Half a century of remembering

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Revolution in Hungary: The 1956 Budapest Uprising
By Erich Lessing
Thames & Hudson; 252 pages; $50 and £35

Twelve Days: The Story of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution
By Viktor Sebestyen
Pantheon; 368 pages; $26.
Weidenfeld & Nicolson; £20

Failed Illusions: Moscow, Washington, Budapest, and the 1956 Hungarian Revolt
By Charles Gati
Stanford University Press; 280 pages; $24.95

Journey to a Revolution: A Personal Memoir and History of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956
By Michael Korda
HarperCollins; 221 pages; $24.95

A Good Comrade: Janos Kadar, Communism and Hungary
By Roger Gough
I.B. Tauris; 320 pages; $45 and £24.50

The Hungarian uprising has inspired a new generation of books

ANYONE puzzled by the recent violence in Budapest, the worst since the failed revolution of 1956, should look at the plaque concealed behind a curtain in a building on Republic Square. Once the headquarters of the Communist Party, it now houses the communists' successors, the ruling socialists, who are led by the youthful multi-millionaire and prime minister Ferenc Gyurcsany. The plaque commemorates victims of 1956: not those killed fighting Soviet tanks or hanged after the revolution was crushed. Rather, it venerates the communist functionaries who were beaten, lynched and set on fire when the rebels captured the building.

Looking at the powerful photographs in Erich Lessing's book, it seems as if what happened in Budapest was less an uprising against the Soviets than a civil war.

His pictures show the corpses laid out in a row, covered with pictures of Hungary's hated dictator, Matyas Rakosi. Mr Lessing's work also illustrates how surreal urban warfare can be. During the worst of the fighting everyday life continued: housewives shopping for food delicately stepped around dead Soviet troops, passers-by stopped to watch an insurgent reload his rifle.

If Mr Lessing shows what the uprising looked like, Viktor Sebestyen, Charles Gati and Michael Korda seek to explain its causes and its course. All have excellent credentials: Mr Sebestyen is a British journalist of Hungarian origin; Mr Gati, also a native Hungarian, witnessed the revolution at first hand before fleeing west. Mr Korda, nephew of the more famous Alexander, a film-maker, drove to Budapest from Oxford University, bringing a car-load of medicines. His lively eyewitness account recalls the chaos and excitement of revolutionary Budapest.

Mr Sebestyen's book should become the standard work on the uprising. His early chapters set the scene and he is especially strong on the terror of the early 1950s, the Rakosi era that helped trigger the events. Politics in Stalinist Hungary operated a revolving door: officials were beaten near to death one day, returned to power another, dragged back to the prison cell the next. Mr Sebestyen uses multiple points of view to bring added perspectives from both Moscow and Washington, DC. Deft portraits of major characters—the tragic Imre Nagy, the duplicitous Janos Kadar and Yuri Andropov, the chilling Soviet ambassador to Budapest—bring the human drama alive and make for a gripping read.

"Failed Illusions" sheds new light on American policy, especially the controversial role of Radio Free Europe as it encouraged the rebels. Published by Stanford University Press as part of the Cold War International History Project, the book draws heavily on newly declassified archives in Budapest, Moscow and America, and extensive interviews by the author.

Mr Gati is strong on Nagy, the leader of the doomed revolution. The nationalist right in Hungary has sought to appropriate Nagy as an anti-communist figurehead. But as both Mr Sebestyen and Mr Gati show, Nagy was as much a communist as he was a Hungarian patriot. Nagy's dithering in the early days of the fighting, his continuing loyalty to the Soviet Union, his inability to break out of the Marxist mindset and move decisively helped seal the fate of the revolution. Yet perhaps that is not so surprising: Mr Gati tells in detail how, in Moscow during the 1930s, Nagy became an NKVD informant known as Agent Volodya. Mr Gati's excellent footnotes, several quite personal and poignant, give

added depth to the story.

In the end, Nagy acquitted himself, at least in history's eyes, at his show trial before his execution in 1958. He neither submitted nor confessed and his courage made clear the dark farce of communist justice. The man who decided Nagy would die was Janos Kadar, his former comrade and Hungary's leader from 1956 until 1988. Roger Gough's admirable life of Kadar, aptly entitled "A Good Comrade", untangles many of the contradictions around his life.

Mr Gough skilfully traces Kadar's development from illegitimate child of a poor countrywoman to idealistic young worker to cynical apparatchik. Yet Kadar invented "goulash communism", turning Leninist logic on its head by proclaiming "All those who are not against us are with us." It worked, after a fashion, and Hungary was the most peaceful, prosperous nation in the Communist bloc. As for the old party headquarters on Republic Square, Socialist officials whisper that they plan to demolish it soon, sensitive plaque and all. Even that may not be enough to banish the ghosts of Janos Kadar and his old comrade Imre Nagy.