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Contact: john.casey@baruch.cuny.edu

Policing a Revolution: Sandor Kopacsi

By John Casey

Policing in Australia operates in a stable, democratic environment. Other police are not so fortunate, and in times of war or rebellion they are forced to decide where their loyalties lie.

In October 1956, fifty years ago this month, the people of Hungary rose up against the brutal Soviet puppet regime that had ruled their country since the end of World War II. They succeeded in toppling the government and had a taste of freedom, before the Soviet Union crushed the revolution. One of the key figures in the uprising was Sandor Kopacsi, the Chief of Police in Budapest.

Kopacsi was born in 1922 in the regional city of Miskolc. His father was a turner and a Social Democrat politician. At age 15 he was shot in the thigh while leafleting against the fascist Arrow Cross. He worked as a turner and in the war joined the resistance against the German occupation. When Hungary was liberated in 1945 by the Soviet army, Kopacsi joined the Communist Party.

He underwent police officers' training and was eventually appointed to head the Communist Party organization in the police force. In 1952, at age 30, he was appointed Chief of Police in Budapest. His officers handled criminal and civil matters, while another force, the State Protection Authority (AVH in its Hungarian acronym), pursued dissidents. The AVH was infamous for its brutal repression.

When the uprising began Kopacsi remained loyal to the regime that had elevated him to high office. On October 23rd rebels built barricades outside police headquarters and he led a raid against them. Shots were fired and many of the rebels were captured.

When he confronted the prisoners he found to his surprise that they weren't "fascist reactionaries" as the state controlled media was declaring, but were young workers and communists who were fighting against the brutal oppression of the regime. They were, he remarked years later, "just like me when I was young".

He had more contact with the insurgents, and then found his headquarters under attack by Soviet forces, even though it was never clear if the attack was deliberate or just part of the general chaos. On October 24th he allowed a symbol of the uprising, the Hungarian flag with the red star removed, to be displayed from a window of police headquarters.

The next day, a large crowd gathered outside headquarters and called on the police to remove the large red star that crowned the building. Despite his actions of the previous day, Kopacsi refused at first, declaring that “the red star is the symbol that has always guided my path”. But in the end he relented and the star was taken down. He released many of the prisoners arrested at the first barricades.

As the fighting intensified he declared his allegiance to the uprising and helped arm the rebels. While his officers never formally became a disciplined armed force of the uprising, many fought individually against the Soviet army and the AVH police who remained loyal to the old regime.

By October 28th the Stalinist government had been toppled and the Soviet army began to withdraw. A new revolutionary government was formed that declared a ceasefire and announced that Hungary would withdraw from the Warsaw Pact. Kopacsi was appointed Deputy Commander of a new National Guard.

On November 4, the Soviets invaded Hungary and had crushed the uprising. Some 3,000-5,000 Hungarians were killed in the fighting and nearly 200,000 fled across the border as refugees. Kopacsi was arrested and sentenced to life imprisonment.

The sentence was commuted in 1963 and he was assigned to work in factory. He was allowed to finish a law degree, but not to practice as a lawyer. After 12 years of harassment, Kopacsi and his wife were allowed to leave Hungary in 1975. He went to Canada where he worked as a waiter, factory worker and janitor.

While working as a janitor, an English version of his memoir of the uprising was published. The book, *In the Name of the Working Class*, became an international bestseller. After retiring in 1987, he returned to Hungary and in 1990 his rank was honorarily restored by the first democratic government elected after the fall of the Iron Curtain. He died in 2001.

The title of Kopacsi’s memoir and his participation in the revolutionary government give credence to the view that the uprising did not aim to overthrow communism, but to create a more open “goulash communism”. Where were Kopacsi’s loyalties? Some consider him an opportunist who simply gambled that the uprising would triumph. Most Hungarians, however, regard him as hero who risked everything to fight for the independence of his country.

***John was born in Hungary just before the uprising.
Contact: john.casey@baruch.cuny.edu***

PHOTOS



Kopacsi 1955

From <http://www.internationalist.org/reissfactions0301.html>



A photo taken through a shop window shows a Soviet tank moving past the police headquarters

From: <http://www.rev.hu/html/hu/kiadvanyok/bobdent/bobdent.html>



The streets of Budapest after the Soviet invasion

From: <http://www.rev.hu/html/hu/kiadvanyok/bobdent/bobdent.html>