

THE POLYGLOT'S SHELF

Tragic Hungary

István BIBÓ
La grande misère des petits pays de l'Europe de l'Est
 L'Harmattan,
 Paris, 1986

Hungarian history is rich in tragic figures, from Prince Rákóczy, through Counts Széchenyi and Teleki, up to Imre Nagy. This gallery certainly has its place for Istvan Bibó, unfortunately little known outside his native country, though undoubtedly one of the most remarkable political thinkers ever produced by Central Europe - and I would be tempted to say by Europe itself - in the period shortly after World War I. A selection of Bibó's writings was published in 1986 under the title **The Great Misery of the Minor States of Eastern Europe**.

In 1943, during World War II, in his provincial solitude and far from the battlegrounds of Stalingrad and North Africa, Bibó foresaw the fall of the Reich before the latter had occupied his own half-neutral and half-allied country, and wrote his first important essay **The Causes and History of the German Hysteria**, which began with the sentence: "The future of Germany is certainly the greatest historical problem of this age" and ended: "The German malaise is neither organic nor incurable. It is a convulsion which affects a whole community and its treatment will con-

stitute the greatest of tasks in tomorrow's world."

In order to explain the historical reasons behind the "deformation of German character", that is, the Hitler hysteria (and in 1943 Bibó was still not aware of the extent of what we know today about the horrors produced by this hysteria), he brilliantly and concisely retraced the whole history of the German race, from the Holy Roman Germanic Empire, through the age of Bismarck (according to him the "false realist") and up to the demon-figure of Hitler.

Similarly to Guglielmo Ferrero, whom he considered his master, Bibó based his historical interpretation on a "symptomatology of political hysteria". Without denying the specific nature of Nazism, he thought of it as originating from a "traumatising historical experience" in which an important part of the German people had had the feeling that the solution to their problems was beyond their abilities. This would mean, according to Bibó, that despite certain hysterical aspects to be found in them, the French and Russian revolutions could not wholly be

considered as explosions of hysteria comparable to Nazism; whatever the violence of the traumas they caused, the crucial community problem - liquidation of absolute monarchy and feudal privilege - was resolved by these revolutions. And here is a thesis which would deserve wider discussion.



I think that today, now that we know everything about the *gulag*, Bibó would hesitate to trace such a clear distinction between the German and Russian totalitarian systems. Hitler's and Stalin's pathologies are not identical and cannot be deduced from the same causes, differing as they did in their aims. Carried out with unfailing erudition, however, Bibó's analysis of the revolutions of the Germans up to Hitler stimulates reflexion. He offers a fine example of his tranquil objectivity when, as a republican, democratic and rational Calvinist, he unexpectedly provides the following praise of the Habsburgs, so frequently put down:

"Perhaps no European dynasty tried so hard as the house of Habsburg to realise the ideal of the 'Christian prince'; subsequently, as times changed, of the 'illuminated sovereign', and finally, as is shown by the example of Leopold II, the modern model of the 'constitutional monarch'. The mediocrity of the Habsburgs is often discussed, undoubtedly because two decisive periods in the history of the dynasty were marked by the reigns of

two monarchs of modest abilities, Leopold I and Francis II. Yet as far as the twenty-two Habsburgs who have occupied the thrones of Germany, the Holy Roman Empire, and Austria are concerned, three-quarters of them were worthy to reign on account of their morality and intelligence."

In his profoundest and most topical work, **The Misery of the Minor States of Eastern Europe**, written in 1946 and from which the title of the collection is taken, this philosopher of history rightly recognised the important but frequently misunderstood role that the fall of the three historic Central European nations - Poland, Hungary and Bohemia - had played "in the precocious failure of the system of European states" at the beginning of the modern age. It is thus astonishing that he should refuse to appreciate the mission of the Habsburg monarchy, which consisted of organising the chaotic Central European area for some four centuries while getting these states (and Croatia should be included among them) to function properly without repressing their linguistic and ethnic substance. Following the direction taken by Czech and French historians, Bibó indulges in severe condemnation of "the fatal political, historical and linguistic heterogeneity" of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, and this should logically have led him to justification of the system of Versailles, with the "resurrection of the older nations" to its credit.

But his love of truth and justice led him to admit that the decision to

establish nation-states in the place of vanished empires was doomed to failure due to the fact that most of the nations involved, in possessing a historical memory, had invested other (and generally more extended) territories, than those which they really inhabited. "As a consequence", he wrote, "these newly revived nations soon got embroiled into border disagreements with each other".



In Central and Southeastern Europe, it was and still is impossible to get state borders and ethnic borders to coincide; hence the problem of the minorities - including, for example, that of the two million Transylvanian Hungarians attributed to a chauvinist Rumania - a problem which embittered the political life of this area between the two World Wars, and which has taken on an even acuter aspect under communism.

Bibó foresaw these difficulties, just as he foresaw the inhuman expulsions of whole populations in the postwar period. Possessing only little confidence in the possibility of a federalist evolution of affairs, he escaped from the dilemma by appealing to "world opinion", that is, to the wisdom of the superpowers. From criticism of the older empires, he got to the point where he was obliged to admit the impasse of nationalism. But with the sole exception of the Polish, none of the representatives of any other people in this tormented area has had the courage to undertake this self-critical revision of nation-

alism as carried out with remarkable intellectual honesty by Bibó and by the contemporary Hungarian historians in his wake - Szűcs, Juhasz and Litvan. It would be rewarding to find Czech, Rumanian or Bulgarian authors penning essays comparable to that by Bibó on **The Deformation of the Hungarian Character and the Impasse of Hungarian History**.

During the Horthy regime Bibó was a firm but isolated opponent, and seems to have lived in domestic exile, locking himself into his library during the worst years. After the fall of the regime in 1945, he took up his pen again and on the basis of a vigorous analysis exhorted the political forces emerging from the resistance, united in a coalition instigated and controlled by the liberator (in point of fact Marshal Vorochilo) to take advantage of the *tabula rasa* in order to establish the foundations for an authentic democracy in Hungary. Bibó's writings between 1945 and 1948 are a compelling mixture of wit, coldly lucid analysis and utopian idealism. Written in 1948, Bibó's essay **The Jewish Question in Hungary after 1914** constitutes the most profound psycho-sociological and philosophical analysis of the sources of anti-Semitism I know, even bearing in mind the writings of Sartre, Hannah Arendt, Adorno, and Poliakov.

After their crashing defeat in Hungary, the Communists were nonetheless supported by the occupying army, and were not only kept in the government but also

THE POLYGLOT'S SHELF

managed to get their hands on the Ministry of the Interior. Throughout all this, Bibó never ceased appealing to their common sense, and to their sense of patriotism, as also to the interests of the Soviet Union in keeping Hungary friendly, in order to preserve the chances of democracy in its throes of death. His was a pathetic voice, compelled to silence in 1948.

Bibó surfaced again in October, 1956. In the middle of the insurrection, his nationalist-progressive friends who had left prison or clandestinity in the meantime, appealed to him to sit for the leadership of a radical-democratic Party which they called by the name of Petöfi, after the poet of the 1848 independentist revolution. Imre Nagy made him a Minister of State, but it was for only two days. In the seat of government, the parliament, where the entire group of leaders had taken refuge on the approach of the Soviet tanks, Bibó remained alone and issued an appeal for passive resistance. Then he formulated a project to resolve the crisis by compromise, a project which he sent to the representatives of the superpowers via the Indian Menon. It is a moving document, with its passionate defence of Imre Nagy's policy and its attempts to dissipate what he saw as a simple misunderstanding between the Russians and the Hungarians who, he emphasised, had in no way wanted to prejudice the vital interests of the Soviets.

In response to these pacific and moderate steps, which were aimed at conciliating the irreconcilable

and avoiding useless bloodshed, Bibó was thrown into prison. There he stayed from 1957 up to 1963, when he regained his freedom - though only on probation - but with his health broken. He no longer had sufficient energy to write the magnum opus which he had sketched out in a letter sent to a friend in London, and in which he would have liked to explain why certain political ideas, logically and ethically unassailable and in part even politically realistic, had necessarily failed in the political history of both his own country and the whole of Central Europe.

Bibó's works were banned for many years. A rebirth of interest in him began in 1980 when the Hungarian "dissidents" published a *samizdat*, **Memorial to Bibó**, of some 1,000 pages, containing some of his unedited texts and the studies and commentaries of a myriad of young philosophers and sociologists from both legal and clandestine opposition circles. Shortly after, a three-volume collection of his essays was published by the Hungarian Protestant University in Europe: *Bibó István Összegyűjtött művei*, Berne 1981. In 1986, the Budapest publishing house Magvető issued a similar three-volume selection of his essays, *Bibó István: Válogatott tanulmányok, 1971-1979*.

The personal tragedy of Bibó thus illustrates the tragedy of the whole generation of Central European liberals and democrats formed after the cataclysm of 1914-1918. Shortly before his death, Bibó made a point, with regard to an

apology for the Hungarian Populist Movement published in Munich (Borbándi Gyula, *A népi mozgalom története*) of stating his distance from this intellectual movement, which was born in the 1930s, but which survived into the Communist period and included certain figures such as László Németh, Péter Veres et al., who had flirted with chauvinist, racist and anti-Semitic ideas. For the last time Bibó was declaring himself to be what he had always been: a patriot, a humanist and a European.

In 1911, the Hungarian political thinker Istvan Bibó was born into a middle class Calvinist family. He conducted his law studies first in Budapest, then in Vienna, completing them in Geneva. Bibó was linked by bonds of companionship to the "populists", a group that attempted to find a third alternative between bourgeois democracy and collectivism. Istvan Bibó served briefly in the Imre Nagy government in 1956. He died in 1979.

François Fejtő

No Hard Feelings

**Luis SUAREZ
FERNANDEZ:**
*Franco y la
URSS,*
Ediciones
RIALP,
Madrid, 1987

This reconstruction of the semi-secret relations between **Franco and the USSR** covers the period that goes from the end of World War II to 1969, and describes the move of Franco's Spain up from the condition of a *pariah* in the international community.

After the defeat of the Axis powers, Spain looked indeed condemned, at least as long as the regime endured, to a condition of isolation and unequal status, and yet, it has succeeded in becoming an accepted actor and an equal partner on the world scene. This passage, the book demonstrates, cannot be traced back merely to the overwhelming American desire to create a world system aimed at containing communism or to Washington's ensuing willingness

to enroll among the US allies also those countries that - in order not to offend European sensitivities - could not become NATO members.

The process through which Spain re-conquered a status of virtual parity with the other Western countries is presented in three phases, the book consequently being divided into three parts. The first phase that spans from the end of the war to December 14, 1955, the day when Spain was first admitted to the United Nations, is one long uninterrupted minuet involving Madrid, the USSR and the Western countries that had emerged from the war on the winning side. Franco's regime had to manoeuvre in difficult waters, one day obliged to defend itself against the accusa-

THE POLYGLOT'S SHELF

tion - because of help received from fascist Italy and Nazi Germany during the civil war - of being "fascist", the next receiving more or less explicit recognition of its role as the defender of the Catholic confession, and as the rampart against the progression of communism in Europe.

This is, however, also the time when secret negotiations were begun with the USSR for the liberation of Spanish POWs that had fought in the *Brigada Azul*, as well as for the recovery of the gold reserves of the Central Bank of Spain that had been shipped to the Soviet Union by Spanish Communists at the fall of the Republican regime.

The second part of the book is devoted to the position of Spain in the context of the Cold War up until the Soviet invasion of Hungary and the Anglo-French-Israeli attack on Suez. It was a period of strong contrast between the USSR and the USA which Spanish diplomacy succeeded in exploiting in order finally to be accepted among the Western countries as being anti-Soviet, to the point of becoming the site of a base for US forces in Europe.

The Hungarian crisis, then, allowed Spain, at the UN, to put an end to a situation in which accusations of being a dictatorship were often thrown in its face. In the end, thanks to Anglo-French aggression in Egypt, Franco succeeded in actively participating in the decisions of the Security Council, calling for a United Nations task force in that

region, and obtaining the right to take part in a UN programme for humanitarian aid.

In the third and final part of this interesting volume, one sees how Spain, by now accepted in the international community, had to face the direct and indirect manoeuvring of the Eastern European countries and of Cuba intent upon destabilising its regime. But one sees as well how Spanish diplomacy successfully maintained relations - sometimes in broad daylight, other times in secret - with these same countries, relations kept with the aim of resolving definitively the problem of the Spanish emigrants in the Soviet Union, of the Spaniards imprisoned in Cuba as counterrevolutionaries, and of Spanish gold, which, however, would never succeed in finding a road home.



The book finishes with the ending of these secret contacts, an ending decreed by the opening of official contacts and by the stipulation for commercial and cultural exchange with the countries of the Communist bloc.

The relations which were born of these treaties, as the author points out, were accepted without scandal by the international community. They were tacitly approved by Pope Paul VI himself, who in this way revoked the veto - never formally expressed but nevertheless present - on Spain to hold dialogue with the Communist world, and this more than anything else was

THE POLYGLOT'S SHELF

the occasion for the Vatican to inaugurate its own embryonic *Ostpolitik*.



The book offers various appreciable characteristics, in particular, with regards to the optimal documentation, to a large extent not as yet published. But what is most striking is the serene and balanced distancing of the Franco regime and its foreign policy, a serenity and a separation which appear quite unexpectedly for the reader who, a short time after the end of a dictatorial regime, is accustomed to looking at it almost always with a sharply critical eye.

In this case, instead, the only sentiment that the author allows to transpire is a certain admiration of the scholar of political events for the consummate diplomatic professionalism demonstrated by Franco and his aides in the attempt to reverse the difficult situation in which Spain found itself after the defeat of the Axis. Thus a somewhat favourable "technical" judgement is also implied when the author refers to the line chosen by Franco, in attempting to justify *ex post facto* the aid received from Germany to help win the civil war and to rise to power, as a purely pragmatic choice in which the advantageous price of weapons had a determining role. The same can be said of the "double war theory", that was utilised by the Spanish diplomacy to justify both neutrality towards the Allies while the *Brigada Azul* fought in Russia. The author seems to consider that of all

the possible diplomatic strategies, the one that Franco actually chose to follow in his dealings with the victorious powers was the most favourable to national interest.

This diplomatic line involved the pretense that the reason why Spain had not intervened against the Allies (as it could have been expected, given the ideological ties that bound Franco's regime at least with Italian fascism) was to avoid the opening of another front, thus raising a smokescreen to hide the fact that Franco's regime, instead of conquering power with a bare military *alzamiento*, had been obliged to fight a three-year war and was too weak and unstable to enter into a military adventure. The judgement of the author on this pragmatic strategy is even clearer in the concluding lines, where it is said that "...states exist and one has to deal with them also when one does not like their political systems."



It can certainly be said that this author is not prejudiced against Franco and his foreign policy. And his prejudice-free approach is one more indication of the psychological and political distance that divides today's Spain from that of Franco, with few remnants, regrets and resentments.

There is here a sharp difference with the post-fascist political environment in the other European countries that have undergone similar experiences of dictatorship. Germany in particular, for several

THE POLYGLOT'S SHELF

decades has purely and simply ignored and removed its past, its "recent, hopeless past". Italy, on its side, has more than compensated for twenty years of fascist conformism and rhetoric with almost forty years of anti-fascist conformism, rhetoric, and common-places.

In comparison with Germany and Italy, Spain reaps thus the fruit of not having been involved in World War II and of not having known the traumatic fall of the regime as a consequence of a national defeat, nor - as in the German case - occupation, partition, or territorial amputation. On the contrary, born of the trauma of military insubordination and a ferocious civil war, the Franco regime - in spite of a

continuous effort to keep the memories alive - has instead seen a steady and long decline of its very *raison d'être*. This book provides, in other words, a small but interesting proof of the fact that the Spanish intelligentsia during Franco's declining phase, while the past was being artificially kept alive by the regime, has already partially undergone the process of reassessment of the country's recent history that Mussolini's biographer, Renzo De Felice, has almost completed in Italy, and that is being attempted, under much more difficult conditions, given the Nazi crimes, by German "revisionist" historians.

Federica Lolli-Ghetti