

Kadar's road from traitor to hero

From Roger Boyes
Budapest

In her unenviable job, Mrs Thatcher has to shake hands not only with the morally astute in the firmament of world leaders but also the compromised, the embittered, the nearly-impeached and the about-to-be-defeated. In Hungary yesterday she encountered Janos Kadar, a leader who does not easily fit into any traditional box. He is a socialist who has been imprisoned by fellow socialists; a former minister of police who was himself tortured; a man who treasures friendship but who signed the death warrant of a friend; a leader hated in 1956 but revered in 1984; an autocrat with charm.

Hungary is not a socialist wonderland. It has wrought few miracles. The full shops, the well stocked market, the stability of a society that can tranquilly accept a 20 per cent rise in the price of meat: all this has been won at a cost that is at once economic and political, but above all personal.

To reform a communist system within the tight boundaries defined by Moscow is to accept sacrifice as well as dividends. Mr Kadar's triumph is to have made that cost tolerable to the Hungarian people. Since the bloody repression of the 1956 uprising, Kadar has coaxed Hungary through anger, disillusionment and apathy to a position where his country can live comfortably with itself.

In early November 1956, when the Soviet ambassador to



Janos Kadar: Balancing the politically principled and the politically expedient

Hungary, a certain Mr Yuri Andropov, was summoned to the Hungarian leadership to explain a new influx of Russian troops. Mr Kadar is said to have burst out: "If you send in any more troops I will strangle them with my bare hands." Days later he went to Moscow and returned with the full trust of the Soviet Union. The uprising had become a "counter-revolution".

For a long time, the Hungarians did not forgive this sudden conversion. Those at

school at the time remember teachers discreetly and parents openly talking of the "Kadar gang". His rapid change was compounded in the eyes of his critics by the execution in 1958 of the former Premier, Imre Nagy. During the uprising he had supported Nagy; after 1956 he described Nagy as "submerged in the morass of treason" and approved the execution.

Kadar's life seems to continue between the politically principled and the politically

expedient. During the war he was active in the resistance - having joined the underground Communist Party in 1932 - was arrested by the Gestapo but managed to escape. The Russians established a foothold in Hungary in December, 1944 and asked Kadar to re-organize the Budapest police force.

For some years his police functions ran side by side with his party career. In August, 1948 he succeeded the Interior Minister, Laszlo Rajk, his friend and former colleague in the Budapest police, visited him in prison to persuade him to sign a false confession and was one of four to sign Rajk's order of execution. Not surprisingly, Rajk's son, also called Laszlo, is now a dissident.

Yet Kadar was himself purged, accused in 1951 of espionage, treason and Titoism, and savagely tortured. Since then he has not been capable of having children. This helterskelter of first holding, then losing, then regaining power is characteristic of post-war history in eastern Europe. Kadar is exceptional only in that he survived.

Most people seem to agree that Kadar genuinely liked Rajk and genuinely respected Nagy. But having built his base on the police and the Interior Ministry, his friendship was prevented by duty. Rajk would have been executed had Kadar intervened or not, and whether Kadar fought for or against the execution of Nagy is still unclear.

He protected his friends and

remembers past favours but this is of little comfort to those who remember the signature on the Rajk and Nagy death warrants.

Kadar is 71, and looks it. Tall, with great charm, he lives a modest life in a two-bedroomed apartment. He smokes the cheapest Hungarian cigarettes and would prefer to play cards or chess than attend a banquet. Although control of the party is in his hands, whether he nowadays takes part in daily decision making is a moot point. He certainly has a final say on major issues and, most importantly, keeps a close watch on cadre policy.

Whoever tries to fill the gap after Kadar will face a swell of opposition from the frustrated critics of economic reform who have so far been kept in check by the aura of Kadar and his cult of modesty. Irreverently, the Budapesters compare Kadar with Emperor Franz Josef, who ruled the Austro-Hungarian Empire through the bitterness of the years following the 1848 uprising to the first World War. But a more precise comparison is with Tito. For much of the 1970s - before Solidarity captured the headlines - the question that most concerned analysts of Eastern Europe was: after Tito what? Perhaps Hungary will muddle through the succession in a similar way to Yugoslavia, but the phased reforms of Soviet-style socialism needs more than patchwork politics; it needs a guiding pilot light that will be extinguished without the grand old man.

Thatcher's modest but charming host.

From Roger Boyes.

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