

MODERN HISTORY

Cold War Crisis: Hungarian Uprising 1956

Prompted by the new seemingly progressive and anti-Stalin USSR leader Nikita Khrushchev, students, workers and soldiers of Hungary felt they could liberalise themselves from Soviet Communism. In October, 1956 they took their concerns to the streets, sincerely believing they could attain democratic elections and restore their own communist ruling through a successful revolution. However, on the 4th of November that belief was inhibited by the Soviet Union's violent counter-attack to the uproar. The USSR sent its troops to Budapest, crushing the attempted Revolution with the aim of restoring Khrushchev's communist rule¹. This crisis contributed greatly to the heightening of tensions between the Eastern and Western Powers, particularly when the Warsaw Pact between Hungary and Russia began falling apart and no nation had a stable alliance system.

Main Personalities involved

Since 1949, there had been a clash in ideologies between the leaders of the Superpowers. In this crisis, Joseph Stalin played a relatively important role in influencing the future events of 1956 although he died in 1953. The shift from the Communist methods he implemented in Hungary to Khrushchev's leadership, subsequently led to the Hungarian Uprising erupting as a direct response.

- **Joseph Stalin:** Introduced the iron curtain and therefore created the radicalism in Khrushchev's actions rather than the possible equality displayed in his words. Used violent tactics to halt his opposition. Likewise Khrushchev followed in Hungary.
- **Nikita Khrushchev:** As successor of Stalin, Khrushchev changing his approach to the rest of the world, promoting 'peaceful co-existence' and the 'de-Stalinization' process. Khrushchev seemed to be keen on the issue of allowing freedom. The Warsaw pact changes this completely.
- **Imre Nagy:** Liberal, pro-Hungarian communism and anti-Stalin communism Nagy wanted to maintain Hungary's neutrality and operate as an independent state under 'Hungarian Communism', separate from the control of the USSR. He becomes Prime Minister of Hungary twice.
- **Matyas Rakosi:** A great supporter of Stalin, Rakosi became General Secretary of the Hungarian Communist Party after WW2. During the de-Stalinization process implemented by Khrushchev, he was removed from his position at the order of the Soviet Politburo in 1956.
- **Dwight D. Eisenhower:** Occupied with the Suez Canal crisis and the fear of an Atomic War with the USSR, the American President, Eisenhower fails to intervene with the Hungarian/Soviet crisis, allowing radical communist control by Khrushchev to flourish.

¹ 'Key Features of Modern History' p.278 and 'International Studies in Peace and Conflict'-The Cold War

CHRONOLOGY OF KEY EVENTS

March 5, 1953: Joseph Stalin dies

March, 1955: Imre Nagy becomes Prime Minister of Hungary

February 1956: Matyas Rakosi overtakes leadership

March 1956: Khrushchev makes his secret speech at the 20th Party Congress, denouncing Stalin

July 18: Rakosi is forced to leave office after Khrushchev's undermining secret speech and Erno Gero succeeds him.

June 1956:

Petofi Circle: a group of Hungarian writers, and journalists who participated in forums and debates – Poland Uprising

16 October 1956: University students form an independent political organization criticizing the government and its policies with a list of demands (the 16 points).

19-22 October: The Petofi Circle became more critically active in politics, criticizing the Rakosi system in particular.

23 October: students, workers and soldiers rioted in Budapest, smashing the statue of Stalin, and attacking 'The State Protection Authority' (Allmvedelmi Hatosag - the AVH) and Russian soldiers. Communist books, symbols and flags were also burnt.

24 October: Soviet tanks are sent in to restore order and Imre Nagy is reimbursed as Prime Minister, requesting Khrushchev withdraw his Russian troops.

25 October: Erno Gero is forced by the Soviet Politburo to resign

28 October: Khrushchev agrees to withdraw his troops and the Russian army is pulled out of Budapest.

29 October – 3 November: The new Hungarian government introduced democracy, freedom of speech, and freedom of religion (the leader of the Catholic Church was freed from prison). Nagy also announced that Hungary was going to leave the Warsaw Pact. Nagy in simple terms introduced the following reforms:

- For free elections to take place
- To bring an end to the communist one-party system
- The release of political prisoners, such as Cardinal Mindszenty (Catholic Priest)
- Freedom of speech
- Freedom of the press
- Free trade unions and the right to strike
- Freedom of worship

- To make Hungary a neutral state in the Cold War. I.e. termination of the Warsaw Pact
- For Hungary to have Western trade links

4 November: Unable to contain himself on the issue of the abandonment of the Warsaw Pact, Khrushchev sent 1000 Russian tanks into Budapest destroying the Hungarian army and capturing the Hungarian Radio, airfields, highways and bridges. The people of Hungary ranging from children to soldiers fought the Russians furiously with machine guns². Using guerrilla tactics and all the resources they could find, the Hungarian Uprising of 1956 became total Revolution.³ Large mobs attacked the AVH, snipers shot at Soviet soldiers and children as young as 12 fought using homemade weapons.

14 November: A new Government was formed, led by Janos Kadar, an opposer of Stalin, ex-prisoner in Rakosi's time in power and the candidate of the Soviet Union. Meanwhile, Nagy concerned about his life, seeks refuge in the Yugoslav embassy in Budapest. As soon as Nagy set foot out of the embassy he was arrested and taken to Romania, subsequently executed behind closed doors two years later.

Causes of the Crisis

- Widespread poverty and food shortages threw the Hungarians into uproar, especially when much of the food and industrial goods they produced were sent to Russia. Hence, inefficient economic system.
- Russian Censorship of the education system at schools and the vicious secret police (the AVH)
- The Communist Party banned religion and imprisoned the Catholic Church leader. This made Hungarians increasingly angry as it suppressed their right to express their religious beliefs.
- Attempt at de-Stalinisation was unsuccessful with the two Hungarian leader Rakosi and the Soviet leader Khrushchev experiencing difficulty when trying to reach a compromise. Rakosi wanted to arrest 400 dissenters but Khrushchev would not agree.⁴
- The June 1956 Successful Polish Revolution in Poznan, Poland gave the people hope and increased their morale.
- The compromise reached by Khrushchev and Nagy on the 28th of October reflected the negotiation nature possible by two opposing authorities. However, how easily this is repetitively modified by the second invasion by Soviet troops, Nagy's insistency on the termination of the Warsaw Pact as well as the nature of the un-cooperative rebels reflects the extent to which these powers are truly inundated with mistrust, the lust for total control and the extent to which the nation had been exploited and forbidden from their rightful freedoms.
- The Hungarians felt encouraged by the American President, Eisenhower as if he was to help them if they were to experience any threat of violence. He stated: "*I feel with the Hungarian people*" and the American secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, stated: "You can count on us." The Hungarians relied on this.

² <http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/A1161280>

³ http://www.johndclare.net/cold_war14.htm

⁴ http://www.johndclare.net/cold_war14.htm

Impact

To show they wanted to be economically and politically independent the protestors rebelliously chanted: 'Russians go home', 'Away with Gero' and 'Long Live Nagy'. Violence erupted between these 'street-fighters' and the secret police. They took the communist arms from the centre of the nation's flag in defiance. The statue of Stalin was demolished and decapitated.

1. 30,000 were killed⁵
2. 200,000 refugees were created, fleeing into Austria and Yugoslavia
3. Terminated Warsaw agreement
4. The Poland revolution was allowed to take place with the new appointed leader Gomulka controlling Poland through their own type of communism as long as they were loyal to the Soviet Union and the Warsaw pact. In Hungary, this was entirely different. The revolt persisted for over 11 days and only stopped when Khrushchev invaded with his troops. The Hungarians were not allowed to have their own communism nor were their list of demands met. Thousands were killed, which reflected the irony in Khrushchev's de-Stalinization process and finally the Warsaw pact was terminated between the USSR and Hungary.
5. Formation of workers' councils

Consequences:

1. The Soviet Union remained in control
2. Horrified and disrespectful, Russia's actions were seen as 'hideous'. Many British Communists such as the two Historians Christopher Hill and Rodney Hilton left the Communist Party, as the other Party members were not prepared to look at the Revolt situation democratically.⁶
3. The West realized it could not do anything about communism. This however made Western leaders even more determined to 'contain' communism.⁷
6. Building of confrontation and tension- relationship between US and USSR even more fragmented
7. Increased mistrust as the unsuccessful revolution emphasized the Iron grip the Soviets had on Europe, even with Stalin dead.
8. This contributed to the period of Oscillatory Antagonism (1953-1969) in which powers aimed to lessen confrontation and reach agreement. This is demonstrated through Khrushchev's hastiness in invading Hungary a second time in order to destroy any of his dissenters that would possibly jeopardize the sole existence of the Warsaw Pact. In addition the lack of intervention by the other superpowers such as the US, although they were fully aware of the crisis, allowed all of those people to be killed so that they would not plunge into a nuclear war.

⁵http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/hungarian_uprising_1956.htm

⁶ "Study Guide One-Communist Party Historians' Group", Massey University, Department of History (pg.9)

⁷ http://www.johndclare.net/cold_war14.htm

9. March 1956, saw Khrushchev seemingly change his approach to other countries and 'communism'. The eastern European countries develop a differing view of Russian communism in comparison to Stalin's communism. However, Khrushchev's hypocrisy which strikes as a result of the Hungarian Revolution proves him to be a fraud, in which he cannot truly be trusted.