A supervisor's review of a Master's Thesis:
Xiaopeng Ding:
Alone Amid the Storm: The Hungarian Uprising and the Western Powers

The author set out an ambitious goal for his M.A. thesis: to review and revise all historical evidence hitherto available concerning the international aspects of the 1956 Hungarian Uprising. Although his thesis is structured so as to include several layers – including an analysis of how the uprising unfolded, how the peoples in the West and their leaders responded to the crisis or how it was covered by the western media – the major focus is on the U.S. policy towards Hungary. Mr. Ding follows the development of this policy from the end of the Second World War, but his analysis is primarily centered on the U.S. (non-)action with respect to Hungary in October and November 1956 as opposed to the very active U.S. diplomacy vis-à-vis the Anglo-Franco-Israeli intervention in Suez. The last chapter assesses the controversial role played by the broadcasts of Radio Free Europe into Hungary.

Even though the author beyond any doubt could not "review and revise all [relevant] historical evidence hitherto available", which would be a task beyond anyone's capacity, he certainly made use of several important documentary editions as well as a number of prominent books on the topic. The way he refers to his sources, however, is somewhat problematic, because it forces the reader to tackle numerous acronyms used not only for documentary editions, but also for monographs. Although these abbreviations are included in the Bibliography, it is only at the end of particular references and not in alphabetical order. Thus the reader has to learn (or jot down somewhere and keep his notes with him/her while reading) that BOR means László Borhi's *Hungary in the Cold War 1945-1956*, JPW Tony Judt's *Postwar*, L/VID Paul Lendvai's *The Hungarians: A Thousand Years of Victory in Defeat*, MOS Leonard Mosley's family biography of the Dulleses, etc. This rather unusual (and certainly not user-friendly…) way of referring to sources is coupled by the author's constant using of the incorrect abbreviation "pp." also for references to single pages.

The thesis contains neither Conclusion, nor a Summary (whether in English or in any other language), so the reader has to find the author's key arguments scattered throughout the text. Instead of a Conclusion, the last chapter called *Reflections and Legacy* demonstrates the author's terminal addiction to grandiloquent and rather ingenious way of writing of what should be primarily a scholarly thesis. In a single paragraph, he mixes up George W. Bush's remark made at the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the 1956 events in Budapest with Edmund Burke's words about "circumstances" in history and concludes that "fifty years onward, Hungary was still *That Faraway People of Whom They Knew Nothing*" – a strange allusion to the well-known words of Neville Chamberlain from the pre-Munich days of 1938, transferred by the author to the time period when both Hungary and the successor states of Czechoslovakia enjoyed the security guarantee derived from their membership in NATO. I would certainly welcome more of a historical analysis and less of this approach of mixing of various historical sketches and sometimes outright gossips, which is rather too often to be found in the thesis. Additionally, the author's language is sometimes too colourful for an academic text, frequently at an expense of lucidity of the message the author wants to pass across. For instance, I do not quite grasp the meaning of the following sentence that follows after a short reference to the departure of two historians from the Oxford Communist

Historians Group: “Eric Hobsbawm, the most prominent member who remained behind, was again a symptomatic case of his ilk.” (p. 47) In what way? There are numerous examples of the author’s style of expressing himself, which would suit more a novel rather than a thesis: “Here, with the initiation of the unexpected, lie the weakness of Dulles’ Janus-faced design: the United States could hardly pursue her goals of détente with Moscow by treading around the corpses of Hungarian martyrs.” (p. 51) In comparison to this, I cannot see Pat Buchanan’s eulogy of the 50th anniversary of 1956 as an example of remembering the events “with remourse [sic] and cathartic pathos” (p. 78, footnote 131), but rather as a measured reflection of the events as viewed by an American living contemporary.

The author’s often overdosed eloquence is the more regretful in that his analysis is perceptive and revealing in those parts of the text where he managed to be more intellectually disciplined. In the latter case he was capable of arriving at some interesting conclusions. For example, he points out that “the 80-20 ratio of influence extracted by Churchill in Moscow [in October 1944] was the most optimistic estimate of postwar Western influence in Hungary which could have been expected” (p. 19); or that in 1945 “the Americans stubbornly held onto the legalistic view that Hungary was the joint responsibility of the Allied Powers, rather than an effective satellite of Moscow.” (p. 20) The outbreak of the revolt as well as its temporary success, without the support of foreign powers, by the end of October “caught Dulles” and the U.S. diplomacy “by surprise.” (p. 53) The author further refers to Csaba Békés’s refuting of the frequent accusation that the British and French governments exploited “the situation in Hungary to divert global attentions from their own adventure in North Africa”: in reality, the schedule of the operation *Musketeer* had been approved “a day prior to the outbreak of demonstrations in Hungary.” (p. 55) Even under Eisenhower, “the United States was pursuing a policy of permanent division in Europe, although rhetoric supplied it with many epithets.” (p. 59) The Suez crisis overtook “the crisis in Hungary as the cardinal priority of the national agenda.” (p. 63) Although Eisenhower “appeared to have felt some concern over the inaction of his government”, Dulles persuaded him as well as the allies that the United States would take action through the UN, even though he knew “that there were no instruments” for compelling “the USSR to change her Eastern European policy.” (p. 67) The RFE “effectively detached itself from the discipline which Foster Dulles had been frantically attempting to impose upon all branches of government, in order to prevent them from acting with undue aggressiveness.” (p. 72) In the chapter focusing on the role of the RFE, the author presents his most remarkable conclusions: Eisenhower and Dulles “indicated that they wished for success but were unwilling to be responsible for failure. This in essence meant that liberation would become a proactive policy only when it stood a chance of happening without risk anyhow.” Thus, the *liberation* of the satellites became “a tactical lever to be employed in pursuit of the ultimate goal, rather than the ultimate goal itself.” (both p. 74) Yet, the two worlds really lived out their separate existences as “neither Nagy, nor anyone else in the Hungarian government expected much help from the Western members of the four Great Powers” (p. 39) and Nagy did not think of “exploiting Cold War cleavages to his advantage.” (p. 41)

Of course, the question arises what were the alternatives for the U.S. policy if any plausible effort to secure Hungary’s freedom was to be made in 1956, short of the threat of war. The author seems to align himself with those historians who suggest “that Washington might have offered Moscow concessions in Europe as the price for leaving Hungary: that the

United States might be prepared to disengage from the Cold War if the Soviets were willing to retreat from some of their holdings." (p. 57) This argument is more than questionable. From the methodological point of view, thinking through historical alternatives is beyond any doubt a constructive and productive way of approaching the dilemmas of the historical personalities adopting decisions at historical junctures, but I personally cannot imagine the price that the West would have had to pay; it would have certainly had to be much more than an assurance of *disengaging* from the Cold War. (And even then, what should have been the approach to the renewed subversive activities of the communist parties in the West?)

Apart from the chapter *Reflections and Legacy*, the weakest part of the whole thesis is undoubtedly Chapter V, called *The Press, The Public, and the Crisis of Communism*. On just seven pages, the author tried to cover too many subtopics and the text thus necessarily remained sketchy and rather superficial. That applies primarily to the part focusing on the press reflection of the Hungarian uprising where the author owes the readers an explanation for the fact that he worked with just four articles in *Time* Magazine, one in *The Guardian* and one in *Der Spiegel*. Such a random selection is definitely too limited for deriving any kind of reliable and convincing conclusion.

In my capacity of the supervisor, I was striving to eliminate as many factual mistakes in the text as possible before the author submitted the thesis. Yet, in the final stages of his writing and editing, he added some new ones: Malenkov was not "Soviet President" in 1955 (p. 33) and Nikolai Bulganin was not "Soviet Chairman" (p. 54); Anthony Eden's successor was Harold Macmillan, not "MacMillian" (p. 79); the correct English transcription of the Soviet Prime Minister and the Secretary General of the Communist Party is Khrushchev, rather than Khruschev (pp. 28, 34, 37); in footnote no. 129, the author probably refers to the Revolutions of 1848, not 1948, as an example of revolutions of particular social classes. Mr. Ding should not just guess the reasons why Rákosi adopted the harsh measures to introduce the Stalinist regime in Hungary: "His eagerness to cultivate favour with Stalin perhaps galvanized him to push for the unpopular economic measures for which he is remembered: requisitions of property, forced collectivization, and the rapid industrialization…" (p. 30) In fact, these were the very fundamental principles of the communist regimes adopted in all the countries of the region at the turn of the 1940s and 1950s, irrespectively of their leaders' efforts to cultivate favour with Stalin. And last but not least, the language employed in the thesis is sometimes erratic, with occasional occurrence of repeated or incorrect words. This glitch could have been avoided by a more careful proof-reading.

Despite all my reservations, I find the thesis sufficient for its author to be admitted to the final exams and I suggest that the thesis should receive the mark *very good* (B), with a possible improvement to *excellent* (A) in case of a brilliant verbal defense of the thesis and of answering the questions and comments present in the evaluations.

In Prague, 18 June 2013 Vít Smetana, PhD.