

DOCUMENT NO. 5

Jan Svoboda's Notes on the CPSU CC Presidium Meeting with Satellite Leaders, October 24, 1956

The CPSU CC Presidium called a meeting of bloc allies for October 24, inviting representatives of the East German, Bulgarian, Hungarian, and Romanian communist parties. The Soviets originally intended to discuss the Polish situation and inform the "fraternal parties" about the negotiations with the PZPR. But because of the "disquieting events" that had taken place in the meantime, Hungary was also a major agenda item. The following document is a report by Jan Svoboda, secretary to Czechoslovak party leader Antonín Novotný, about this extraordinary session.

This account has special significance because, among all the materials that have been made public so far, it gives the most detailed account of the circumstances underlying the first Soviet intervention of October 23. However, it also differs markedly from the account in Malin's notes (see Document No. 25). For example, it is interesting that Khrushchev emphasizes Gerő's role in Moscow's decision to intervene, reflecting the Soviet leader's attempt to balance the need for strong measures to avoid unraveling the alliance, with a desire to stress principles of mutual assistance and support demands for "legal" requests for assistance from within the socialist alliance. In some ways, Malin's notes, recording an internal CPSU leadership gathering, are a more realistic assessment of the decision on military intervention.

Account of a Meeting at the CPSU CC,
24 October 1956,
on the Situation in Poland and Hungary

On 24 Oct. 1956 I [Novotný] attended a meeting of the CPSU CC Presidium. Comrades from the HWP Central Committee, the SED Central Committee, the BCP Central Committee, and the RWP Central Committee also were invited to take part. But the only ones who were actually present were the comrades from Germany, namely Ulbricht, Grotewohl, and Stoph,⁸⁷ and the comrades from Bulgaria--Zhivkov,⁸⁸ Yugov, and Damyanov.⁸⁹

Comrade Khrushchev began by informing everyone about the situation in Poland and Hungary. He said that originally the CPSU CC Presidium wanted to inform the fraternal parties about the situation in Poland and about the outcome of the negotiations between the CPSU CC and the PZPR CC. But in the meantime, important events had happened in Hungary. That is why he deemed it necessary to inform us about the situation there as well.

In essence, this is what he said:

⁸⁷ Willi Stoph was a member of the SED Political Committee from 1953-1989, vice chairman of the Council of Ministers from 1955-1962, and minister of defense from 1956-1960.

⁸⁸ Todor Zhivkov was first secretary of the BCP from 1954-1989.

⁸⁹ Georgi Damyanov was a member of the BCP CC Politburo beginning 1945 and chairman of the Bulgarian National Assembly from 1950.

When serious reports came in from Poland that far-reaching changes were expected in the top party posts of the PZPR, the CC CPSU decided to send a delegation to Poland.

The delegation negotiated mainly with Comrades Gomułka, Cyrankiewicz,⁹⁰ Jędrychowski,⁹¹ Ochab, and the foreign minister.

All of these comrades, especially Gomułka, sought to defend everything that was happening in Poland. They assured the Soviet delegation that the measures being taken would not have an adverse effect on Poland's relations with the Soviet Union and the CPSU. On the question of why so many changes occurred in the [PZPR] Politburo, Comrade Gomułka said that the comrades who had not been reelected to the Politburo had lost the confidence of the party masses. The Soviet comrades are very worried because the [Polish] comrades who were removed from the Politburo were known to the Soviet party as old, trustworthy revolutionaries who were faithful to the cause of socialism. Among them is also Comrade Rokossovskii, who is of Polish origin but never gave up his Soviet citizenship.

While the CPSU CC delegation was in Poland, certain Soviet Army maneuvers took place on Polish territory, which displeased Comrade Gomułka. The discussions between the delegations ranged from being very warm to rude. Gomułka emphasized several times that they would not permit their independence to be taken away and would not allow anyone to interfere in Poland's internal affairs. He said that if he were leader of the country, he could restore order very promptly. The PZPR representatives explained the arguments and factors that had led to the current situation in Poland. These were very unpersuasive and seemed to be outright fabrications. For example, Comrade Gomułka tried to convince the Soviet delegation that most blame should be placed on the presence of 50 Soviet security advisers in Poland and [on the presence] of many generals and other senior officers in the Polish army who still hold Soviet citizenship.

In addition, [Gomułka] said that Poland's obligation to supply coal to the USSR at excessively low prices had caused the difficult economic situation. Comrade Khrushchev emphasized to the Polish comrades, referring to several concrete examples, that on various occasions in the past, this had not been true.

After the CPSU CC delegation returned to Moscow, an official letter was dispatched to the PZPR CC from the CPSU CC saying that it was up to the Polish side to decide whether to send the Soviet advisers and the generals with Soviet citizenship immediately back to the USSR.

A delegation from the PZPR was invited to meetings in the USSR along party lines [po stranicke linii]. On Oct. 23, 1956 Comrade Gomułka told the CPSU CC that he would accept the invitation and that he would arrive after Nov. 11, 1956. Comrade Gomułka also asked Comrade Khrushchev to have the Soviet forces return to their camps, as he had been promised. From the telephone conversation between Comrade Gomułka and Comrade Khrushchev, Comrade Khrushchev got the impression that Comrade Gomułka was attempting to earn the confidence of the CPSU CC.

On this occasion the two sides arranged that a long-planned exchange of delegations between Trybuna Ludu and Pravda would take place in the near future.

Typically, at PZPR CC plenary sessions the majority of speakers would express their wish for friendship with the USSR and other states of people's democracies.

⁹⁰ Józef Cyrankiewicz was a member of the PZPR CC Politburo and chairman of the Council of Ministers beginning 1948.

⁹¹ Stefan Jędrychowski was a member of the PZPR CC Politburo from 1956-1971 and head of the PZPR CC Planning Committee from 1956-1971.

The opinion of the CPSU CC is that in the case of Poland it is necessary to avoid nervousness and haste. It is necessary to help the Polish comrades straighten out the party line and do everything to reinforce the union among Poland, the USSR, and the other people's democracies.

Poland is in a catastrophic economic situation. There is a shortfall of 900,000 tons of grain. Coal mining is in very bad shape also. After the Twentieth CPSU Congress, Poland adopted the same social measures as in the USSR, but did not have sufficient means to carry them out. That is why Comrade Ochab turned to the CPSU CC delegation with a request for a loan. When Comrade Khrushchev remarked that perhaps the USA would give them a loan, [Ochab] answered that Poland would ask for a loan from the USA but he doubts that the USA would give them one. Comrade Khrushchev surmised that Comrade Ochab was answering hastily, on the spur of the moment.

Comrade Khrushchev said that the GDR and ČSR had asked the CPSU CC to resolve the problem with Polish coal at the highest level. But [Khrushchev] believes it would be inappropriate to do that at this time because it would unnecessarily exacerbate the affair and lead to disputes and polemics between fraternal parties about this matter, which the Poles, even with the best of intentions, cannot do much about.

Comrade Gomulka's speech will not be published in the USSR because it would have to be accompanied by commentaries that would lead, in turn, to further disputes and polemics, which would be highly undesirable. It is necessary to help Poland. The USSR is willing to provide the necessary grain. All possible measures will be taken to ensure that by 1958, or at the very latest by 1959, the USSR will no longer be dependent on Polish coal. Most likely the USSR will also agree to the loan request.

Later on, before the meeting ended and after the main discussions, Comrade Ponomarenko delivered a report about a political rally today by workers in Warsaw. Comrade Gomulka gave a speech there. There were more than 150,000 people.

Among other things, Comrade Gomulka said that the PZPR CC had received a letter from the CPSU CC which stated that it was up to the Polish side to determine how to resolve the matter of the Soviet security advisers. He expressed his view that the presence of Soviet advisers in Poland at this time was in Poland's interests. This was greeted with wide and loud applause.

He further emphasized that the presence of Soviet troops on Polish territory was necessary because of the existence of NATO and the presence of American troops in West Germany. And this view, too, was greeted with loud and long applause.

He condemned all those who want, by means of demagogic talk, to undermine trust in the Polish army, which is under the exclusive command of the Polish government and the PZPR CC. He appealed to the crowd to finish the rally and commit themselves to work for the good of the Polish people.

It was the view of Comrade Khrushchev that this speech by Comrade Gomulka gives hope that Poland has now adopted a course that will eliminate the unpleasant state of affairs. He said that finding a reason for an armed conflict now would be very easy, but finding a way to put an end to such a conflict would be very hard.

On the Situation in Hungary

Comrade Khrushchev said he does not understand what Comrades Gerő, Hegedüs, and others are doing. There were signs that the situation in Hungary is extremely serious. That did

not prevent Comrades Gerő and Hegedüs from continuing to spend time by the sea. And as soon as they returned home they left on a “trip” to Yugoslavia.

When Comrade Khrushchev talked by phone on Oct. 23, 1956 with Comrade Gerő, whom he summoned for a consultation, Comrade Gerő told him that the situation in Budapest is bad and for that reason he cannot come to Moscow.

As soon as the conversation was over, Comrade Zhukov informed [Khrushchev] that Gerő had asked the military attaché at the Soviet embassy in Budapest to dispatch Soviet troops to suppress a demonstration that was reaching an ever greater and unprecedented scale. The CPSU CC Presidium did not give its approval for such an intervention because it was not requested by the highest Hungarian officials, even when Comrade Gerő had been speaking with Comrade Khrushchev earlier.

Shortly thereafter, a call came through from the Soviet embassy in Budapest saying that the situation is extremely dangerous and that the intervention of Soviet troops is necessary. The Presidium authorized Comrade Khrushchev to discuss this matter by phone with Comrade Gerő.

As it turned out, Comrade Khrushchev informed Comrade Gerő that his request will be met when the government of the [Hungarian People’s Republic] makes the request in writing. Gerő responded that he is not able to convene a meeting of the government. Comrade Khrushchev then recommended that Hegedüs call such a meeting in his capacity as chairman of the Council of Ministers. Although that had not happened as of today, the situation developed in such a way that Comrade Zhukov was given orders to occupy Budapest with Soviet military units located on Hungarian territory and in Uzhgorod. The redeployment of the units was slow and difficult because of dense fog. In an effort to protect at least Comrade Gerő, an armored car was sent to Budapest. The vehicle passed right through Budapest without the slightest resistance. The other Soviet army troop formations did not arrive until Oct. 24, 1956 at 4:00 a.m., when the sessions of the HWP CC plenum were already over in Budapest.

Comrade Khrushchev recommended to Comrade Gerő that he tell everyone that the HWP CC plenum had not taken place before the demonstration was suppressed. It turned out that this did not happen. As was expected, a new politburo was elected at the plenum. It included some members from the previous politburo: Apró, Hegedüs, Gerő, and Kádár. It also had new members: Imre Nagy, Köböl (the head of the 1st department of the HWP CC, who recently spoke out strongly and sharply against the politburo), Gáspár, Szántó (the head of the Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations), Marosán (a persecuted but good comrade), Kiss (the chairman of the CCC), and Kállai (the head of the department of culture of the HWP CC). Selected as candidates were: Losonczy (a journalist who was very active in campaigning against the leadership of the party) and Rónai (chairman of the parliament).

In the new politburo there are three people who were persecuted in the past and have now been rehabilitated. Among the old members not elected [to the new body] are: Hidas, Szalai, Mekis, [István] Kovács, Révai, Ács, Bata (a candidate), and Piros (also a candidate).

Those elected to the secretariat were: Gerő (first secretary), Kádár, Donáth (director of the Institute of Economics), Köböl, and Kállai. Among them are three persecuted comrades. Of the old secretariat members, those who were dismissed were: Szalai, Egri, Vég, and Kovács.

Within the government, Nagy has been selected as chairman of the Council of Ministers and Hegedüs as first deputy chairman of the Council of Ministers.

There were no longer any demonstrations in Budapest on the evening of Oct. 24, 1956. Near the Danube there were several groups of bandits. These consisted of groups of 15-20 people armed with pistols and weapons seized from soldiers. Resistance is still occurring on certain

street corners, roofs, and balconies. On several streets there were barricades. The bandits temporarily occupied two railway stations and one of the two radio stations. The bandits wanted to tear down the statue of Stalin. When they were unsuccessful in this task, they seized a welder's torch and cut the statue to pieces, and then disposed of the whole thing.

The Hungarian internal security forces performed very well, but suffered most of the casualties from among the 25 dead and 50 wounded. Also, one Soviet officer was killed and 12 soldiers were wounded. The unrest has been confined to Budapest so far. Everywhere else, in cities and villages, there is calm. The workers from the Csepel factory defended themselves with bare hands against armed bandits.

In Hungary, after a decision by the government, an "action group" of five [akcni petka] was set up to suppress the uprising. It consists of Bata, Piros, Kovács, Emerich,⁹² and Zoltán Vas, who in the past spoke out very strongly against the HWP leadership and now is centrally involved in organizing the fight against the bandits. The group consists entirely of people who were not elected to the [Hungarian] Politburo.

On the morning of Oct. 24, 1956, Nagy spoke on the radio. He called for order, and he signed a decree establishing a military tribunal which is authorized to pass immediate sentence on anyone who puts up resistance. Generally, the bandits are spreading the word that Nagy has betrayed the uprising.

He spoke again later in a similar vein. He also mentioned that the Hungarian government had asked Soviet troops to enter Budapest.

In his third speech on the radio today, he said that the positive thing the students had begun was being abused by the bandits to foment turmoil and shoot people. He appealed for order and urged people to give up their arms by 1:00 p.m.

A delegation from the CPSU CC Presidium was sent to Hungary this morning; it included Mikoyan, Suslov, and Serov.⁹³

During the [Soviet] Presidium meeting, those comrades informed the Presidium by telephone about the situation [in Hungary]. They said that Comrades Mikoyan and Suslov had attended the [Hungarian] Central Committee meeting. The situation, in their view, is not as dire as the Hungarian comrades and the Soviet ambassador have portrayed it. Budapest itself is more or less calm. Resistance is limited to certain rooftops and house balconies, from which the enemy is shooting. The internal security forces respond quite freely to each of their shots, which creates the impression of a battle. One can expect that by morning there will be total calm. The Soviet embassy let itself be encircled and protected by 30 tanks.

Among the Hungarian leadership, both in the party and in the state, there is an absolute unity of views.

There is no doubt that Nagy is acting courageously, emphasizing at every opportunity the identity of his and Gerő's views. Gerő himself had told the Soviet comrades that protests against his election as 1st secretary were occurring. But Nagy had emphasized and reemphasized that those protesting against him did not include even a single Central Committee member. Only certain individuals were behaving that way.

⁹² "Emerich" is not the name of any known senior Hungarian official. Svoboda probably spelled it phonetically; it might refer to Imre Mező, who was a member of the military committee, or perhaps to Ferenc Münnich.

⁹³ The mission had a fourth member as well, General Mikhail Malinin, who was in charge of Soviet forces during the first phase of the invasion.

In Budapest roughly 450 people have been arrested. In response to a question from Comrade Ulbricht about whether it is known who is leading the uprising, Comrade Khrushchev said that according to reports, the insurgents had set up their headquarters in the Hotel Astoria. This had been captured by Soviet troops. It appears that the groundwork for preparing a coup was organized by writers and was supported by students. The population as a whole has reacted passively to everything, but has not been hostile toward the USSR.

Comrade Khrushchev recommends that we not cover the situation in Hungary in our press until the causes of everything have been well clarified.

The representatives of the fraternal parties who were present joined the discussion. All of them expressed support for the CPSU CC Presidium's stance.

Comrade Ulbricht emphasized in his speech that in his view the situation had arisen because we did not act in time to expose all the incorrect opinions that had emerged in Poland and Hungary. He assumed that it would behoove each party to give a response in the press to certain incorrect opinions.

Comrade Khrushchev recommended that they think about the problems in greater depth. We must realize that we are not living as we were during the CI [Communist International], when only one party was in power. If we wanted to operate by command today, we would inevitably create chaos. It is necessary to conduct propaganda work in each party, but we cannot permit this to turn into polemics between fraternal parties because this would lead to polemics between nations. The CPSU CC plenum in December will discuss ideological questions and, a bit later, the question of how to raise living standards, particularly quicker construction of apartments as one of the basic prerequisites for boosting living standards. The extent to which patience is required can be seen from the recent case in Zaporozhe. Here 200 people refused to work because those responsible for guiding the work of the factories, including party functionaries, union leaders, and the top manager, did not do anything to induce the employees to work to the limit. Did they refuse to work because some ideological matters were unclear to them or because they were opposed to the Soviet regime? No, they refused because basic economic and social issues had not been resolved. Ideological work itself will be of no avail if we do not ensure that living standards rise. It is no accident that the unrest occurred in Hungary and Poland and not in Czechoslovakia. This is because the standard of living in Czechoslovakia is incomparably higher. In the USSR more than 10,000 members of the CPSU were rehabilitated and more than a million were released from prison. These people are not angry at us because they see we have done a lot to raise the standard of living in our country. In our country they also listen to the BBC and Radio Free Europe. But when they have full stomachs, the listening is not so bad.

It is necessary to improve ideological and propaganda work and to bolster the quality of the work of the party and state apparatus geared toward managing the economy.

[Source: SUA, Fond 07/16, Svazek 3. Originally published in English in the Cold War International History Project Bulletin no. 5 (Spring 1995): 53-55. First published in Hungarian by Tibor Hajdu, "Az 1956 október 24-i moszkvai értekezéslet," in Évkönyv 1992, I., ed. János M. Bak et al. (Budapest: 1956-os Intézet, 1992), 149-156. Translated by Mark Kramer.]