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III
Soviet Security and the Hungarian Revolution of 1956

By Mike McCabe '12



“No event in recent history has been so much lied about, distorted, and besmirched as the Hungarian Revolution.”¹

World War II marked a decisive end to a very sad chapter of history. Fascist leaders of two European countries were defeated as the Allied powers achieved victory in both the Atlantic and Pacific theatres. Unfortunately, the conclusion of global conflict did not come with international peace. Two global, rival superpowers emerged and rather than dig physical trenches as in wartime, the world became a battleground of ideology. Whether it was seen as democracy against authoritarianism or capitalism versus communism, nearly every country around the world was impacted by ideological warfare of the Cold War.

As the Soviet Union began to consolidate its Warsaw pact states, all located in the Soviet Bloc of Eastern Europe, it grew ever fearful of the United States and her allies in NATO. The battlegrounds in Europe between these two opposing ideologies, as it happened to turn out, would all be located inside the former Axis powers. Berlin would be a consistent problem in U.S.—Soviet relations. Vienna, Austria was to be partitioned off between the victorious powers much like Berlin. Hungary would be a different case. The Hungarians were subject solely to a Soviet puppet government; there would be no other Western powers to oversee control of Budapest. Although Hungarians would never fully support any version of Soviet occupation, Hungary would still be incredibly important in the Soviet Union’s grand scheme for defense against outside threats. In the past two centuries Russia had been invaded by the formerly great European powers of France and Germany. For the Soviets after World War II, a precarious situation would have developed should Hungary have joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Understanding that, the Revolution of 1956 in Hungary became not merely a struggle over one nation’s freedom—but rather, a chance for the West to gain a significant upper hand in security operations in Europe; a chance that Moscow could not allow to come to fruition. The Hungarian Revolution of 1956 was a substantial event in the Soviet Government’s consolidation of power at the beginning of the Cold War. For twelve days Hungarian rebels,

¹ Quote from American Journalist Leslie B. Bain, as it appears in Paul Lendvai’s, *One Day That Shook the Communist World: The 1956 Hungarian Uprising and Its Legacy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008, 1.

mostly students and writers, fought against the communist puppet government. The Soviet Union was forced to make a drastic decision: allow the revolution to take place and risk losing Hungary as a satellite state or order the Red Army into Budapest to crush the opposition. The free world looked on as the Kremlin decided on the latter.

The events that unfolded in 1956 are very unique in terms of a revolution. First, it began as a peaceful protest of students and writers. Unlike the Russian Revolution of February, 1917, there was no food shortage, labor problems, or socialist discontent.² It came from the intellectuals—many of whom were very well paid, but discontented with the Soviet Occupation and the Stalinist Hungarian leader, Erno Gero.³ Therefore, the story of the Hungarian Revolution cannot be told like the other revolutions of history. A second unique circumstance was that (for the most part) the revolt was contained inside the capital city of Budapest. If the ideals of the revolution spread into the countryside, the will to fight did not. For the Soviets to restore communistic order they had to defeat a group of lightly armed, militarily untrained intellectuals.

Given the unique circumstances of Budapest, 1956, the question of whether it was really a revolution must be addressed—a revolution being distinct from a rebellion. The answer is yes.⁴ The Hungarians resorted to violence in 1956 because of their desire for a multi-party democracy. The freedom fighters would not have been satisfied merely with Gero's abdication, they wanted an end to the Soviet occupation—a Hungary ruled by the Hungarians (Magyars). These young intellectuals were engaged in a full social revolution. At the very least, those fighters who were communists were rejecting the corruption of Marx caused by the Soviet imperial dogma.

Revolutions rarely follow a blueprint.⁵ Doctrines may influence the politics of those involved; however, the operations are often sporadic. The only driving factor behind the revolution was the Hungarian people's thirst for freedom. The short-lived uprising changed everything—from how Hungarians saw themselves under communist rule to how the other Bloc countries perceived their political situation. Most importantly, for a short time it appeared that Hungary would be a free nation.⁶

The Soviet regime had to face the reality of the situation. They were caught off-guard by the seeming incompetence of the Hungarian leaders, coupled with the quick organization of the freedom fighters into militias. There would be no negotiating with the freedom fighters. They quickly dismantled all relics of Soviet Occupation—from statues of Lenin and Stalin to Communist Party headquarters and buildings. The situation would end in a free Hungary or a further repressed one, and as history will tell, the Soviet Union ordered the Red Army into Budapest to destroy any elements of resistance to the occupation. The Soviet Union acted in its own best security interests in crushing the Hungarian Revolution of 1956.

This paper will attempt to show that the Soviet Union could not allow a free Hungary if it was to remain a threat against American hegemony. If the Bloc states began to crumble and revolt, the collapse of the Soviet Union would have surely been escalated—not only by the loss

² For more details surrounding the Russian Revolution of 1917 see Orlando Figes. *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution 1891-1924*. New York: Penguin Books, 1998.

³ Noel Barber, *Seven Days of Freedom: The Hungarian Uprising, 1956*, New York: Stein and Day, 1975, 31.

⁴ The uprising of 1956 was a revolution; however for the sake of prose the Hungarian people's plight against the Soviet imperialists will be referred to as a rebellion, revolution, and uprising throughout the paper; however, the word choice does not change this stance.

⁵ *Ibid*, 30.

⁶ Victor Sebestyen, *Twelve Days: The Story of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution*, New York: Random House, 2006, xxiv.

of economic territory, but by the assured strengthening of the NATO alliance. This thesis will not attempt to apologize for the brutality of the Russian forces or any of the decisions made in the Kremlin. As the Hungarians suffered immensely against the Russians, the human element of the revolution should not be forgotten. If nothing else, the uprising in Hungary of 1956 represents one of the greatest tragedies of 20th Century history. A group of people unified by their hatred for civil, political, and social repression fought in a David versus Goliath battle for their freedom. This time, David lost.

The Iron Curtain Descends

By the time of the Revolution in 1956, Hungary was an established communist nation, having been under Soviet domination for almost a decade. A common historical misconception is that control of Hungary was given to Stalin in Yalta in 1945; however, there were several preexisting factors determined by the Allies that allowed for a Russian dominated Hungary following the conclusion of the war.⁷ Churchill, with Roosevelt's begrudging acquiescence, agreed in 1943 to hold zones of influence with Stalin; however, the most important factor in determining the fate of post-war Hungary was the geographical positioning of the Allied powers.⁸ It would be the Soviet Red Army who would 'liberate' (certainly not a liberation if one were to ask a victim of the violence of 1956) Hungary from Nazi Germany mostly due to Hungary's location in Eastern Europe, but make no mistake—the Allies had no intention of willingly subjecting Eastern Europe to another repressive regime so quickly after the defeat of another.⁹

One of the first viewpoints to emerge from the West regarding the Soviet Union's domination of Eastern Europe in the post-World War II era was the bloc nations needed Russia to support them. These western intellectuals argued that without support from Moscow these fragile states would collapse without Soviet military and secret police forces.¹⁰ The truth was much more complicated than that sweeping, generalized statement (as it is with much of Soviet history). Initially it appears that Stalin acted both out of fear for the West and a desire to recreate the Russian Empire as the Soviet Bloc developed in the years after the war. As Stalin moved to consolidate power, there began to emerge a less publicized, but very important conception of the communist system. At the onset of the Cold War Western politicians, writers, and intellectuals thought that the Soviet Union was indestructible from the inside—to them only exterior pressure would threaten Soviet hegemony.¹¹ The Hungarian Revolution, even though it failed, would test this theory. For Khrushchev's government it was a zero-sum game—to fail in Hungary meant that the other Bloc states would come to understand interior revolution could collapse the Soviet imperialism.

The Hungarian communist experiment was not unique. Hungary's experience paralleled the other Eastern European bloc states. After Stalin and the Red Army defeated Nazi Germany, Stalin rapidly consolidated power in Budapest. The new communist puppet regime quickly

⁷ Miklos Molnar, *A Concise History of Hungary*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, 295.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ According to the Michael Charlton in *The Eagle and the Small Birds: Crisis in the Soviet Empire: From Yalta to Solidarity*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984, 13 Stalin allegedly said that he would not subject a larger powers decisions, no matter the subject, to the approval of a lesser power.

¹⁰ Agnes Heller & Ferenc Feher, *From Yalta to Glasnost: The Dismantling of Stalin's Empire*, Cambridge (MA): Basil Blackwell, 1991, 37.

¹¹ Ibid.

liquidated all non-communist political parties, nationalized the economy with a focus on heavy industry, and began to arrest (and execute) both real and imagined political opponents.¹² Logically then, the question arises, why did revolution break out on the streets of Budapest in October, 1956? Moreover, why was Hungary so important? Could the Soviet Union have simply let Hungary out of its bloc—perhaps Khrushchev could have tested the theory that without Moscow's support these Eastern European states would have collapsed. To pursue that course of action would have proved too risky for the Kremlin. The Hungarian Revolution had to be put down with force if the Soviet Union were to remain a power in Europe. To answer the remaining questions, Hungary's history from the beginning of the Cold War until 1956 and the relationship between Budapest and Moscow must be examined further.

The Soviet Union had been a power player in global politics far before 1956 when international attention quickly diverted to the cause of a group of young intellectual Hungarians. The Soviet Union, despite any critics who would say otherwise, saw itself as a primarily European power. For Stalin, the bloc states were areas of great strategic importance. After the war it became clear that once the mutual threat of Nazi Germany was defeated, the Soviet Union and the United States would no longer be able to cooperate as allies. Stalin had a justifiable, and logical, fear of the new NATO alliance. Moscow saw any of the Border States in the bloc as potential targets for the U.S. and its allies to engage the threat of communism.

American politicians saw the Soviet Union as the main cause of the Cold War; however, a non-partisan assessment could see that the Soviet Union felt just as slighted by the United States. The Soviet Union—especially the ever distrustful Joseph Stalin—believed that the United States had left the Soviet Union to fight a separate war during their alliance. From Stalin's perspective it was only the Red Army's successes at Stalingrad and Kursk that sped up the opening of a second front in France—something Stalin had been lobbying for long before June 1944.¹³ In addition, Moscow felt that the United States was continually pursuing a policy after the defeat of Hitler that went against Soviet interests. The U.S. tolerated many governments in exile inside America (particularly the Baltic States), but the U.S. would not let the Soviet Union occupy Japan (despite the Allies sharing both Berlin and Vienna). Additionally, it was clear to the Kremlin that the Marshall Plan was a direct threat to the wall of communism that the Red Army had fought for.¹⁴ All of these decisions by the United States significantly contributed to the Soviet Union's inferiority complex when it came to politics in the European Theatre of the Cold War. It is the next logical step to suggest that the policy of the United States directly contributed to Moscow's decision to brutally repress the Hungarian Revolution. Without a fear of NATO support for Hungary, perhaps the Soviet Union would have been infinitely more willing to open negotiations for reform, even potential freedom for a Hungarian state.

Russian history played an important part in the patriotic storm Stalin created around the civilian and military war effort against Hitler and the Third Reich. Stalin and the Bolshevik leaders who would follow him would not soon forget the heroics of the Russian people in beating back the Germans. Looking back over the last 150 years, Russia had been engulfed in a European war three times, and all three times the invasion of the Motherland had come through Eastern and Central Europe. In the first 25 years of the Soviet Union's existence, there was a

¹² Lendvai, 25.

¹³ Klaus Von Beyme, *The Soviet Union in World Politics*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987, 36.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 36-37.

noticeable absence of Russian influence in the bloc states.¹⁵ It is a safe assumption to presume that the Soviet Union would not let a lack of regional presence in Eastern Europe cause another conflict—big or small.

It becomes clear that Hungary was a piece of an intricate security network that the Soviet Union established throughout Eastern and Central Europe; however, the unique conditions that made Hungary a boiling pot for revolution well before any other Soviet dominated country still needs to be established. Hungary's World War II history is unique among many of the other bloc states. Hungary fought on the Axis side and did not attempt to switch to the Allied cause. Hungary was seen as a defeated nation—unlike Poland, Romania, or Czechoslovakia, who were, in the eyes of the world, seen as victorious (the extent of their “victory” is a topic for another paper, but they were all fighting against Nazi Germany by 1945).¹⁶ Hungary lost a significant amount of territory after the war and had to bear the shame of being referred to as “Hitler's last satellite.”¹⁷

Besides the partitioning of Poland no other European nation has been treated with such malfeasance by the Great Powers.¹⁸ Throughout the Modern Era Hungary has been on the defeated side of several European conflicts. After each rout a large amount of territory had been stripped from Hungary—their influence both in political power and geographical dominance had been decreased significantly. Just as the Soviet Union's inferiority complex led Moscow to pursue a policy that at all costs would prevent NATO expansion in Eastern and Central Europe, Hungary's people possessed an inferiority complex due to their constantly subjugated position in European geopolitics. Psychological factors can be powerful motivational apparatuses, even if it is an unconscious awareness. Young, educated Hungarians rebelling—with little chance of success—against a repressive Soviet occupation becomes easier to understand given Hungary's recent embarrassments in European politics.

History, culture, and heritage have always been compelling factors in nationalistic struggles, which is ultimately what the Hungarian Revolution was—a nationalistic rebellion. It is easier to appreciate Hungarian nationalism once the heritage of the Hungarian people is understood. Inside the Soviet bloc, Hungary did not share the cultural heritage that Bulgaria, Romania, and even Yugoslavia had with their Russian overlords. The Hungarians are not a Slavic people. Their cultural heritage can be linked to the Magyars. The Hungarian name for their language is Magyar—linked most closely to Finnish and other languages to flow out of the nomadic steppes in early history.¹⁹ Culturally, Hungary is much more closely linked to Germany and Austria. Historically, Hungary was part of the Hapsburg Dynasty and Austro-Hungarian Empire. Both Austria and Hungary would fight alongside of Germany in both of the World Wars. The Hungarian cultural history is an important reason the Magyar people were not willing to submit to a Slavic overlord.

Hungary was the outlier in the Soviet Bloc—in culture and politics. However, Hungary's post-World War Two government was an eager participant in Stalin's bloody version of communism. Understanding the Hungarian communist party and their affair with Stalinism is crucial to understanding one of the driving factors toward revolution. First, Stalinism was the

¹⁵ Hugh Seton-Watson, “Eastern Europe,” in *The Soviet Union in World Politics*, edited by Kurt London, Boulder: Westview Press, 1980, 61.

¹⁶ Lendvai, 27.

¹⁷ Ibid, 28.

¹⁸ Ibid, 25.

¹⁹ Molnar, 5.

communist system under Stalin that consisted of all parts of life. Stalin and his cult declared that there was only one way to achieve a perfect communist society—through dedication to the Bolshevik party.²⁰ Stalinism penetrated every aspect of Soviet life—the economy was centrally planned with a dedication to heavy industry.²¹ The best way to explain Stalinism is that “the party controlled the state, the state controlled society and these two, together with the now transformed social institutions, controlled the individual.”²² Perhaps the most significant characteristic of Stalinism was the terror. According to the memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev, Stalin’s government had a considerable distrust of what Khrushchev terms, the bourgeois intelligentsia.²³ This suspicion was manifested in Stalin’s numerous purges of all elements of society, eliminating any and all potential opponents of the Revolution.²⁴

In Hungary, the post-war dictatorship was headed by Matyas Rakosi, who was a dedicated Stalinist. Rakosi would be responsible for the largest and bloodiest purges in any of the Eastern Bloc states before and after Stalin’s death.²⁵ Rakosi was a cold, calculating politician who described himself as “Stalin’s most apt pupil.”²⁶ Rakosi was more than willing to push Stalinism’s political purges on all aspects of Hungarian society, starting with Hungary’s communist party. He had a simple message: “if the powerful officials of the communist dictatorship can vanish from one day to another, how much more defenseless a simple citizen must be.”²⁷

The purges under Rakosi began with the party; however, their impact was felt in all the elements of Hungarian society. Perhaps the greatest institution affected was the Roman Catholic Church. The Church held the unenviable position as being the last independent institution in Stalinist Hungary. Starting in 1949 Rakosi began using what he termed ‘salami tactics,’ meaning a slice-by-slice disposal of political opponents.²⁸ In the early weeks of that same year the Rakosi regime had already arrested 225 members of the Catholic clergy and organized show trials in the famous Stalinist procedure for Cardinal Jozsef Mindszenty and Archbishop Grosz.²⁹ The Catholic Church served as an indication that no person or institution would be safe from Rakosi, who was always eager to prove himself as Stalin’s henchman. In a two-year span starting in 1950, over 100,000 middle-class Hungarians, primarily residents of Budapest, were either deported or placed in appalling internment camps. Overall, between 1948 and the year of the Revolution, over 350,000 Hungarians suffered from the Rakosi purges.³⁰ One of the great ironies of the Rakosi regime is that the feeling of admiration was never reciprocated by Stalin. In fact, Stalin hated Rakosi—the self-proclaimed greatest of Stalin’s

²⁰ G. Shopflin, “Hungary after the Second War,” In *The Hungarian Revolution of 1956: Reform, Revolt and Repression 1953-1963*, Edited by Gyorgy Litvan, translated by Janos M. Bak and Lyman H. Legters, London: Longman, 1996, 15.

²¹ For more on Stalin’s centrally planned heavy industry and his pre-war Five Year Plans see Stephen Kotkin’s *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as Civilization*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997.

²² Shopflin, 16.

²³ Nikita Khrushchev, *Memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev: Volume 2, Reformer 1945-1964*, edited by Sergei Khrushchev, translated by George Shriver, Providence: Brown University Press, 2004, 128.

²⁴ In Stalinist terms everyone who opposed the party and Stalin’s control was a counterrevolutionary and had to be destroyed (referring to 1917).

²⁵ Lendvai, 29.

²⁶ Shopflin, 17.

²⁷ Ibid, 19.

²⁸ Lendvai, 30.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Shopflin, 19.

hangman. Rakosi was a Jew—an immediate source of distrust from Stalin.³¹ Additionally, Rakosi was one of the only members in the hierarchy of the Hungarian government who spoke English, and Stalin used a photo of Rakosi laughing with Harry Truman as a delusional source of proof that Rakosi was an American spy.³² Rakosi, as twisted as he was, acted in a way almost like a son whose father never gives approval would—always eager to prove his allegiance and dedication to the cult of the bloody dictator.

The Rakosi regime and its purges would be one of the leading factors in causing the massive discontent of the Hungarian people that would lead to the turbulence in October, 1956. Stalinism, and the subsequent denouncement of it by Nikita Khrushchev, would be influential in the events to play out in the fall of 1956. Rakosi's counter on the liberal side of the Hungarian communist party was Imre Nagy. Nagy would become a cause of concern for the Soviet leadership. Nagy's calls for reform would start the path toward an armed insurrection against the communist government. The stage for the Revolution became set due to all of these factors early in the Soviet occupation of Hungary; however, one event would perhaps be the most influential in leading the citizens of Budapest to revolt. In 1953, Joseph Stalin died somewhat suddenly from an apparent stroke. A power vacuum opened in the Kremlin, and the future of the Soviet Union seemed uncertain for a short time.

The “Liberals” Rise: Khrushchev and Nagy

With the death of Stalin also brought about the end of Stalinism. This departure meant greater emphasis was placed on the political and cultural side of Soviet life than on the economic. Collectivized agriculture would no longer be implemented; however, focus on heavy industry would be a token of the Soviet Union until its collapse in 1991. Despite the denouncement of Stalin's policies in regards to Hungary, most of the damage Stalinism had inflicted seemed irreversible. The Stalinist model of collectivized industry had encumbered Hungary with a high operating cost and a simultaneous decrease in industrial structure and standard of living.³³ The resulting economic decline, along with problems arising from Stalinism's insistence on collectivized agriculture, hit the intelligentsia the hardest. Stalinism's ultimate (and only) truth lay in the communist party leaving little, if any, room for intellectual freedom. The intelligentsia found themselves in a constant struggle with the government's drive for total control.³⁴ The revolution that would occur only three years later would be started by the students and the writers—members of the intelligentsia that Stalin's regime had repressed. Their discontent in 1953 began to create the situation in which a revolution from below could gain traction.

As the situation in Hungary reached a critical stage, there remained a looming question of who would come to lead the Soviet Union after the death of the Stalin—who had ruled for almost thirty years. Books have been written about the political game played around the power vacuum created by Stalin's death; however, for this thesis it is not important to delve into the details. In the end only one of Stalin's cabinet could assume his role as General Secretary. Nikita Khrushchev was thrust onto the international stage. He won the power battle over long-time Stalinists Lavrenti Beria, Lazar Kaganovich, and Vyacheslav Molotov. Khrushchev would

³¹ Lendvai, 33.

³² Ibid.

³³ Schopflin, 20.

³⁴ Ibid, 21.

lead the Soviet Union on a very different course than the vision Stalin for the nation. While much of Khrushchev's legacy remains in question by historians of the Soviet Union, most of that debate includes superfluous details to include in this paper. One important idea to keep in the forefront of any discussion of Khrushchev's succession of Stalin is that while Nikita Khrushchev never identified himself as a Stalinist, he was a product of the Soviet system and remained trapped within the confines of the very same structure.³⁵

Unfortunately, the trappings of the Soviet state would factor into Khrushchev's eventual decision to use military force to end the Hungarian Revolution. During the Stalin years, the Soviet Union underwent a significant transformation in international identity. He radically departed from Lenin and his 1917 Revolution (though Stalin would never publically admit it), which brought along with concept of a communist upheaval spread throughout Europe. Stalin was a man of many faces, but above all else he was a political realist. He saw that an international revolution was not going to occur and he decided to create a socialist utopia inside the confines of the Soviet Union's borders.³⁶ While this chimerical idealism brought a focus on heavy industry, class-based terror, and collectivized agriculture, it was also accompanied by a passionate defense of the ever-expanding border of the Soviet Union.³⁷ For Khrushchev in the mid-1950's—now dealing with the newly built NATO alliance—defense of socialism inside the Soviet Union remained a *prima facie* issue. To allow a free and independent Hungary would send a message to any other discontented communist state, most notably Poland, that a revolution from below would be successful.

Was Khrushchev a liberal? In the true definition of the word, probably not. Khrushchev had been appointed to head the Ukrainian reconstruction project by Stalin and during the Stalin years continued to serve the dictator faithfully.³⁸ To mistake Khrushchev as a man not capable of violence would be a terrible misunderstanding. Khrushchev's record inside the communist party would prove that he possessed the ability to order and execute incredibly violent acts. He had been bloodthirsty during the Terror of 1937-1938 and engaged in Stalin-like political violence while reclaiming Western Ukraine after the Great Patriotic War.³⁹ Unlike his predecessor, Khrushchev understood that the Soviet Union needed to be taken in a different direction—the War had exposed far too many Soviet citizens to the Western World and complete Soviet isolation was no longer a viable policy option. When addressing Hungary in 1956, Khrushchev was at a cross-road of his early years in office. Without a doubt, Khrushchev was certainly more than capable, and willing, to order the Red Army into Hungary, but there would be no massive blood purges—at least, nothing close to the political violence committed by Stalin and his omnipresent NKVD officers.⁴⁰ Khrushchev's years in power were a series of contradictions, and there existed a constant tension between reform and repression; however, compared to his predecessor, Stalin, Khrushchev was significantly more open to the idea of reform—and for Soviet internal politics that fact is what really mattered.

In February of 1956, Khrushchev appeared before the 20th Party Congress and gave a report titled *On the Personality Cult and Its Consequences*—more commonly referred to as his “secret speech.” This address has been named the defining moment of Khrushchev's political

³⁵ Jeremy Smith, “Introduction,” In *Khrushchev in the Kremlin: Policy and government in the Soviet Union 1953-1964*, Edited by Jeremy Smith and Melanie Ilic, New York: Routledge, 2011, 1.

³⁶ The famous quotation attributed to Stalin is “Socialism in one country.”

³⁷ Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin*, New York: Basic Books, 2010, 388.

³⁸ William Taubman, *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era*, New York: W.W. Norton, 2003, 182.

³⁹ Snyder, 371.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

career by many historians and can be seen as a critical turning point in Soviet history.⁴¹ Despite being nearly three years after the death of Joseph Stalin, this meeting would be the first time the Party Congress had been convened since the dictator's death. By Khrushchev's own admission in his memoirs, the secret speech had a profound impact on the situation in Hungary which had already reached a critical point.⁴²

The lengthy speech consisted of a systematic and methodical deconstructing of the Stalin era, denouncing the genocidal dictator for the creation of a personality cult. Just over 10 years prior Stalin led the celebration of the Soviet Union's victory in the Great Patriotic War over Nazi Germany; however, Khrushchev criticized Stalin for a lack of preparation and for his disbelief at the outbreak of the conflict. Most importantly for the Soviet Bloc nations, Khrushchev took Stalin to task for his consistent breach of Soviet rule of law in dealing with political opponents:

Facts prove that many abuses were made on Stalin's orders without reckoning with any norms of Party and Soviet legality. Stalin was a very distrustful man, sickly suspicious... This sickly suspicion created in him a general distrust even with eminent party workers whom he had known for many years. Everywhere and in everything he saw enemies, "two-facers," and spies." Possessing unlimited power, he indulged in a great willfulness and choked a person morally and physically. A situation was created where one could not express one's own will.⁴³

Although meant to be secret, foreign journalists were allowed access to the speech material, ensuring that the entire world would hear of Khrushchev's new anti-Stalin stance. For the Hungarian intelligentsia Khrushchev's speech had several implications. First, even though Khrushchev had not specifically denounced the Rakosi regime in his speech (or any other communistic leaders beside Stalin) he had criticized the Stalinist purges that Rakosi employed to consolidate power. For the Hungarian people there was little distinction between Rakosi and Stalin—both had broken Soviet legality under Khrushchev's interpretation. Additionally, both men had created a personality cult (though a drastically larger one in Stalin's case) and removed political opponents. Again in Rakosi's case the purging of the Catholic Church in Hungary was the biggest example. Finally, Rakosi had followed Stalin's lead and created conditions in Hungary where it had become impossible to "express one's own will." Khrushchev's critique of Stalin's removal of intellectual expression was seen by the writers and university students as a call for a free press—something Moscow could not allow if Hungary was to remain a loyal Soviet satellite. Khrushchev's "secret speech" had profound effects in being the final catalyst from Moscow in the Hungarian Revolution and Khrushchev's contradiction of his own words was what brought the revolutionary upheaval to an abrupt end. The situation and main players in Moscow have been set up; however, to understand why the Hungarian people rebelled and why they may have been misled, the situation in Hungary after Stalin's death must be examined further.

⁴¹ Robert English, *Russia and the Idea of the West: Gorbachev, Intellectuals & the End of the Cold War*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2000, 49.

⁴² Nikita Khrushchev, *Memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev Volume 3: Statesman, 1953-1964*, edited by Sergei Khrushchev, translated by George Shriver, University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004, 644.

⁴³ Nikita Khrushchev, "Highlights of Khrushchev's Secret Speech to the 20th Party Congress, February 25, 1956," in *The Cold War: A History through Documents*, edited by Edward H. Judge and John W. Langdon, Upper Saddle River: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1999, 87.

Nearly 2,000 kilometers away from Moscow in Budapest the post-Stalin thaw had begun to take place. Imre Nagy, a little known member of the Politburo, was promoted to prime minister replacing Matyas Rakosi.⁴⁴ The order for Nagy's promotion came directly from Moscow, but the official reasoning behind the choice is still unclear. Nagy was relatively young did not belong in the core group of leaders in the Hungarian communist party because he had fallen onto bad terms with the party due to his opposition to collectivization.⁴⁵ From the leaders in the Kremlin, there were several reasons to prefer Nagy to Rakosi and his henchman. First, Nagy was not a Jew. Even so shortly after the Western World had become aware of the Holocaust, Anti-Semitism still had an influence on Soviet party decisions. Second, Nagy's popularity with the Hungarian people continued to rise because of his work on implementing a successful land reform as Minister of Agriculture.⁴⁶ Perhaps the party bosses thought that Nagy could find common ground between the gap that still existed between the communist party and the agricultural peasantry.

Nagy's appointment made one thing clear: Moscow was not happy with the Hungarian party's leadership. In a party memo from Moscow, the Rakosi regime was heavily criticized for the decreased standard of living for the Magyar working class and for seeing industrialization as an end in itself, not as a means to provide economic security for the working socialist citizens.⁴⁷ Nagy's opposition to collectivization put him at odds with the Hungarian communists; however, his anti-Stalinist policies seemed to have endeared him with the party heads in Moscow. Inside the party memo it is clear that the rapidly deteriorating social situation in Budapest was known to those in the Kremlin. The memo notes that in 850,000 cases the Hungarian AVH (or secret police, the Hungarian version of Stalin's omnipresent and feared NKVD) imposed "penalties."⁴⁸ One is left to guess what these penalties might have included; however, given the number of Hungarians purged under Rakosi, certainly some of the 850,000 suffered the worst possible fate. Moscow's insistence that Rakosi resign and their appointment of Nagy at least tacitly shows their acknowledgement of the precarious situation that was beginning to develop in Hungary, 1953.

The situation in Hungary following Stalin's death was unique. In no other Eastern Bloc country did a communist leader suggest that the socialist system was open to reform and humanization.⁴⁹ The Hungarian Revolution would occur over a decade before the Prague Spring. If nothing else, Imre Nagy and his failed attempt at reform points to the fact that there was a significant gap between what the party said and what the policy would be. Moscow could not allow a liberal Hungary because once concessions had been made, the people would only want more. Surely the leaders in Moscow were familiar with Tsar Nicholas II's attempted liberal reforms following the squashing of the 1905 Revolution and when those same reforms were never realized the February, 1917, Revolution became inevitable. Nagy's reformist policies became known as the 'New Course.' It would become the liberal forerunner to the Prague Spring of 1968 and Mikhail Gorbachev's Glasnost and Perestroika in the 1980's.⁵⁰ A liberal agenda and certainly a reformist one, Nagy had no intention of breaking

⁴⁴ Charles Gati, *Failed Illusions: Moscow, Washington, Budapest, and the 1956 Hungarian Revolt*, Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2006, 24.

⁴⁵ Molnar, 306.

⁴⁶ Lendvai, 38.

⁴⁷ Central Committee MDP memo, as it appears in Schopflin, 25.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Lendvai, 37.

⁵⁰ Goti, 55.

Hungary out of the Soviet Union. Nagy's belief in socialism never wavered; he merely wanted to implement a better version, one that broke away from the economic woes that Stalinism had brought after the end of the Second World War. It appeared that Moscow had appointed a man who could lead Hungary out of the economic depression that it faced, while keeping the Magyar people dedicated servants of the Soviet Empire. Unfortunately for Khrushchev and his advisors, Nagy's plans would never be implemented fully.

Books could be written detailing the failures of the pre-Revolution Nagy-led government; however, the blame should not be placed solely on Nagy. Three reasons exist for the failure of the liberal reforms and the continued intellectual discontent on the party of the Hungarian intelligentsia. First, after the death of Stalin, there were a series of riots in Eastern Germany that began when the East Berlin construction workers went on strike. The riots had a profound effect on Hungary (as well as the other Bloc states). It is important to remember that the Bloc states did not operate inside a vacuum. When a crisis arose in one state, Moscow then had to decide how that situation might affect other Soviet dominated countries. The Red Army was quickly sent in to violently crush the revolt. Coming after a short period of relaxation by the central party following Stalin's death, the Red Army's military triumph over a group of non-centralized, liberal revolutionaries would serve as a blueprint for Soviet imperialism three years later in Hungary.⁵¹ For Soviet interests, East Germany could not allowed to be a free country. Khrushchev saw that allowing East Germany to be free would allow the United States to gain a further foothold in Germany and potentially reunite Germany as one nation.⁵² The same logic would be applied to Hungary and the NATO alliance.

Second, Nagy's freedom to govern as he chose would be limited after Berlin, 1953. The party always came before the national government in Soviet politics.⁵³ Nagy was a dedicated socialist; however, he was still primarily a Hungarian—not in a militarist or nationalist sense, but as a politician who would look after the interests of the Hungarian people. It became impossible for him to operate in the government when the government apparatus still obeyed Rakosi and his Stalinist clique.⁵⁴ There was a clash of ideals inside the Hungarian communist party, and the party structure made it impossible for Nagy to be victorious.

The third reason was that Nagy lacked liberal allies inside the government. Just as Rakosi still controlled the AVH and other state-controlled organizations, Nagy did not have the support from any powerful groups for his proposed reforms.⁵⁵ The final result would be to make Nagy a martyr to the liberal Hungarian intelligentsia.⁵⁶ Nagy may have been idolized by the liberal elite in Hungarian society, but their dedication to him was not enough to appease their desire for freedom. The liberal elite that formed a pseudo-coalition group around Nagy became the first significant anti-Stalinist reform movement in any of the Bloc countries. Their organization unmasked the Hungarian Stalinists and helped the Hungarian people ready themselves for revolution.⁵⁷

In terms of the Hungarian Revolution, perhaps the biggest shortcoming of Nagy's first term as prime minister was the failure to reexamine any of the public or secret political trials

⁵¹ Seton-Watson, 72.

⁵² Taubman, 249.

⁵³ Lendvai, 39.

⁵⁴ Schopflin, 28.

⁵⁵ Lendvai, 40.

⁵⁶ Schopflin, 33.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 35.

undertaking by the Rakosi regime.⁵⁸ Nagy's shortcomings in liberalizing the economic, social, and cultural situation in Hungary become understandable after examining the situation in the Hungarian political party; however, had Nagy been able to open the files on many of the political trials, even restore some of the Catholic Church's power in Hungary, there could have been a chance that Nagy could have successfully began the process of liberalizing Hungary. In those purged by Rakosi, Nagy would have found allies. Perhaps for that very reason Nagy's enemies blocked any chance of reversing the show-trial's decisions.

The situation in Hungary would become incredibly fluid over the next three years and Moscow had a difficult time dealing with the crisis leading up to the Revolution. The party bosses in Moscow were stuck between choosing a liberal reformer, who in some ways they feared, and a Stalinist, in Rakosi—that they wanted purged from the party—but had too many allies in Budapest. It would be Khrushchev's speech to the 20th Party Congress that would formally end Rakosi's political career. The removal of Rakosi after his 'secret speech' would symbolize a common occurrence during the Khrushchev era.

Nikita Khrushchev's eleven years as head of the communist party was marked by broad contradictions.⁵⁹ He called for domestic reform and peaceful coexistence with the capitalist world; however, he treated the Bloc states as tools to buffer against his perception of NATO's imperialist agenda. Khrushchev responded to NATO's skepticism of the new Soviet doctrine by distrusting the West's intentions—thus dooming any significant change in international relations. Unfortunately for the Hungarian people, Khrushchev would respond with military force to their revolution—just as he did in Berlin in 1953. For a politician who marked his career with the liberal thaw and a period of de-Stalinization, Khrushchev appeared to respond to crisis situations by following the model of the preceding party dictator. Khrushchev was a man marked by internal conflict and so too was the story of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956—one that was full of contradictions, misguided allusions, and violence.

1956: The Communist Experiment Hangs in the Balance

Nikita Khrushchev stated after the Hungarian Revolution took place, "If ten or so Hungarian writers had been shot at the right moments, the revolution would never have occurred."⁶⁰ Khrushchev's quote signifies how unique the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 was in comparison to other armed rebellions. It began with a small group of writers and university students and spilled over to a twelve-day struggle of Hungarian nationals fighting against an organized military force, superior in both quality and quantity of troops. The Red Army had proven itself in both conventional and guerrilla warfare. During World War II, Operation Bagration swept through Germany advances, and within one year from its launch date, Soviet forces reached Berlin. Combating guerrilla and partisan forces in Berlin, 1953, the Red Army successfully, and brutally, restored order.

For the Hungarian liberals, the Nagy prime minister experiment lasted only two short years as he was forced out by changes in Moscow. Nagy was forced to resign from his position as prime minister and was expelled from the communist party. His replacement, Andras

⁵⁸ Lajos Izsak, "Imre Nagy's First Government," in *1956: The Hungarian Revolution and War for Independence*, edited by Lee Congdon, Bela Kiraly, and Karoly Nagy, New York: Columbia University Press, 2006, 83.

⁵⁹ English, 50.

⁶⁰ Nikita Khrushchev, qtd. In Barber, 17.

Hegedus, would reinstitute the policies of the Rakosi regime.⁶¹ Before his exit Nagy correctly predicted that reinstating Rakosi and Stalin's policies (or further roll-back of the Hungarian people's liberty) could not be the alternative to reform. According to Nagy, should the Hungarian people be left to decide between Stalinism and revolution, they would choose the latter:

Today, probably a return to the policy of the New Course and the application of June [1953] principles to the economic, political, and social life of the nation could still check the growing crisis and avert catastrophe. But it is doubtful whether a return to the June principles would suffice as a solution tomorrow...there is a danger that the masses, having lost their faith, will reject both the June way and the Communist Party, and it will become necessary to make a much greater retreat in order to keep the situation under control.⁶²

Neither the Communist Party in Budapest nor Moscow would heed Nagy's warning. The country was set on a path for revolution that would begin on the streets of the Hungarian capital city on the evening of October 23, 1956.

The beginnings of the Hungarian Revolution echo the start of the Russian Revolution in 1917—a series of peaceful protests, as a result of continued decreases in the quality of life, exploded into violence after an initial response by the military. In the Hungarian case, the large group of writers and university students were gathering in the streets of Budapest as the AVH gathered on the rooftops above them. After a series of blanks were fired to disperse the crowd, a single can of tear gas was hurled into the crowd.⁶³ Panic ensued in the streets of the Hungarian capital city as the young, unorganized intelligentsia scrambled for cover from the secret police. Thus began the Hungarian Revolution of 1956.

The revolution possessed no organization; it was simultaneously spontaneous and inevitable. Had the AVH allowed the students to protest down the streets of Budapest, the fighting likely would not have occurred in the night of October 23rd; however, referring back to Nagy's prediction, the Hungarian intelligentsia would not abide by the one party communist system. The Hungarian people proved for twelve days that they possessed the will to fight for a multi-party government. Despite his expulsion from the communist party Nagy would return to attempt to lead the Hungarian people through the crisis of the Revolution. Had the freedom fighters ultimately won their independence from the Soviet Union, more than likely Nagy would have been the head of the new multi-party Hungarian government.

Before covering the details of the Revolution and the decision from Moscow to ultimately crush the will of the Hungarian people with a major offensive, some facts have to be addressed. One of Khrushchev's motivating factors in using military force to end the Hungarian Revolution was the threat that an independent Hungary and NATO posed to the Soviet Union; however, there is no evidence to suggest that the Hungarian people desired to be a member of the NATO alliance. The revolution was mostly contained within the city borders of Budapest and only around 15,000 Hungarian men and women took up arms against their Soviet occupiers. It was a nationalistic and patriotic revolution, but not an antisocialist one.⁶⁴ However, to prove the necessity of

⁶¹ Izsak, 92.

⁶² Excerpt from Nagy's essay *On Communism*, 49. As quoted in Gati, 66.

⁶³ Barber, 21.

⁶⁴ Gati, 3.

Moscow's actions, the desires of the Hungarian people do not matter—only Moscow's perception of their wishes. Khrushchev thought that NATO would immediately enter Hungary forcing Capitalism on the Magyar people regardless of whether the Hungarian freedom fighters desired to be a member of the United States alliance.⁶⁵ Contrary to the Kremlin's belief, the Hungarian people who fought for their freedom did so solely because they wanted a government for the Hungarian people by the Hungarian people. They did not want Moscow to continue to dictate the life of the Magyars.

Second, Moscow did not engage in a trigger happy defense of their empire. New evidence suggests that Khrushchev would have been willing to listen to Nagy's demands had he given a centralized list of what the Hungarian people desired and how those requests would have benefited the overall Union of Socialist Republics.⁶⁶ Ultimately Moscow did decide that a military option was preferential to any peaceful negotiations so there should not be too much weight put into this claim. While Khrushchev mulled the decision to use force for nearly a week, his decision was necessary for the Soviet Union's continued status as a major European power. It is unfortunate for the Hungarian people that the lack of leadership in the Revolution (and Nagy's inability to centralize the people's demands into a clear policy) forced Khrushchev into ordering direct military action.

Third, Washington was completely taken by surprise by the outbreak of the Revolution, proving how spontaneous it was.⁶⁷ The CIA possessed no Hungarian-speaking official on the entire European continent.⁶⁸ The United States had few options given the short timeframe of the Revolution. Although the United States was caught off guard by the outbreak of the Revolution, they should share some culpability of the blame for the failure of the Hungarian freedom fighters. Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, failed the Hungarian people in what amounted to one of the lowest moments of his term in office.⁶⁹ Dulles had called for insurrection against the Soviet occupation of the bloc states; however, at the outbreak of the Revolution he did nothing to aid the freedom fighters. Dulles did not attempt to open a dialogue with the Soviet governments, instead choosing to focus on the crisis over the Suez Canal.⁷⁰ Additionally, the United States found itself in a 'Catch-22.' A free Hungary was in its interests, but to openly aid the Hungarian freedom fighters, either economically or militarily would have risked turning the Cold War into a hot one. Given the assets available at the time and the logistical realities of the situation, the United States' only option was to sit on the sidelines and hope for a successful Hungarian victory. Only eleven years after World War II, Eisenhower—ever fearful of war and the military industrial complex—surely did not want to risk the third global conflict of the 20th Century.

It is a common misperception by American Cold War politicians that the Soviet Union looked to engage or provoke the West into another global conflict. In a document published nine months before the Hungarian Revolution, the Soviet Foreign Ministry outlines the Soviet Union's desire to maintain peace inside the Bloc. Should any of the Bloc states be granted their freedom, there was a legitimate fear in Moscow that those states (at the time most likely Poland

⁶⁵ Khrushchev, *Memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev: Volume 3: Statesman, 1953-1964*, 650.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶⁷ Gati, 5

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Fred C. Ilke, "Review of *Dulles on Diplomacy* by Andrew Berding," in *Canadian International Council* 21.1, Winter 1965, 135.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

or Hungary) would appeal for NATO support.⁷¹ The Soviet logic flows from the realistic fact that the United States and its allies would have insisted that the Bloc countries be given the right of self determination because foreign occupiers could be seen as substantial causes to both of the 20th Century's global conflicts. Granted, NATO operated under the assumption that given a choice between democracy and communism Eastern and Central Europe would also choose the former because communism was an oppressive exterior government. However, Khrushchev responded to such a claim in his memoirs. Khrushchev acknowledged that the Soviet Union established communist governments inside the Bloc; however, he argued that the United States did the same with capitalism in Western Europe, citing a capitalist inspired civil war in Greece.⁷² The truth behind such a claim can surely be debated, but it is not the facts in this case that matter, merely Khrushchev and Moscow's perception of the West. This line of logic naturally leads to the question: so was the Soviet Union's fear of the West really unfounded or did it have basis in reality?

From Moscow's point of view, the Soviet Union had just as good a claim to fear the NATO as the western alliance was scared of the USSR. As the Soviet Foreign Ministry pointed out, the United States and Great Britain had authorized the rearmament of West Germany and granted its status as a member of NATO.⁷³ Washington and its allies had the ability to strike the heart of the Soviet Union with much greater ease than vice versa. Although the Soviet Union had successfully tested its nuclear program, the USSR remained far behind the United States in nuclear capacity at the beginning of 1956. Additionally, the Soviet Union lacked any long range strike at the United States. A consistent problem in United States-Soviet relationship during the Cold War began with missile defense. The United States had military bases spread throughout Europe, meaning that America possessed a greater capacity for first strike potential against Moscow. If the Soviet Union were to lose any more territory in Central Europe, it would have marked disaster for the security status of the entire Bloc.⁷⁴

Again, in early 1956 the Soviet Foreign Ministry was open to improving relations with the Western Capitalist world, except that this enhancement predicated on two stipulations. First, the geographical boundaries of the Soviet Union (of 1956) remain completely intact. Second, there would be no further encroachment on the Soviet Union's security network. A western political scientist or politician could easily dismiss the Soviet Union's insistence on Eastern European domination as tyrannical and imperial; however, from the perspective of the politicians inside the Kremlin it can be seen that there was a legitimate fear of the West. It should not be too far a stretch to think that the Soviet politicians realized what had happened to Japan in 1945 and feared the United States might use nuclear weapons against major Russian cities. Granted, given that mutually assured destruction ensured that scenario would never play out, Soviet politicians feared the United States as much as the politicians of the U.S. were scared of the Soviets. Khrushchev would eventually see the situation in Hungary as being inspired by the Capitalist countries of the West—similar to his allegation of the West's agitation of the Greek Civil War.

⁷¹ Soviet Foreign Ministry, "Notes from Mid USSR Concerning Questions of Foreign Policy," in *The 1956 Hungarian Revolution: A History in Documents*, edited Csaba Bekes, Malcolm Byrne, and Janos Rainer, Budapest: Central European University Press, 2002, 108.

⁷² Khrushchev, *Memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev: Volume 3: Statesman, 1953-1964*, 645.

⁷³ Soviet Foreign Ministry, 108.

⁷⁴ Central Europe is a vague term whose limits can be debated; however, for this thesis Hungary will be included in "Central Europe." Without a doubt had Hungary joined a NATO alliance and had a U.S. military base been established in Hungary it would have posed a significant security risk for the Soviet Union.

The United States knew that the “political, military and economic power of the Soviet Union” was greatly augmented by the Soviet domination of Eastern Europe.⁷⁵ It is clear that both sides of the Cold War knew of the importance of the Bloc states. The Hungarian Revolution stood in direct opposition to the Soviet concept of security. Unbeknownst to the Hungarian intelligentsia, this game of international power politics was the context of the 1956 Revolution. As the Hungarian AVO began to fire on the peaceful protesters in Budapest, Moscow began to scramble—unsure what the extent of the protest would amount to, or if for the second time since the death of Stalin, the Red Army would have to be utilized to subdue an unruly Bloc nation.

It should be noted that the Soviet Union began to build up its military presence in Hungary three months before the Revolution. This military deployment constituted a blatant violation of the terms of the Warsaw Pact. Although it was easy for Moscow to disregard the terms of the treaty without rapprochement, the action should be indicative of Moscow’s awareness as to how the situation in Hungary had already developed. Nonetheless, the military buildup should not indicate Moscow’s eagerness to crush any opposition with the force of the Red Army. Had that been the case surely there would have been Stalin-like purges following the conclusion of Hungarian resistance, but Khrushchev did not resort to such measures. In fact, the few executions were mostly undertaken by the Hungarian communist party, one was the execution of Nagy—understandable, but not justified, given his assumption as the leader of the freedom fighters. Again, Moscow’s use of force should not (and will not, by this paper) be excused or justified from a humanitarian perspective, however, in international security an unfortunate truth exists—the moral compass and the direction of a state’s best interest often point in two separate directions.

In Hungary the fighting escalated quickly as hundreds of thousands met on the streets of Budapest. Although the students, writers, and other Hungarian nationalists had no central organization, there were two reasons for why violent protest spread rapidly. First, in the early weeks of October, 1956 there were a series of mass demonstrations at various points around Budapest—the discontent was visible, it was not as if thousands of Hungarians randomly poured onto the streets of Budapest.⁷⁶ Second, although there was no central organization, a central motive existed, which was Hungarian independence. In no less than twelve hours since the outbreak of the rebellion, before the morning of October 24, the radio station—a symbol of Soviet propaganda—had been set ablaze. The writers were behind the arson; however, as they took to the streets at the beginning of the night they had possessed no plans for violence.⁷⁷ The radio station had refused to broadcast a patriotic message written by the writers and as the students joined them on the streets, pandemonium ensued as discontent turned to anger and anger to bloodshed.⁷⁸ Moscow’s initial reaction was to do nothing—their troops were stationed on alert; however, a similar situation in Poland had recently been put down without violence. The Kremlin hoped for the identical result in Hungary—after a night of rioting, peace would return to the streets of Budapest. Hoping for such a fairy tale ending showed that even though Moscow had begun to take measures to counteract a Hungarian revolt, the Soviet politicians were desperately out of touch with the reality of the situation in Budapest.

⁷⁵ NSC 5608, “U.S. Policy Toward the Soviet Satellites in Eastern Europe,” in *The 1956 Hungarian Revolution: A History in Documents*, 119.

⁷⁶ Schopflin, 52.

⁷⁷ Barber, 24.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

Nikita Khrushchev's decision to call in military support was not one that he made lightly. Why did Khrushchev decide that an independent Hungary was not in the best interest of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics? The internal debate that Khrushchev experienced before deciding the fate of Hungary should not be mistaken for compassion. Khrushchev showed little concern for the fate of the Hungarian freedom fighters, but rather he needed to determine what the best course of action was for the Soviet Union. Granting Hungary a semi-independent status would have been a risky endeavor for several reasons.

First, Yugoslavia and Tito had been granted that same position and had been a constant tension point in Soviet-Bloc relations. Tito consistently dissented from Moscow's party line, leading to the question of whether Tito was a nationalist or a communist first. It is often difficult to separate the two (in Tito's case) in order to make a clear distinction. In post-World War II, Soviet relations between Belgrade and Moscow were constantly strained over the planned economy. According to Khrushchev, Tito and members of the Yugoslavian government refused to have their economy subject to the bureaucratic red-tape of the Soviet Union.⁷⁹ Most importantly, Yugoslavia did not just ask for independent status in international relations, Tito actively campaigned for all socialist countries to share this status.⁸⁰ For reasons still unclear, Khrushchev allowed the dissent from Tito, and Moscow granted Yugoslavia the right to export its products to capitalist markets. However, due to Tito's campaigning for an alliance of independent socialist states, a free Hungary would be dangerous. It seems under Khrushchev's logic one country makes an exception, two makes a norm. It seemed that only Tito would receive a special status from Moscow—Khrushchev could not allow an independent Hungary.

Additionally for Khrushchev, in 1956 a situation developed in Poland that required the attention of Moscow. Poland, much like Hungary, suffered from imposed Stalinism after World War II and shared an equal if not more extreme hatred of the Russians stemming from the constant Polish subjugation to Russia's will throughout history.⁸¹ While the tension in Poland was long standing, the spark in 1956 was a shortage of food. The significant difference in the Polish case was that a liberal communist, Wladyslaw Gomulka, exerted enough influence over the Polish rebels to ensure an end to the protests. Khrushchev was ready to order in Soviet troops; however, assurances made by Gomulka successfully backed Khrushchev down.⁸² This strategy would be almost identically similar to Khrushchev's initial stance on the Hungarian crisis (he wanted to allow Nagy to negotiate a peace between the communist party and the freedom fighters); however, Khrushchev could not continually appear weak in the Soviet satellite states before protests turned into a full-scale revolution.

The Polish issue had a direct link with Hungary—the two states shared in their hatred of their Russian overlord. The demonstration that began on October 23, 1956, in Budapest was inspired to show solidarity with the events occurring in Poland in October.⁸³ Likewise as the Polish people protested for bread and freedom, several demonstrators clamored under the tagline 'Warsaw-Budapest-Belgrade.'⁸⁴ Khrushchev began to lose control of the Bloc states. He first ordered the Soviet Army into Warsaw and after a bloody day of fighting, order was restored to

⁷⁹ Khrushchev, *Memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev: Volume 3: Statesman, 1953-1964*, 545.

⁸⁰ Milan Sahovic, "Yugoslav Diplomacy and the Hungarian Revolution of 1956," in *1956: The Hungarian Revolution and War for Independence*, 178.

⁸¹ Taubman, 289.

⁸² *Ibid*, 294.

⁸³ Janos Tischler, "Poland and Hungary in 1956," in *1956: The Hungarian Revolution and War for Independence*, 95.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 96.

the Polish capital city. In contrast to the Hungarian freedom fighters, the Poles were organized, but possessed little to no military equipment in order to resist the Red Army. Khrushchev had hoped for a similar result in Hungary after the protests became widespread because Moscow could not allow the crisis in Eastern and Central Europe to escalate further. To do so would have meant a substantial decrease in Soviet hegemony in the area, and as a byproduct, the strengthening of the NATO alliance.

Again, the issue of NATO cannot be overstated. Khrushchev was keenly aware that the United States and its allies were closely watching the communist Bloc, especially the border states that were prime for rebellion. The NATO alliance established a diplomatic and military alliance between the Capitalist powers in Western Europe and North America. While the alliance's charter primarily dealt with defensive agreements should any of the signatory nations come under armed attack, it did much more than that. It became the bulwark of anti-communist nations that were constantly watching for holes in the Warsaw Pact (or in the Soviet Russia's domination of the remainder of Communist Europe). Against these background issues, as the situation in Hungary began to deteriorate further and it became clear no peaceful negotiation or reform would occur, Khrushchev was forced to consider a military option for the continued existence of Soviet hegemony.

Soviet troops first entered Budapest on Wednesday, the 24th of October—a full day after the fighting had broken out. By this point the freedom fighters had seized several (including the largest) ammunition depots in Budapest and two of the city's finest military academies had joined the cause of the Revolution.⁸⁵ The AVO had lost control of the city due to the growing numbers, and growing military supplies, of the freedom fighters. The Red Army entered the city with 6,000 men and 700 tanks with another 20,000 infantry men and 1,100 tanks placed on high alert; however, the Soviet army expected to perform a routine military police operation and crush rioting students—very similar to their experience in Berlin three years prior.⁸⁶ Perhaps if the story of the Hungarian Revolution ended there, it would not have been worth telling. If only a group of rowdy students had been dispersed and protests banned, it would only be an underscore to the entire Cold War—of course, that is not the case. The freedom fighters fought the occupying Soviet army viciously, beginning on the morning of the 24th of October. The Hungarian citizens were desperately struggling for their freedom, but unfortunately for the Magyar people it was a battle they had no chance of winning.

Even before the Moscow ordered its own troops to crush the freedom fighters, the West began to see the hopelessness of the situation. A British memorandum, authored by Thomas Brimelow, dated October 25, 1956—eleven days before the Red Army marched triumphantly through Budapest—details the West's attitude toward the Hungarian Revolution.

This is full of pitfalls. We must be careful not to say anything which might encourage hotheads in Budapest to further useless rioting. We might express our disapproval of the intervention of Soviet forces, but the Russians are forearmed with the answer that they went in by invitation. We could criticize Mr. Nagy for calling the Russians in and for suppressing the riots with such brutality. But it may be to our interest to have Mr. Nagy

⁸⁵ Sebestyen, 123.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 126.

in power. At the moment he seems to offer the best prospects for a more liberal Communist regime in Hungary...I recommend that we should say as little as possible.⁸⁷

Even though at the time of the outbreak of the Revolution, Khrushchev had only been in power for three years, he was no beginner when it came to international relations and Soviet politics. When the Soviet troops began to march into Budapest, Moscow released a statement condemning the violence in Hungary as counter-revolutionary (to the Russian Revolution nearly 40 years prior). Additionally, Khrushchev's government placed NATO in a difficult position—Moscow's statement disclosed that the Hungarian people's government had asked for the Red Army to restore peace under the terms of the Warsaw Pact.⁸⁸ Surely NATO could see through the façade that the Soviet Union had placed around Hungary; however, under international law there was nothing they could do. Additionally, any resolution brought before the United Nations to order a ceasefire or a peace-keeping operation in Hungary would have, without a doubt, been vetoed by the Soviet Union, a fellow Security Council member. Khrushchev had skillfully negated any potential that the West could intervene in Soviet internal affairs in Hungary.

Khrushchev did not anticipate how important his skillful political game would become regarding the Hungarian Revolution. He shared in the Soviet military's preconceived notion that order would be quickly restored in Hungary through the superior training, weaponry, and manpower of the Red Army. It was nearly midnight when an emergency cabinet meeting shared the bad news with Khrushchev: there had been 60 Russian casualties, in addition to four tanks and four armored vehicles being destroyed.⁸⁹ Quickly Khrushchev began to lose total faith in any non-violent, political solution repairing the problem in Hungary. The Premier sent a message to Tito stating "The West and anti-Soviet elements in Hungary have taken up arms against the Socialist camp and the Soviet Union. The West is seeking a revision of the results of World War II. It has started in Hungary, and will then go on to crush each socialist state in Europe one by one."⁹⁰ It is unclear if Khrushchev believed his words or, in a more sinister manner, wanted Tito to believe them—so that Tito would approve of military action against the Hungarian people. Regardless, it is clear that Khrushchev remained a devout communist throughout the entirety of his reign. To allow a free Hungary would be a significant back-track in the goals of a global communist revolution and to the status of Soviet security in Europe.

Once Khrushchev understood that Russia was dealing with a much greater threat than a large group of disgruntled intellectuals, due to the Revolution spreading to Hungarian nationals and nearly all other members of Hungarian society he began to realize that there could be no middle ground in Hungary—no negotiations and no compromise. He saw the situation in classic Bolshevik terminology. The freedom fighters were counter-revolutionary elements and the Soviet Union was aiding the Hungarian working class to realize the ideals of communism.⁹¹ His memoir would have one believe that he had known this fact from the outset; however, it is clear that is not true. It took almost a week of debate in the Kremlin, before Moscow offered an official policy on Hungary. On the night of October 30, (as usual during the Hungarian crisis) Khrushchev tossed around, unable to sleep. He initially had approved a plan granting Hungary

⁸⁷ Thomas Brimelow, "Memorandum from Thomas Brimelow to the British Foreign Office News Department," in *The 1956 Hungarian Revolution: A History in Documents*, 234.

⁸⁸ "Excerpts from Soviet Government Statement, October 30, 1956," in *The Cold War: A History through Documents*, 91.

⁸⁹ Sebestyen, 137.

⁹⁰ Khrushchev's message as it appears in Sebestyen, 137.

⁹¹ Khrushchev, *Memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev: Volume 3: Statesman, 1953-1964*, 651.

the status of a semi-autonomous independent nation on par with the likes of Austria, Yugoslavia, and Finland.⁹² The story of Khrushchev's decision had already been printed for the morning headlines of *Pravda*. During Khrushchev's sleepless night he unsurprisingly decided to reverse his initial plan. Had Khrushchev's original arrangement been implemented it would have changed the course of history in Eastern Europe. Certainly it would have removed a substantial cause of the cold war from the American perspective, which was Soviet domination of Eastern and Central Europe.⁹³ One of the motivating factors in Khrushchev's decision was self-preservation. He feared (rightfully so) that his rivals in Moscow would pounce should he give proof of his willingness to cooperate with the Capitalist powers through his seeming acquiescence on the Hungarian issue.⁹⁴

The decision was then made that the Hungarian issue would be resolved with the might of the Red Army. The United States and its NATO alliance had been effectively neutralized by the statements of the Soviet government detailing Hungary's begging for military action to restore order. Eisenhower would address the nation condemning the violence of the Soviet military and refuting the claim that Hungary needed the assistance of the Russians—"after World War II, the Soviet Union used military force to impose on the nations of Eastern Europe governments of Soviet choice—servants of Moscow."⁹⁵ Eisenhower's impassioned speech would amount to little. The Hungarian people were left alone to fight one of the greatest military forces of the 20th Century. What could Eisenhower have done? Khrushchev absolutely would have been willing to go to war over the issue of Soviet power projection in Eastern Europe. Under this framework, Khrushchev ordered the commencement of Operation "Vertex" on the morning of November 1, 1956.

Up to this point, a pseudo-cease fire had been in effect and Soviet forces were pulling out of Hungary. Early on the first morning of November, Nagy received a report that the largest Russian force yet, backed by 850 tanks, had reentered Hungary. Nagy's days as prime-minister were numbered—the Soviet Army had begun its full invasion of Hungary.⁹⁶ Operation "Vertex" fully restored the 'national-democratic' government in Hungary by November 4; twelve days after the fighting had broken out.⁹⁷ Nagy was arrested and later executed. He would be replaced by Janos Kadar. Kadar was willing to comply with Moscow's demands thus ending any threat of a free Hungary. Kadar remained subservient to the Kremlin; however, he showed his brutal side in his execution of Nagy and several of Nagy's allies in a brilliantly designed trap after Nagy attempted to seek refuge in Yugoslavia.⁹⁸ Almost a decade of uneasy Soviet-Hungarian relations was decided in twelve bloody days with a devastating Soviet victory.

Legacy

The Hungarian Revolution was dismissed from serious academic study for quite some time for two reasons. First, serious studies of Soviet history were limited until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the opening of the Soviet archives. Second, near the end of the

⁹² Gati, 186.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Sebestyen, 214.

⁹⁵ Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Excerpts from Address by President Eisenhower," in *The Cold War: A History through Documents*, 91.

⁹⁶ Sebestyen, 228.

⁹⁷ Marples, 221.

⁹⁸ Sebestyen, 282.

Hungarian Revolution international attention quickly shifted to the crisis in the Suez Canal that had the potential to cause another global conflict. The Hungarian Revolution became an afterthought as foreign media covered the Suez crisis with much greater zeal. For many years, the unfortunate deaths of the Hungarian freedom fighters and reformist leaders were completely forgotten—one of the biggest tragedies of the entire affair. Regardless, the success of Operation “Vertex” marked a return to ‘normalcy’ in the Soviet Bloc. The Red Army made an example of the Hungarian people to show the entire Bloc what would happen should they follow the Hungarian path.

Leading up to the events of the Hungarian Revolution, Poland and Hungary were de-facto allies inside the Bloc given their status as problem states for the Russians. The new Polish government, under the leadership of Wladyslaw Gomulka followed the day-to-day events of the Hungarian Revolution very closely. While the Kremlin did its best to prevent information from leaking out of Budapest, Poland used its embassy in Hungary to gain as much intelligence as possible.⁹⁹ Once it became clear that the Hungarian cause was lost, Gomulka officially condemned Nagy’s revolutionary government, and by 1958 the Polish communist party had fully accepted Kadar’s ordered execution of Imre Nagy—no matter how uncomfortable it made the Polish leaders.¹⁰⁰ The Polish people, once united in cause, gave up on their Hungarian freedom-desiring brethren. A sense of complacency began to dawn over the entire Soviet Bloc—for it seemed better to acquiescence to Moscow’s demands than to suffer that fate of Hungary in 1956.

Khrushchev established a precedent in his ordering of the Red Army into Budapest on November 1st. In his memoirs Khrushchev showed no regrets in his decision to crush the freedom fighters in Operation “Vertex.” In fact, Khrushchev argued that the use of force was completely justified for two reasons. Since Hungary was a member of the Warsaw Pact and of the Soviet Union it was Khrushchev’s obligation to maintain order—especially in one of the capital cities.¹⁰¹ Additionally, Khrushchev argued that the use of force became morally justifiable.¹⁰² Khrushchev’s concept of morality (deriving from communism’s atheistic belief) certainly would have been different from Western notions of morality; however, from the perspective of Moscow Khrushchev’s argument did hold weight. From Moscow’s perspective, the Hungarian Revolution exhibited an explicit danger to the Hungarian workers and inspired counterrevolutionary zeal in Budapest—neither of which could be morally tolerated under Soviet doctrine.

Khrushchev made sure that his order of force did not fall upon deaf ears. He intentionally visited with nearly every single communist Bloc leader to inform them of his decision to authorize military action. His memoirs would have one believe that he wanted to ensure that no further dissent broke out over the Red Army’s actions.¹⁰³ It is clear, however, that Khrushchev had a more sinister purpose for traveling to each European communist capital city. Khrushchev wanted to inform each of the party leaders of his decision so that they would have no thoughts to aid or follow Hungary.¹⁰⁴ While the Hungarian Revolution would be the first major uprising against Soviet imperialism it would not be the last. Certainly Khrushchev’s decision had a direct impact on his successor, Leonid Brezhnev’s decision to invade

⁹⁹ Tischler, 105.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 114.

¹⁰¹ Khrushchev, *Memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev: Volume 3: Statesman, 1953-1964*, 653.

¹⁰² Ibid, 659.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 657.

¹⁰⁴ Taubman, 298.

Czechoslovakia during the Prague Spring of August 1968. Ultimately the Hungarian Revolution failed at creating an independent and free Hungarian state; however, the rebellion can be seen as the starting point for the decline of the Soviet Union because “it gave the Soviets a jolt from which they never entirely recovered.”¹⁰⁵ Khrushchev’s decision had ramifications in the entire Soviet society; however, it remains the correct one in terms of a rational state protecting its interests—Khrushchev cannot be held responsible for the economic, social, and political shortcomings of his successors Brezhnev, Yuri Andropov, and Konstantin Chernenko.

The ramifications of the Soviet decision to invade Hungary in 1956 were never fully manifested in Soviet-NATO relations. The Suez crisis and subsequent negotiations displaced the tension that the Hungarian issue had created and formed another crisis point in Soviet relations to the West. For the United States the Soviet crackdown on Hungary was an unfortunate and shocking setback; however, it provided additional opportunities.¹⁰⁶ The United States was able to portray the Soviet Union as reformist in dialogue only—despite Khrushchev’s ascension to power, the USSR was still an inherently evil nation-state.¹⁰⁷ While the United States failed to help the Hungarian freedom fighters, and in some cases misled them, the United States redeemed itself slightly. Over 50,000 refugees from Hungary fled the Soviet violence and successfully sought asylum in the United States and the government set up several relief organizations for the newest immigrants to America.¹⁰⁸

“Temetni tudunk!” This Hungarian expression best translates to English as ‘what we are really good at is burying people.’¹⁰⁹ Over a fifteen-year span, Hungary saw some of the worst foreign state-sponsored bloodshed in modern European history between the Nazi Germany occupation beginning in 1944 and the immediate Soviet ‘liberation.’ Against this context the legacy of the Hungarian Revolution remains to this day an incredibly tense issue in Hungary. The Hungarians never forgot that the first anti-Soviet revolution ended in bloodshed; however, it immediately became a source of national pride for the Magyar people. This act of rebellion demonstrated for the first time that totalitarianism was not destined to control Hungary, Eastern Europe, or any nation in this world for centuries.¹¹⁰ This was Hungary’s victory in defeat. For current residents of Budapest there are sights around the city that serve to remind them that their ancestors proudly stood up to the imperialism of Nikita Khrushchev and the entire Soviet Union. Even Khrushchev recognized that the Hungarian people would have no love for their Russian occupiers—a hatred that continues today.¹¹¹

Conclusion

The year 1956 belongs to no one group of people. There are many different sides of the same story. The Hungarian people hoped and fought for their independence. The United States had no deployable assets in the area to respond effectively or supply aid to the freedom fighters. Additionally, if the United States had supported the rebels, a potential global conflict could have started with the streets of Budapest serving as the front-lines. The Soviet Union saw a situation which had direct ramifications to its entire security and hegemony in the Communist Bloc. All

¹⁰⁵ Sebestyen, 300.

¹⁰⁶ Gati, 235.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Lendvai, 241.

¹¹⁰ Molnar, 321.

¹¹¹ Khrushchev, *Memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev: Volume 3: Statesman, 1953-1964*, 667.

three stories are both separate and intertwined; however, this paper attempts to retell the motivating factors in Khrushchev's decision to authorize Operation "Vertex."

The Soviet Union acted in its best interest with its decision to crush the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. The Soviet Union, and its leader Nikita Khrushchev, were ever fearful of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Despite there being no evidence that the Hungarian freedom fighters desired to be a signatory nation to the treaty, it is a logical thought that the United States would intervene and force Hungary's compliance. It would not have been the first or the last time in the Cold War that the United States undertook questionable methods in the name of anti-communism.

The situation in Poland and Yugoslavia certainly (and for Soviet hegemony, rightfully) influenced Khrushchev's decision to order the invasion of Hungary. For Soviet security, Khrushchev needed Nagy out of power and installed a 'yes-man,' Janos Kadar, in his place. The Bloc nations received the message of Operation "Vertex" and their relative obedience to Moscow continued without major incident until the Prague Spring nearly twelve years after the Hungarian Revolution. In hindsight, Khrushchev's decision played a substantial role in the return of the party-line in all of Eastern and Central Europe. Additionally, Khrushchev tightened his grip on power—which he would hold until being forced out by political rivals in 1964 after a series of embarrassments at the hands of the West (the Cuban Missile Crisis).

The Hungarian Revolution remains one of the greatest tragedies in the entirety of the Cold War period of modern history. A group of guerrilla freedom fighters fought for their nation's independence from their Soviet overlords and for twelve days had one of the largest land-based empires of the modern world on the ropes. Khrushchev was one restless night away from granting a semi-autonomous declaration to Hungary—instead he swiftly reversed course and ordered the complete annihilation of the counter-revolutionary forces in Hungary. In this battle, Goliath bested David in a bloodbath. The Soviet actions were reprehensible and cannot be justified on a moral basis. Khrushchev deserves no apologies. The Hungarian people suffered immensely as a result of 1956; however, the story of the Hungarian Revolution is an incredibly inspiring one. One small, unique European nation taking on the Soviet Union's oppression is a story that deserves to live on through the annals of history—no matter if Khrushchev made a rational policy decision.

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