

# Twelve Days: The Story of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution

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On the fiftieth anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution, a defining moment in the Cold War, Victor Sebestyen, a journalist whose own family fled from Hungary, gives us a totally fresh account of that uprising, incorporating newly released official Hungarian and Soviet documents, his family's diaries, and eyewitness testimony.

Tracing the events that led to the rebellion, Sebestyen tells the story of these twelve days with front-page immediacy. Sebestyen's narrative moves from the tumultuous streets of Budapest to the inner sanctums of the Kremlin and the White House, where we hear the conversations of the men and women who planned and took part in the uprising and of those who helped crush it—some actively, others through craven inaction.

Sebestyen shows how Western anti-Communist rhetoric encouraged the rebels and convinced them they would receive help. We witness the thrilling first days when, armed with a few rifles, petrol bombs, and desperate courage, the people of Budapest rose up against their Soviet masters and nearly succeeded in routing the Russian forces. For a few exciting days, as the Western world watched in amazement, it looked as though the Hungarians would win and humble the Soviet Union. Russian troops withdrew. But not for long.

The Soviets showed they would resort to brutal lengths to cling to their Communist empire—and the West was prepared to let them. The free world looked on in sympathy and horror, did nothing, and, finally, the Hungarians suffered a devastating defeat, remaining under Soviet occupation for three more decades.

Fast-paced, vivid, and authoritative, *Twelve Days* adds immeasurably to our understanding of one of the most important battles of the Cold War and reminds us—through the extraordinary courage and sacrifice of the Hungarian people in their doomed fight—of the unquenchable human desire for freedom.

## Twelve Days: The Story of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution Details


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## Jonathan says

Excellent book on an often over looked topic, using declassified documents from both sides in order to paint a complete picture. The author does a good job of blending the first hand accounts, the politics, the quotes, and the documents into a flowing narrative. An interesting struggle where few stood against many, in what ended as being ultimately futile.

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## 40brown says

I read this on the flight to Budapest this summer. I really know (knew!) nothing about Hungary and wanted to have some kind of familiarity with its recent history.

I am SO glad I picked this up. It is written in an easy to read, narrative style, but still heavy on the history and details.

Having read this prior to my visit, I appreciated all of the monuments (official and not) that are scattered around Budapest (from the shoes on the Danube, to Monument Park, to the bullet holes left in the buildings in Pest...).

I highly recommend it if you want to know more about Hungary's role in WWII. It also makes an interesting study in social movements.

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## Lorenzo Berardi says

This was an excellent, engaging and quite informative read which happened just when I needed it. I've been interested in the 1956 Hungarian Uprising/Revolution for quite a long time, but - by sheer coincidence - one week upon finishing 'Twelve Days' I finally visited Budapest for the very first time.

I guess it might have been rather annoying for my partner (she has just confirmed that it was) being led through the Hungarian capital by me unawaringly lecturing her on events and anecdotes from October '56. And I reckon how more than once I juxtaposed the monumental main streets and squares we were navigating through with the black and white pictures depicting Soviet tanks, urban guerrilla, rubble and destruction dating back to the uprising. Sorry for that, Paulina! And blame on you, Victor Sebestyen.

For reading 'Twelve Days' brought me straight into a Budapest that is no more. I got sucked into a time vortex blowing me away from A.D. 2014 Poland and leaving me stranded but not confused in 1956 Hungary. It took Mr Sebestyen's wizardry only a few pages to captivate me and - much to his merit - once I get into the history whirlwind I was reluctant to get out of it. I'll tell you why.

'Twelve Days' is one of those rare history books where the context is introduced and explained thoroughly, the chronology is always clear and the narration manages to be enthralling, coherent and consistent. It reads

like a well-plotted political spy story with a Machiavellian cast of characters, but it deals with one of the darkest pages in recent European history.

Despite of the title he chose, the author doesn't rush to the brave and bloody twelve days of the 1956 uprising/revolution. At the contrary, Mr Sebestyen takes his time to explain what happened to Budapest and Hungary during and after World War II. By doing so the Anglo-Hungarian historian skilfully introduces the readers to a place and time they might not be familiar with and gradually builds up the book to its climax.

Each of the main domestic characters who played a major part in the events leading to 1956 and following it - Matyas Rakosi, Erno Gero, Laszlo Rajk, Imre Nagy, Janos Kadar - is carefully disclosed in an unbiased and quite objective way. True, when it comes to villains Mr Sebestyen stresses out Gero's 'sadistic smile' or Rakosi's 'overwhelming cynicism', but one must not forget that these men sent thousands of people to death and are justly remembered as criminals by Hungarians.

What I've found interesting is that the author doesn't depict Imre Nagy - now considered a hero and a martyr by his compatriots - as an entirely positive character. In fact, Sebestyen does quite the opposite by showing us an often undecided politician, an excessively cautious man incapable to cut the bounds tying him to the USSR and reluctant to accept the moral leadership the Budapest crowds granted him.

In the same fashion, Janos Kadar - the man who took over the power after the uprising/revolution was crushed to bits by the Soviet tanks - could be included into the villains ranks as he was 'loathed as a Judas' by Hungarians. And yet, Sebestyen doesn't portray Kadar as merely a Muscovite puppet but reckons how in the years following the uprising he actually did something to soften things up leading to the so called 'goulash socialism'.

On a side note, my only criticism to the author is that he might have done a better job on the international stage.

The role played in smashing the uprising by a deus ex machina such as Nikita Khrushchev in Moscow is explained but not investigated as much as it could have been. Looking Westwards, Sebestyen expresses some mild criticism towards the lack of interest in Hungary from the US and the UN, but eventually justifies both Eisenhower and Hammarskjöld for their giving priority to the Suez crisis unfolding in the very same days. This point of view is a tad too simplistic to be accepted completely, but Sebestyen did such an excellent job overall that I can forgive him.

If you are interested in knowing more about the 1956 Hungarian uprising, revolution (or whatever you call it), 'Twelve Days' is a book to get and read soon.

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## Greg says

A marvel of editing. Names spelled differently on the same page! Chapter 31 is "Sunday, 4th November" while chapter 32 is "Friday, 7th November"! (Poor planning to switch from the Julian calendar during a revolution, I guess.)

This one takes the cake, though: "The gifted Paris-Match photographer Jean-Pierre Pedrazzini, twenty-nine, \*on one of his earliest war zone assignments,\* stepped from behind the cover of a tank for a split second to take a picture. He was caught in the crossfire — from which side nobody knows — and was shot in the stomach. He died of his wounds a few days later in Paris." Either his earliest war zone assignment was also his last, or his brutal editors sent him on a lot of war zone assignments while he was dying of his wounds.

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## Quinten says

1956, al is het onbeleefd om een recensie met een getal te beginnen, is dit wel het jaartal waar het hele boek omdraait. Met als kern de date 23 oktober tot en met 4 november van dat jaar. Het is het jaar van een historisch ondergesneeuwd onderwerp; De Hongaarse opstand. Of het nou een revolutie of een opstand was, daar zijn de meningen oververdeeld. Dat het een uiterst pijnlijke, voor alle kanten, gebeurtenis is staat vast.

Victor Sebestyen begint zijn boek met een honderd pagina durende inleiding over de oorzaken van de opstand. Het begint al bij het beleid van de regerin in de jaren 1930. Na de Duitse inval in 1941 wordt een grote stap gezet naar een verschrikkelijke periode. De Sovjet-Unie 'bevrijdt' het land jaren later van het Duitse bewind. Rakosi raakt uiteindelijk aan de macht van de satellietstaat en begint een horror-bewind. Honderduizenden Hongaren worden vervolgd op grond van valse beschuldigingen. Bekend communsiten worden door Rakosi opgeruimd om plaats te maken voor zijn eigen bewind. Een volgende stap richting de opstand van 1956 is de dood van Stalin. Na de dood van Stalin wordt deze grote dictator bekritiseerd, vele personen vinden zijn beleid slecht. Rakosi is een van de beste volgelingen van Stalin en dus komt ook zijn beleid onder vuur. Imre Nagy krijgt van het Kremlin een bestuursfunctie als landverdelers, want er moet een ommekeer komen in de armoede van Hongarije. Hij doet zijn werk een kortere periode en wordt er vervolgens uitgewerkt, weer een bakermat voor de Revolutie. Als er in Warschau (de hoofdstad van Polen) eenstaking uitbreekt tegen het beleid van hun land. Volgend de Hongaren hun voorbeeld enkele dagen later. Wat begint als een grote demonstratie wordt een revolutie. En hier begint het levendigste stuk verhaal van Sebestyen. Op de 23e oktober worden deze demonstraties de grond ingewerkt door geweld. Dit wekt weer agressie op bij de inwoners van Boedapest. En uiteindelijk wordt het een veldslag in de straten van Boedapest. Wapens worden overal vandaan gehaald. Bolwerken worden overgenomen en de radio wordt zwaar bevochten. Na enkele dagen trekken de Russen zich tactisch terug. Imre Nagy wordt premier en begint een gematigde hervorming, volgens veel inwoners te magertjes. Tevens is dit een begin van lange politieke kwesties in de wereld, van Imre Nagy, naar Chroestjov en Eisenhower. Er wordt vanuit Hongarije gesmeekt om steun uit het Westen, dat uiteindelijk niet komt. Want ze hebben het te druk met het conflict in Egypte. De Russen besluiten een massale overrompeling van de Revolutie met een 150.000 man sterk leger. Met een list worden de hoge leiders weggewerkt. En de opstand neergeslagen. Tevens elke opstand voor de komende 30 jaar. Vrijheid wordt dood. Hoop wordt angst en dat allemaal op de 4e van november.

Victor Sebestyen schrijft over een uiterst bijzonder boek over de gebeurtenissen voor, tijdens en na de opstand. Hij doet op een zeer heldere stijl, deskundig en goed uitgewerkt. Zijn tijd die hij erin heeft gestoken betaald zich terug. Dit boek is goed. Maar zeker niet zeer goed of zelfs perfect. Als Sebestyen echt een goed had geschreven had hij veel meer in moeten zoomen op de burgers van de stad, wat voelde ze? Hoe gingen ze ermee om? Het boek wordt meer een politiek verhaal met veel informatie rond de opstand. Voor elke liefhebber van historische onderwerpen, een grote aanrader. Voor de avonturiers, een stuk minder. Desalniettemin: een zeer deskundig naslagwerk over een moedig verzet in het Sovjetblok.

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## Adrian Buck says

Sebestyan is best in the middle section of this book. A fast-paced but heavily detailed narrative presented on a day-by-day structure that was well suited to events. I enjoyed the little journalistic flourishes that brought the personalities to life: Cardinal Mindszenty tucking up his cassock so that he wouldn't be identified as a priest; Defence Minister Maléter patting his holster as he remarked the uprising didn't mean end of Socialism

in Hungary. This sort of detail is either imagined or researched, the cross referencing of accounts suggests it is researched. Excellent.

The problem is in the Prelude and Aftermath sections where he tries to replicate this one day at time approach. It doesn't work: the causes and effects of the uprising can't be distinctly packaged into events. What's more trying to squeeze them into a diary format means that some important things have been left out.

For example, many of the Hungarian combatants were teenagers and would have been small children when Budapest was besieged in 1944. During that time over 48,000 Axis, 70,000 Soviet and 76,000 Civilians were killed. Afterwards 400,000 Hungarians were sent to the Gulag, and 30,000 were raped. It makes the 2,500 combat deaths, 2,500 executions and 22,000 arrests of 1956 pale into insignificance. Would the uprising have happened at all if a generation of Budapest's children hadn't been utterly brutalised? For a blistering fictional account of this time see *Under the Frog*, for the facts see *Battle for Budapest*.

The Aftermath is a mere sketch, mostly concerned with the immediate implications for Hungary and the conduct of the Cold War - America is of disproportionate interest to Sebastyen. He remarks that in 1989 the post-Soviet republic was created on October 23rd, yet there is no analysis of the how current Hungarian politics is caught in the shadow of '56. Which is strange seeing as I found his research enlightening here.

The uprising was spontaneous and leaderless, or at least conducted by small groups whose only common ground was a hatred of the Russians. At one stage the teenage rebels of the Corvin Cinema were exchanging fire with the patriotic soldiers at Killian Barracks. There was a strong element of civil war that Sebastyen doesn't linger on. Yet, the hatreds of the civil war are apparent today in the frequent disorder that occurs on the anniversary of the uprising, and the attempt by the current Government to rewrite the 1989 settlement. 1956 is still a very divisive event in Hungarian politics, and I can't even guess why it is given the prominence it is. If we want to celebrate a national tragedy, shouldn't we be looking at '44 instead?

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### **Brian Childs says**

A gripping account of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. Some passages were extremely moving, others covered such intense cruelty they were hard to finish reading. I finished it on my way to Budapest and it has been a wonderful complement to the trip.

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### **Otto Benz says**

Well-written account of the harrowing experience of the Hungarian revolution against the hated Russian occupiers and communist regime in October 1956. Sebastyen prefixes the 12 days of revolution with an excellent introduction of the brutal suppression of the Hungarians under the Stalinist leader Rakosi and leads on to the surprising and short-lived success of the initial revolt before its inevitable crushing by Soviet military might and ignored by the rest of the world focusing on Suez. Sebastyen includes moving 1st hand descriptions of the events and the horrendous results. Should be required reading for all advocates of communism.

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### **Zack Rusk says**

Picked up this book expecting it to be a textbook, but was pleasantly surprised by how it read like a storybook. The context and events of the revolution is well written, major characters have clear motives for their actions and behaviors, and the narrative is well paced. I definitely ended this book with more of an emotional and factual understanding of what happened in 1956.

This book does have a few issues, secondary characters are hard to keep track of (especially if your not familiar with Hungarian names) and Sebestyen does come across as having an agenda (we get it, Soviets are bad, Americans and the UN failed everyone)

I can forgive these shortcomings though, my grandparents were a part of this uprising and this book helped me gain a better insight into what they were going through and the scars that it left behind. Definitely recommend as a personal introduction course to Hungarian history and Culture

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### **Yvonne says**

Well written history of Hungarian Revolution of 1956, and lack of US support at the critical hour, after all our anti-communist rhetoric.

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### **Roelof Kotvis says**

Sebestyen provides an impressive amount of information about the curious events that took place in Budapest in the autumn of 1956, in a style that is very easy to read. Unfortunately, the author is a journalist, not a historian: little effort has been made to distinguish the significant from the trivial, and facts from suppositions. The rather messy annotation doesn't help either. Most annoying are the author's inclination to impress his personal views about the 1956 events upon the reader, and his childish habit of emphasizing the obvious. (What's the point of calling a torturer for the secret police 'sadistic'? That would have been in his job description, wouldn't it?)

There are quite a few books about the 1956 uprising (not a revolution, I daresay). This one describes the events in great detail, but leaves it up to the reader to put them in historical and moral perspective. "Twelve Days" is certainly interesting, but it's far from brilliant. If you have been looking for the definitive handbook on the Hungarian uprising, I'm afraid this book doesn't even come close.

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### **Erica McBride says**

Incredible, detailed history leading up to the revolution during and just after. A must read before a trip to Budapest to understand the country and people more!



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## Jim says

As a Hungarian-American who lived through the period of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 (we even took in two refugee families at different times), Victor Sebestyen's *Twelve Days: The Story of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution* help refresh my memory. Plus, it made me even more furious at the Eisenhower administration's craven failure to pay any attention to the failed efforts of my people to break free of the Soviet yoke.

During the Revolution, the propagandists at Radio Free Europe, in effect, kept promising American and UN aid, going so far as to give specific military advice. But the eyes of Eisenhower and of UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld were on the Suez Crisis, which was taking place at the same time. Even the Russians were nonplussed: They had lined 20,000 troops with armor and artillery along the Austrian-Hungarian border in expectation of an invasion.

Over the long haul, the Hungarians won. Janos Kadar, who was put into power by Khrushchev proved to be a good leader -- years after he had all the uprising participants executed. After the Hungarian people, the biggest casualty of the Revolution was all the Communist parties of Europe. Russia's naked aggression did not stand well with the West, and it was one of those subtle turning points in history that preceded by some thirty years the collapse of Soviet Communism itself.

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## Tom says

My son recently returned home from studying in Budapest and brought along a copy of *Twelve Days: The Story of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution*. He seemed to think that it would appeal to a "history nerd" like me. He was right...about the book's appeal and my interest in most any facet of history ("Nerd" indeed. Disrespectful damn kid). Anyway, I was intrigued by the subject matter, not only because he had just been living in Budapest, but because I realized how little I actually knew about the 1956 Hungarian revolution. In truth, all I really knew about it was that it occurred and that it was summarily put down by the Soviets. Obviously there had to be more to it than that, but as far as who the players were and how events unfolded, I couldn't have begun to say. Now, however, I understand how complex the circumstances were that led to the uprising and how truly remarkable it was for a student protest to have exploded into a battle that, however briefly, held the military might of a superpower at bay. An absolutely fascinating account and one that was scrupulously researched. Props to the author not only for accumulating the facts, but also for being upfront about what facts could not be established. Where the clinical account of an historian would have altogether omitted mention of anything not fully verified, Sebestyen's narrative style allows for a number of points to be presented, with the appropriate caveats, as what most likely occurred based on subsequent events. Far from impugning the credibility of the account, this helps bring clarity to the broader scope of what went on in those chaotic days. As a reading experience, I did find this book to be tough sledding at times. Admittedly that was in no small part due to the great number of Hungarian names sounding too similar to my western ear to quite keep track of who was who and how they were involved. While the author is certainly not to blame for that, the sheer volume of names referenced did make for a very densely populated account. The documentation would have benefitted overall by leaving out some of the less relevant references. I also felt that a bit more context would have helped. It seemed there was a fair amount of foreknowledge assumed of

how the uprising ultimately impacted the political ideology of the Soviet bloc, the balance of power in Europe, and, of greater interest to me, the daily lives of the Hungarian people. These things were only briefly acknowledged and I found myself wanting to know more. But then again, I suppose that's not such a bad thing, is it? In any case, *Twelve Days: The Story of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution* is not just a sound chronology of events, it is an informative, compelling, and often moving account. For those, like me, who might otherwise be unfamiliar with the Hungarian revolution of 1956, this is a very comprehensive introduction and well worth the read.

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## **Petr says**

It has lot of details, which I (unlike the previous reviewer) found interesting and new.

Perhaps different personal history explains different evaluation:

I was a freshman in (then) neighboring Czechoslovakia and I remember the events in Hungary vividly. Of course, my understanding and memories was based on information then available to us: Official Newspapers and rumors.

Problem is, that both are often wrong, and even if you average, you end up with distorted story. For example: the incidents of (horrific) lynching, which did play a role in Soviet decision to invade, were not published. OR: The rumors was that Soviets removed Imre Nagy from Yugoslavian embassy by force and hanged him. According this book, which I find credible, he was promised safe pass, left voluntarily, and was arrested and spend three years in a prison, before he was murdered, not on Soviet, but on Kadar's insistence. The amount of treachery and lies, and the sad fact that they worked, over and over again, is telling us something profound about the human despair and hope.

Book is readable, well researched, but to the end (page 295) where author is discussing the US (Eisenhower, Dulles, Lodge) reaction and position, author is, in my view he still naive, or under the influence of 'western propaganda':

Hungarians (just as Czechs in 1968) were expecting help, some help, from the US. In both cases, the RFEERL (radio free europe),(which we did not knew then was run by CIA) was cheering up the rebels, freedom fighter, whatever, cheering them on. Objectively, UN, Security council, was subject to Soviet veto, and it must have been clear to an objective adult,that 'west', US, will not do anything. (Alas, we were neither objective, nor adults).

What CIA was interested in was short term propaganda payoffs. The worse mayhem in the Soviet block, the better.

However, history evolves differently then people, be they 'plain people', Demagogues, dictators and rebels, plan and forsee.

In the end, Gorbachev surprised (not just me I think) us when he answered the question "what the difference was between Dubcek's suppressed Prague Spring of 1968 and Gorbachev's perestroika of 1987", and quipped "19 years [ [books.google.cz/books?isbn=0815730608](https://books.google.cz/books?isbn=0815730608) ] showing that all those hopes scarifices, passions, and blood, was not spent in vain ...

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