

The British press about the Hungarian revolution of 1956

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At present many English-speaking researchers are sure that the role of public opinion as a factor of foreign policy continues to increase. Before TV and the Internet, the press had an exceptional influence on public opinion. In the UK the press traditionally played a significant role being a manipulator of public opinion and exerting a great influence on foreign policy. Since the middle of the XIX century the mass media of Great Britain have created a contradictory image of Russia.

During the First and Second world wars, journalists did everything possible to form a positive image of the allied country. However, during the interwar period and the first decade of the Cold war, newspapers and magazines returned to the previously formed stereotypes and adopted an extremely negative image of the Soviet Union.

Changes or complications in the geopolitical situation often contributed to the strengthening of existing patterns. October of 1956 was marked by two serious crises: the invasion of the Anglo-French troops in Egypt and the Hungarian revolution. In both crises, the Soviet Union played a key role. The position of the Soviet leadership forced Britain to leave Egypt. The British press attentively followed the developments that began in Hungary on October 23, 1956.

Digital «British Newspapers Archive» (<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>) has 430 word combinations for the request «Hungarian Revolution» in central and regional newspapers of Great Britain for 1956 year. Let's analyze the context of the articles where the Hungarian events were mentioned.

From the first days of the events in Budapest, most British Newspapers called these events as «revolution», «October revolution». However, some journalists were careful in their assessments and wrote about «so-called revolution», riot, «throw-the Russians-out-rebellion».¹

The most newspapers tried to present the most detailed chronicle of events. They were on the first pages of issues.

Besides it the journalists wrote about the participants of the event. By the opinion of journalists of Daily Herald, «the revolution was made by young people of the working class, apprentices or students»², correspondents of the Aberdeen Evening Express so pointed out that «many soldiers had deserted their units and gone over to the rebels».³

Also the British journalists took an interest to the personalities of Hungarian policy, i.e. of I. Nagy. They underlined that «his background is typical of hundreds of East European Communists – peasant birth, elementary education, early Socialist leanings, service in World War I and later the Soviet revolution, attempts to set up a Communist state in his homeland in the early 1920's. Then came gaol, exile in Moscow, a return in 1944 to set up a Communist government denunciation – and a return to power».⁴ For them the personality of I. Nagy was the embodiment of hopes for democratic reforms.

Some newspapers paid attention to the personality of J. Kadar. For example, «Aberdeen Evening Express» noted that Kadar was «one of the organizers of the Hungarian underground, for whom the Gestapo hunted in vain. He was arrested in 1944 and escaped. After the liberation he became deputy-chief of police and later deputy-secretary of the Communist

¹ Belfast Telegraph. 24 October 1956. P.1.

² Daily Herald. 31 October 1956. P.5.

³ Aberdeen Evening Express. 25 October 1956. P.1.

⁴ Lancashire Evening Post. 24 October 1956. P.1.

Party...he was imprisoned for political offences during 1948-1953».⁵

From the first days of the Hungarian events, the rhetoric/ vocabulary of the most articles was openly anti-Soviet. The facts of Hungarian Revolution were interpreted predestinedly enough. For example, from the 1st day the newspapers began to write about street battles between Russian troops and Hungarian anti-communist and practically nothing about the battles between Hungarian Army, police and security troops. Big black headlines of the articles of October 24, 1956 cried about it.

Meanwhile the careful readers reading the text of articles could gain insight that «Nagy sought the help of Soviet soldiers to quell the uprising after a night of rioting in the city»⁶, «the Government called on the Russian and Hungarian troops to quell the rising by noon».⁷

After reviewing many British Newspapers, we found only one mention about the event, which was the beginning of the Hungarian revolution. The «Belfast Telegraph» wrote that «it was fairly peaceful demonstration until uniformed men of the secret police fired into a crowd near the broad-casting station and killed a man. Five lorry loads of soldiers had been rushed to the wireless station, where Mr. Gero was making a broadcast. ... The A.V.H. (secret police) men threw tear gas bombs to force them back. The crowd kept coming. Then the secret policemen fired. A Hungarian fell, shot through the face. Another was seriously wounded. From then on savage rioting took place»⁸. We have to note that Belfast Telegraph is an Irish newspaper and it had more independent view on the events. As we can see from this text Soviet soldiers didn't take part in this clash.

By different ways, British journalists emphasized exclusively anti-Soviet orientation, ignoring the intra-Hungarian contradictions:

- they cited anti-Soviet slogans, trying to underline strong anti-Soviet mood: «The Soviet Army must go», «Free our land from Russian joke»;

- they cited anti-Soviet speeches of the politicians. For example, the «Birmingham Daily Post» cited the speech of Lajos Nemeth, leader of the Christian Democrat Party of Hungary, who said that «the weapons which Russia gave to Hungarian Army and police are now being used to attack the Soviet troops in the fight for liberty from the Russians themselves»⁹;

- they chanted the so-called heroism of Hungarian youth: «14-years girl threw a «Molotov cocteil» in 3 Russian lorries, each of which had been towing 75 mm guns. Her body was covered by Hungarian flag and a lot of flowers. On the note pinned to the flag were the words: Here died a Hungarian girl, 14 years old, but not in vain. All Hungary joins in mourning her death. Death to the Russians, death to the Communists».¹⁰ This guns didn't fire. Rather, these guns were as a weapon of fear. These guns were exploded by a teenage girl and it was regarded as a feat;

- with a pleasure they wrote about protest sentiments among Hungarian sportsmen who didn't «want to compete in Olympic games in Melbourne with Russian murders»¹¹ though Olympic games have to be aside of political events;

- they newspapers reported about creation of International Solidarity Fund set up by the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions to aid victims of Communist oppression. And they published the appeals to the British workers to help their Hungarian comrades against Soviet domination¹²;

- they published information often contradicting to the historical facts. For example, in the newspapers was published an unverified information with reference to "eyewitnesses". As

⁵ Aberdeen Evening Express. 25 October 1956. P.1.

⁶ Lancashire Evening Post. 24 October 1956. P.1.

⁷ Aberdeen Evening Express. 25 October 1956. P.1.

⁸ Belfast Telegraph. 24 October 1956. P.1.

⁹ Birmingham Daily Post. 27 October 1956. P.12.

¹⁰ Daily Herald. 31 October 1956. P.5.

¹¹ Ibidem.

¹² Ibidem.

you know, at the beginning of the uprising (October, 23-24) the Soviet troops received an order forbidding to open fire on the demonstrators. This order has been steadily implemented, because the nonfulfillment of order by officers and soldiers leads to severe punishment. That's why for the period from 24 to 26 of October rebels killed 215 Soviet soldiers and officers. Meanwhile «Coventry Evening Telegraph» wrote that some Dutch Businessman was in Budapest from 22 to 25 of October and saw as «Russian tanks fire at crowds of demonstrators in front of the building of Parliament».¹³

On the contrary Swiss (i.e. independent) traveler told that saw by «his own eyes that 20 leaders of Budapest rioters have been hanged on flagpoles and lampposts at the promenade along the Danube»¹⁴. Either he wrote that «rioters who had occupied the radio station had been thrown out of the windows from the fourth floor».¹⁵ Evidence of the Swiss traveler shows that the victims of the uprising were those who died in an armed conflicts with the units of the Hungarian army, police and security forces, and not from the hands of Soviet soldiers and officers, as many British journalists tried to show. On the contrary, the same traveler witnessed «I have also seen Soviet soldiers being hanged» and «12 burned-out Soviet tanks».¹⁶

The journalists wanted to show awful scenes of the views of the capital after the withdrawal of Russian troops at the end of October. When we read these lines, we have to understand, that it was wishful thinking. For example, the real number of killed Soviet soldiers to the end of October does not allow to speak that «the streets were full of killed bodies of Russian soldiers. Nevertheless we read: «The streets of Budapest today are filled with scenes that would make even the war-veteran shudder. The streets are littered with burned-out tanks, lorries, bodies of Russian soldiers, overturned guns, wrecked trams and other rubble of the battle».¹⁷

But there was a problem for journalists. There weren't pictures of these awfully described scenes. On the photos published in the Illustrated London News we see tanks without damages, with citizens sitting or standing on these war machines. Explaining this dissonance, journalists wrote: «Some Russian troops are said to have shown reluctance in their task of repression, but others were willfully brutal. The situation was further confused inasmuch as some Russian tanks were flying the Hungarian flag, presumably in an attempt not to arouse additional odium».¹⁸

Most Newspapers published detailed information about the destruction of the statue of Stalin: «Ropes were wound round the neck of the statue and to cheers the crown tried to topple it. But it would not budge. They finally managed to melt Stalin's knees by using welding torches. With hammers, iron pipes and various other tools the crowd cut and broke the monument into countless pieces».¹⁹ The pictures of this destruction were published in the «London Illustrated news».²⁰

A distinctive feature of the publications was the exaggeration of the number of the killed citizens. Meanwhile the statistics facts were cited with reference to eyewitnesses from other countries. In particular, some "Western" traveler who arrived in Warsaw reported about 200 killed only on October 23, 1956. This eyewitness testimony was reprinted by newspapers, contributing to the formation of a certain public opinion.²¹ So it was said that in the night 30/31 of October Soviet artillery and tanks were withdrawn from Budapest and then

¹³ Coventry Evening Telegraph. 27 October 1956. P.1.

¹⁴ Hartlepool Northern Daily Mail. 26 October 1956. P.1.

¹⁵ Coventry Evening Telegraph. 27 October 1956. P.1.

¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷ Daily Herald. 31 October 1956. P.5.

¹⁸ London Illustrated news. 3 November 1956. P.742.

¹⁹ Birmingham Daily Post. 27 October 1956. P.14.

²⁰ London Illustrated news. 1956. 3 Nov. P.16.

²¹ Lancashire Evening Post. 24 October 1956. P.1.

«nationalists brought the bodies of hundreds of their comrades who had died in the fight».²² Or they cited the statements of Nehru, who compared the Hungarian revolution with the movement in British India. The price of Revolution is 25 thousand dead Hungarians and 7 thousand dead Russians.

Sometimes the newspapers published unverified information as for instance about the death of Hungarian football player Ferenc Puskas, who will die in 2007.

Anti-Russian rhetoric intensified after 4 of November when the Soviet troops entered Hungary again. But...now it was obviously because secret order of Russian General Headquarters was contrary to international law and provoked a strong international reaction. On the pages of "Illustrated London News" were published photos of numerous demonstrations in different cities of Europe. The journalists wrote about this fact: «It can not be expected that the brave efforts of the Hungarian rebels will be successful against the renewed attack by strong Soviet forces, which began on November 4. However, the «Hungarian October Revolution» is long to be remembered for the supreme bravery displayed by the citizens of Budapest and other cities, in their unequal struggle for freedom from Russian domination».²³

After defeat of the Hungarian revolution, British Newspapers wrote about the deportation of wives and babies to Soviet prisons. The Soviet press did not write about this fact and now we haven't any full information about it. But British journalist wrote that it was secret action. «The news that deportation to the Soviet Union were under way came from an "unimpeachable source". "Notes were thrown out of train windows by young men asking that their families be notified they were being taken to the Soviet Union. Many families in Budapest received such messages".²⁴ This issue was raised in the General Assembly of the United Nations and British Newspapers characterized the debates on this issue.²⁵

So they paid attention to increasing of the army divisions in the countries of Warsaw Pact in order to prevent revolutions like the Hungarian one.²⁶

In general British journalists continued to use anti-Russian headlines and slogans: «The Soviet threat is no bluff»²⁷, «Russians attempt to tighten grip on their satellites»²⁸ etc.

Summing up the characteristics of publications in the British press devoted to the Hungarian events of 1956, we can note the following. Before the events of the Hungarian revolution, Hungary was on the periphery of the interests of the British press. The events of October led to increasing its interest to the country. A significant part of the articles immediately acquired anti-Soviet orientation. But if after November 4, this position was objective, then in October this assessment was ideologically biased. Journalists did not try to identify the true causes of the uprising, to consider the features of the development of Hungarian society, they did not mention the considerable number of supporters of Horti, who still retained their influence in Hungarian society and contributed to the October provocations. The tone of the articles was determined by a predetermined paradigm: «Communism is an evil». In the context of the Cold war, Western journalists used the Hungarian events to deploy powerful propaganda against their enemy.

As the publications of 1957 showed, the anti-Soviet publications were also explained by another internal British factor – the strengthening of the position of the Communist party. The suppression by the Soviet Union of the Hungarian revolution in conjunction with anti-Communist publications led to a reduction of the British Communist party by 1/3.²⁹

²² Daily Herald. 31 October 1956. P.5.

²³ London Illustrated news. 1956. 10 Nov. P.789.

²⁴ Londonderry Sentinel. 15 November 1956. P.3.

²⁵ Belfast News-Letter. 20 November 1956. P.5.

²⁶ Northern Whig. 19 November 1956. P.1.

²⁷ West London Observer. 23 November 1956. P.8.

²⁸ Northern Whig. 19 November 1956. P.1.

²⁹ West London Observer. 19 July 1957. P.8.

After the suppression of the Hungarian revolution interest to the events in Hungary immediately faded, and she was again on the periphery of the interests of British journalists.

Literature

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