

**Avoiding Nostalgia:
James Michener's *The Bridge at Andau***

by Anthony Arthur

During the autumn of 1990, my wife and I were living in a small city in southern Hungary where I had a teaching Fulbright at the university. I didn't pay much attention when it was announced, rather suddenly, that classes would be canceled on October 23: a new national holiday. That evening, on local television, we watched a program commemorating October 23—the date, in 1956, that the Hungarian Revolution began. The program we watched was narrated in Hungarian, so we didn't understand much of what was being said, but the images were what mattered. Most of the television footage had been shot in Budapest during the revolution, then smuggled out of the country and edited in Vienna. What we saw were the initial stages of the revolution, including the marches by students and workers upon Parliament on October 23rd. We also saw footage of the street fighting, followed by the crushing invasion by Soviet tanks on November 4th. In other words, the speedy destruction of the city and of the revolt.

The very fact that this film was being aired on Hungarian television, and that the country was now encouraged to celebrate October 23, indicated to me how profoundly things had changed in Hungary since my first Fulbright visit to Budapest, in 1980. But I didn't think much more about the new Hungarian holiday until the following summer, after my wife and I had returned home, just in time to watch another image of revolution and counter-revolution. When I saw Boris Yeltsin standing on the tank defying the plotters of Gorbachev's downfall, I flashed back to those earlier images of Soviet tanks rolling through the streets of Budapest, blasting whole walls from buildings that harbored snipers, or flaming with Molotov cocktails thrown by Hungarian children, or sliding on the soap-slicked cobblestone approaches to Castle Hill.

As I watched the Yeltsin-Gorbachev drama unfold, I wondered what kind of connection might be drawn between the images of defiance in Budapest and those in Moscow. Was there a distant causal connection? Had the heroic resistance of the Hungarians anticipated and foreshadowed the demise of Soviet communism through the agency of Boris Yeltsin?

A search of the literature about Hungary in '56 unearthed a number of good books by many writers—Tibor Meray's *That Day in Budapest* (1969) foremost among them—but hardly any accounts by Americans, with one notable, surprising, and almost forgotten exception: James Michener's *The Bridge at Andau*.

The Bridge at Andau is different from Michener's other works, say, *Hawaii* or *Centennial* or *Poland*. For one thing, *The Bridge at Andau* is short, not much longer than a long *New Yorker* piece. For another, Michener was actually at the Austrian border when the refugees fled Hungary, and much of the book's material is drawn from interviews with these refugees, rather than from library or archival sources.

In *The Bridge at Andau*, Michener writes as an advocate and admirer of the Hungarians. The immediacy and emotion of the Hungarian Revolt give his account an edge of outrage that both dates it as a Cold War artifact and, at the same time, makes it particularly vivid and moving. The book is also, for today's readers, an antidote against the nostalgia emerging for the more stable and predictable "good old days" of the Cold War era.

Indeed it is a book that rewards reading, if only because of the responses it provokes. For example, in my university's library copy, there is an exclamation point pencilled in the margin next to this passage in Michener's preface:

At dawn, on November 4, 1956, Russian communism showed its true character to the world. With a ferocity and barbarism unmatched in recent history, it moved its brutal tanks against a defenseless population seeking escape from the terrors of communism, and destroyed it. A city whose only offense was that it sought a decent life was shot to pieces . . . A satellite country which had dared to question Russian domination was annihilated.

The events had “laid bare the great Russian lie” and showed the world “what Russian communism really means.” Michener concludes with the observation:

That Budapest was destroyed by Russian tanks is tragic; but a greater tragedy had already occurred: the destruction of human decency. In the pages that follow, the people of Hungary—many of them communists—will relate what Russian communism really means.

It is here—at the end of the quoted passage—that the inserted exclamation point appears. I assume it was this same reader who also felt moved to underline the paragraph’s last seven words, “will relate what Russian communism really means.”

Now, as I read the pencilled-in mark, made (judging from the checkout record) sometime between 1974 and 1985, it means one of two things: first, “Absolutely right, Michener. You’ve really nailed the bastards.” Or, “Oh, man! lighten up. You sound like Ronnie Reagan.” Why do I think it’s the latter? And what does this minor act of library vandalism tell us about both Michener’s book and his subject?

My own response to Michener’s book is dictated by the fact that my generation has been conditioned by the Cold War: Korea, Budapest, Castro, the Berlin Wall, the Prague Spring, *détente*, Viet Nam, Afghanistan, *glasnost*—all are words that contain volumes. Now that the Cold War seems to be history, we find ourselves looking again at works conceived during its worst days with a different perspective, trying to get a more objective grip on the truth of the whole affair.

Michener’s *Bridge at Andau* is one such work. It surprised me how Michener’s narrative of the revolt rests upon the same plot points as all of the many later accounts I have read, none of which were researched, written, and published—as Michener’s was—within 14 weeks of the crucial events: the massacre of unarmed civilians by the Hungarian secret police and the Russians in front of Parliament, the storming of the radio station, the betrayal of the Hungarian Resistance, the Hungarian government’s

call for Russian help in defeating its own people. Michener deserves credit for seeing and interpreting the revolt's principal events so clearly in the midst of terrible confusion.

Michener was appalled and disgusted by the excesses of the AVO—the *Allamvedelmi Ostszag*, a special branch of the *Allamvedelmi Hatosag*, or state police—and he recounts in grisly detail some of the horrors this organization inflicted upon its victims. He apologizes for detailing these outrages, and they do make for unpleasant reading. Here, Michener explains the protocol of the one-foot torture:

The guards would bring in a dozen prisoners and stand them facing a row of bright electric lights. “Now stand on one foot!” [one] would command. The combination of intense light and one wavering foot brought forth unexpected reactions. A man would begin to scream, another would faint, a third would start dancing. But no matter what happened, if any prisoner made so much as a single move, all the others would be savagely beaten. Not the one who moved. He was safe.

Try standing on one foot for a few minutes: the calf muscles begin to knot after about 60 seconds, the arch of the foot aches, and the balance begins to go. Few people can last five minutes. Imagine others being beaten if you moved. There are accounts of people never recovering from the trauma of this diabolically simple torture.

In *The Bridge at Andau*, Michener wonders about the original purpose of such organizations as the AVO. He feels that the AVO was not first intended as “an instrument of national torture” but as a means for the communist party bureaucrats to protect their privileged positions; it becomes a “Frankenstein’s monster,” he suggests, in spite of its original purpose, not because of it. John MacCormac, a *New York Times* reporter on the scene during the revolution, later praised Michener’s account on the front page of the *Times Sunday Book Review*, but criticized his naiveté with regard to the role of secret police in totalitarian states. However, it is one of the strengths of Michener’s account that he acknowledges

the force of this charge: "When communism took over our nation," as one Hungarian tells him, "every important leader had already been trained in Russia. . ."

[There] they had been carefully taught that communism must rely on terror, and when they arrived in Budapest, they already carried in their pockets precise plans for the AVO. When they built it, they knew what it would become.

In any case, whatever its source or its original intention, Michener concludes, organizations such as the AVO and systems of government that depend upon them deserve to be overthrown. And those who fight against them deserve American support. It is almost a commonplace that Michener and many others then and since have been uncomfortable with the American role in and reaction to the 1956 Hungarian uprising. According to Michener, the United States was at fault in three ways: The U.S. encouraged the Hungarian Revolt through Radio Free Europe broadcasts, but then refused to intervene, and was even reluctant to aid refugees after the failure of the revolt.

The charge against Radio Free Europe is eloquently presented in *The Bridge at Andau* in a long statement by a young Hungarian, Ferenc Kobol:

America spent millions of dollars, telling us, "You are not forgotten. America's ultimate aim is to help you win your freedom. To achieve this we will support you to the best of our ability." America spent millions . . . to bring this message to us behind the Iron Curtain. Your Voice of America broadcast fifty hours a day of freedom programs. You used seventy frequencies and sometimes I would hear you from Tangiers or Munich or Salonika. I can remember the thrill we got when we heard that you were outfitting one of your Coast Guard cutters, the Courier, to dodge jamming stations. You said the Courier "would punch deeper holes in the Iron Curtain." Then came Radio Free Europe, in 1950, with

eleven stations broadcasting one thousand hours of encouragement a week throughout Eastern Europe, with the message "our purpose is to keep opposition alive among the people of the slave states behind the Iron Curtain. We want to help such people gradually to make themselves strong enough to throw off the Soviet yoke."

Then, Kobol says, when he and his friends did move they were ignored and forgotten. The fault lay partly with the Hungarians, Kobol said, for "trusting in words." Further:

It was partly America's fault for thinking that words can be used loosely. Words like "freedom," "struggle for national honor," "rollback," and "liberation" have meanings. They stand for something . . . I was motivated primarily by words. If America wants to flood Eastern and Central Europe with these words, it must acknowledge an ultimate responsibility for them. Otherwise you are inciting nations to suicide.

American culpability with regard to Radio Free Europe's contribution to the unsuccessful revolt remains a matter of debate, though Michener points out in subsequent printings of his book that many later studies have argued that the Hungarians heard what they wanted to hear more than what was actually promised.

Still, a major U.S. failing was our initial hesitation to receive Hungarian refugees. This problem was, however, remedied by a change in U.S. immigration laws. By the end of 1957, well over 100,000 Hungarian refugees had settled in the United States.

A major point of interest for me in Michener's book is his forecast of the long-term effect of the Hungarian Revolution: he was "absolutely convinced that the yearning for freedom which motivated Hungarians will operate elsewhere within the Soviet orbit with results that we cannot now foresee." This argument for future democratic victory was widely advocated at the time, though it struck most as improbable—a British historian, David

Irving, would later assert that the CIA station chief in Vienna who tried to console himself with it ultimately committed suicide.

In the light of recent events I think Michener was right—that Boris Yeltsin's stand against the coup plotters does follow logically from the stand of the Hungarians in 1956. The Soviet Union died not from violence but from atrophy; the limbs went first, in Hungary, then elsewhere, and in August, 1991, the sickness reached the heart. Michener's perceptions, his moral and political position, and even his rhetoric, cold warrior-like though it is, were right on target for his time, and hardly less so for ours. At its best, as some fairly recent graffiti in Budapest put it, "communism makes you lazy and stupid." At its worst, Soviet communism and its expression in various guises throughout the world was indeed a bad thing—an "evil empire" in more than comic-book form. Michener's *The Bridge at Andau* is a good reminder of just how bad it was in the bad old days of the Cold War. □

