members. A significant data shows how many of the heads of department in 1956 renewed their party membership after the revolution. Out of the forty people there is no available data concerning the party membership of nine, further nine people were outside the party both in and after 1956. Only four of the twenty-two heads of department joined the MSZMP, one of them only in 1958./7/

References:

1. DUBECZ, Sándor: *Surgery Clinic in the Frontline*, 1956. Budapest, 1996. p.274. /3/
2. SE Lt.3/a University Council Meeting Minutes 7. volume 1957/58. p. 255. /8/
3. Institute of Political History Archive 290. fonds The 56 collection 1.d. p. 47. /2/
4. SE Lt. 5/a Medical Department Council Meeting Minutes 2. volume 1957/58. p. 92.
„Egy klinika élete a Rákosi korszakban. Emlékeim a Haynal-klinikáról” (*The Life of a Clinic in the Rákosi Era. My Memories about the Haynal-Clinic*) by Zoltán Antalóczy. (Heraldika, Budapest. 1997. pp. 143-148.)/7/
5. SE Lt.3/a University Council Meeting Minutes 7. volume 1957/58. p. 255. /9/
6. SE Lt.3/a. University Council Meetings Minutes 6th volume 1956/57.p.71. /5/
7. SE.Lt.13/b Personnel Department Documents, personal material. /10/