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The Hungarian Revolution of 1956:
Dissent and the Cracks in Soviet Power

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October 2025

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About the Author



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The Hungarian Revolution of 1956: Dissent and the Cracks in Soviet Power

Dr. Bernd Christoph Ströhm

Abstract

This paper seeks to deliver a sophisticated examination of the complex 1956 Hungarian Revolt and regards the uprising as a critical turning point in Cold War history. It outlines its causes, course, and lasting repercussions through a cross-historical perspective, with special reference to Khrushchev's "Secret Speech" at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956. The research places the revolt within the wider struggle for Hungarian autonomy while also establishing parallels with the 1848–49 revolution and Russian interventions in Central Europe. Central themes encompass the boundaries of Soviet authority, the function of intellectuals in instigating dissent, and the emblematic significance of national defiance. Close attention is given to how the revolution affected the intelligentsia both within the Eastern Bloc and the Western left-orientated intellectuals. To analyse these dynamics, the paper employs a multi-method approach, including comparative historical analysis, archival and document-based research, discourse analysis and intellectual history.

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Introduction

The 1956 Hungarian Revolution undoubtedly stands as a pivotal event in Cold War history. The revolution itself was sparked, after all, by growing discontent with Soviet-imposed policies as well as a desire for political and economic reform—it transformed into a symbol of “national resistance” against totalitarian control in Hungary. It also revealed to the West the multifaceted inherent vulnerabilities within the classical Soviet “sphere of influence” over Eastern Europe, exposing the limits of Moscow’s ability to maintain ideological and political dominance through classical coercion alone.

Though the revolution was ultimately crushed by Soviet military forces, the event had lasting reverberations. It particularly inspired the creation of a renewed sense of national identity among Hungarians, while also serving as a stark reminder to the global “western” community of the human cost of oppression under communist regimes.

It should also be kept in mind that the 1956 uprising acted as a powerful catalyst for any future dissent—both cultural and political—within the entire Soviet Empire. The courage demonstrated by the Hungarian people also emboldened various intellectuals, artists, and reformers in Eastern and Western Europe to question the proper legitimacy of Soviet authority.

In the longer term, this “spirit of resistance” also contributed to the gradual, slow erosion of communist control and Soviet power, which impacted such movements as the 1968 Prague Spring and facilitated the rise of Solidarity (Soli-

darność) in Poland during the 1980s. In retrospect, the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 should not only be regarded as a critical moment in Hungary’s quest for independence, as it also laid the multifaceted foundations for eventual disintegration of Soviet control within its sphere of influence and for the rebirth of democratic aspirations throughout Central and Eastern Europe, which eventually culminated in the Soviet Union’s collapse in 1991.

This paper aims to explore themes closely related to the 1956 Hungarian Revolution and the development of Hungary’s national identity, including the limits of Soviet control and the revolution’s influence on the intelligentsia—both within the Eastern Bloc and among Western leftist thinkers. It also aims to outline how the events of 1956 catalysed ideological shifts, fracturing global communist solidarity, and inspired reformist movements, while drawing comparisons to the Hungarian Revolution of 1848–49.

Another important topic which shall be covered in this paper is the aftermath of Khrushchev’s “Secret Speech” at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956, in which he denounced Stalin’s policies. In addition, the international response to the Soviet intervention in 1956 should be outlined, paying special attention to United Nations resolutions. Guiding questions of this paper include: How did the 1956 uprising challenge Soviet hegemony? In what ways did it influence intellectual and cultural dissent within and beyond Hungary? What continuities exist between Hungary’s revolutions of 1848 and 1956?



Destroyed building on Baross utca, Budapest. (Fortepan/Gyarmati Béla).

The Roots of 1956

After WWII, Hungary quickly became part of the Soviet Empire and was ruled by a Stalinist regime under Mátyás Rákosi. His government was marked by purges, forced collectivisation, and brutal repression via the Hungarian secret police (ÁVH).¹ Owing to those repressions, discontent among the Hungarian populace increased early in the 1950s, which was further exacerbated by economic hardship.

At the end of WWII, Hungary's economy was in ruins. Besides the destructiveness of the war itself, Nazi Germany, in an act of desperation, had destroyed and removed the nation's industrial machinery and stock. Overall, 40% of Hungary's total GDP was lost as a result of the destruction of 90% of the country's industrial enterprises, 40% of its rail system, and 70% of its rolling stock.² Hungary's economy was further burdened by the USSR, which seized all German-owned property in Hungary to make up for some of the losses it had suffered during the war.³

The machinery from 300 more industries, along with two hundred complete factories, were disassembled and sent to the Soviet Union, leaving Hungary's industrial capacity in disarray. Russia established enterprises with combined Russian-Hungarian ownership, assuming control of whole sectors. In this way, the Soviet Union was able to benefit from Hungarian coal and oil, steel factories, railroad development, Danube commerce, and transportation.

The Communists had driven the Hungarian economy to the verge of collapse since they started restructuring the country along Stalinist principles. Hungarian labourers suffered most under the deteriorating economic situation. Famine was rampant on the land as a result of forced collectivisation. In the 1950s, the economic situation did not improve but even deteriorated in Hungary. The average Hungarian worker was subsequently confronted with declining living conditions

and an extended working week.⁴ The economic hardships within Hungary boosted general discontent among the Hungarian population, which also contributed to the outbreak of the 1956 uprising.

The uprising itself started on October 23, 1956, as a student-led protest in Budapest. Both lecturers and students from the Budapest Polytechnical University managed to mobilise some 50,000 protesters initially. The demonstrators had a range of demands, foremost the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Hungarian soil, freedom of speech and press, a multi-party system and the release of former Prime Minister Imre Nagy, who was seen by demonstrating students as a reformer. The protesters grew in number, culminating at some 200,000 people, who gathered in front of the Budapest parliament building.⁵ Observing the developments in Budapest at the end of October 1956, it can be argued that the revolution had been initially victorious: First, Imre Nagy was reinstated as Hungary's Prime Minister, announcing Hungary's wish to withdraw from the Warsaw Pact. Second, the ÁVH secret police was disbanded on 29 October. Third, the Hungarian Workers (Communist) Party was dissolved.⁶

The newly established Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party adopted the idea of a multi-party state and parliamentary government elected by universal suffrage and secret ballot. By November 1, a multi-party government led by Imre Nagy was in office.⁷ The initial Soviet military intervention in Budapest also failed to suppress the uprising, and Soviet troops were forced to retreat, albeit only temporarily.⁸

Moscow, however, wasted no time in responding to the revolution, launching a full-scale military intervention on November 4, with a large deployment of Soviet tanks, successfully crushing the revolution. Nagy's government was ousted, and a new Soviet-supported government was installed under the leadership of János Kádár.⁹

¹ László Borhi, *Hungary in the Cold War, 1945–1956: Between the United States and the Soviet Union* (Central European University Press, 2004), 207

² *Ibid.*, 53–54.

³ Victor Sebestyen, *Twelve Days: Revolution 1956. How the Hungarians tried to topple their Soviet masters* (Pantheon Books, 2006), 13.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 47–4.

⁵ Alexandr M. Kirov, "Soviet Military Intervention in Hungary, 1956," in *Soviet Military Intervention in Hungary, 1956*, ed. Jenő Györkei and Miklós Horváth (Central European University Press, 1999), 133.

⁶ Béla K. Király, "Preface," in *Soviet Military Intervention in Hungary, 1956*, ed. Jenő Györkei and Miklós Horváth (Central European University Press, 1999), xii–xiii.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Jenő Györkei and Miklós Horváth, "Additional Data on the History of the Soviet Military Occupation," in *Soviet Military Intervention in Hungary, 1956*, ed. Jenő Györkei and Miklós Horváth (Central European University Press, 1999), 20–21.

⁹ László Borhi, *Hungary in the Cold War, 1945–1956: Between the United States and the Soviet Union* (Central European University Press, 2004), 301.

While the 1956 Revolution was brutally suppressed, it had a certain symbolic impact on the Soviet Union and, by association, the broader Eastern Bloc, since the uprising revealed deep fissures within the Soviet system. The uprising was one of the first real signals that Soviet control over its own bloc was not as absolute as it initially appeared or as it was marketed to the West. The uprising showed that the communist regime in Eastern Europe faced deep, widespread resentment. In addition, it showed that, in theory,

there was a real possibility of defection from the Soviet sphere of influence. Last but not least, the 1956 Revolt also showed that reformist elements existed, even within Communist parties. This realisation unsettled Soviet leaders, including Khrushchev, who had just launched a policy of de-Stalinisation and a thaw period following Joseph Stalin's death in 1953, promoting a slightly more "liberal" course for his communist regime.

Khrushchev's Secret Speech and the spark of 1956

After the death of Stalin in 1953, the Soviet Union faced the need to dissociate from Stalin and his repressive policies. Change started with the appointment of Nikita Khrushchev as Stalin's successor. With his appointment, several events already indicated that he pursued a more conciliatory approach, contrasting with the total control previously exercised over Europe.

This was first observed in 1955, when the Soviet Union withdrew its troops from Austria, allowing the country to become a neutral state and pursue pluralism and a free-market economy. Second, Khrushchev broke with Stalin at the historic Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in February 1956, where he denounced Stalin and policies in his famous "Secret Speech."¹⁰

By early and mid-1956, the United States possessed a wealth of knowledge on the Soviet bloc, thanks to Western journalists' increased access to both official and unofficial sources in various Communist cities.¹¹ After finding out in March 1956 that Khrushchev had given an unplanned, "Secret Speech" in February, criticising Stalin's misdeeds, the CIA swiftly obtained a copy of this speech, in order to disseminate it across the Soviet Union and its satellite states, in a bid to foster dissent.¹²

It quickly realised that Khrushchev's speech was a very useful propaganda tool for dividing the Communist world. Radio Free Europe (RFE) was a vital medium in broadcasting and spreading the complete speech throughout Soviet satellite states, while carrying quotes from the international press regarding its meaning and relevance: that communism was on the defensive.¹³ The dissemination of Khrushchev's "Secret Speech" was an active strategy to undermine Soviet power by the CIA under CIA Director Allen Dulles, who headed the agency at the beginning of the Cold War. In July

1956, he confirmed this strategy during a United States National Security Council meeting. The minutes of this meeting stated:

*Continuing his intelligence briefing, Mr. Allen Dulles pointed out that the Soviet leaders are now trying to cut off debate on the Khrushchev speech to the Twentieth Party Congress. The United States, of course, wants to keep the debate going, and indeed it is still going on, as witness Togliatti's continuing statements and those of the French Communists and other foreign Communist parties. One vehicle we are going to use, said Mr. Dulles, to keep the pot boiling, is to collect and publish all relevant data bearing on the Khrushchev speech and its implications.*¹⁴

In addition to Khrushchev's "Secret Speech", there were various domestic ideological developments in Hungary that triggered the 1956 uprising. A mood of defiance had come to dominate the communist intelligentsia, particularly within universities and scientific research institutions.¹⁵ The Union of Working Youth (DISZ)—a large-scale youth organisation—also emerged to prominence in the 1950s. Particularly within the DISZ, oppositional tendencies emerged. It established the "Petöfi Circle"¹⁶ in 1955, which organised discussions on sensitive themes, including economics, history, Marxist philosophy, and finally, the press.¹⁷

Together with intellectuals who had demonstrated against censorship, it instigated the uprising of the press, which had started to break free from party control in late 1955.¹⁸ To better handle opposition to Soviet rule in Poland and safeguard his anti-Stalinist stance in Moscow, Khrushchev may even have let Hungary to move toward a "semi-independent" mode of existence, within the Soviet sphere of influence.¹⁹ But events in Poland, most notably the Poznań workers' rebellion, would eventually reignite Moscow's uncompromising grip on Central Europe.

¹⁰ Charles Gati, *Failed Illusions: Moscow, Washington, Budapest, and the 1956 Hungarian Revolt* (Woodrow Wilson Center Press; Stanford University Press, 2006), 5.

¹¹ Ibid. 108.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ "Minutes of the 290th NSC Meeting, July 12, 1956," in *The 1956 Hungarian Revolution: A History in Documents*, ed. Csaba Békés, Malcolm Byrne, and János M. Rainer (Central European University Press, 2002), 135.

¹⁵ Miklós Molnár, *A Concise History of Hungary*, trans. Anna Magyar (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 309.

¹⁶ Kirov, "Soviet Military Intervention in Hungary, 1956," 130-131.

¹⁷ Molnár, *A Concise History of Hungary*, 309.

¹⁸ Ben Fowkes, *The Rise and Fall of Communism in Eastern Europe*, 2nd ed. (Macmillan Press, 1995), 79.

¹⁹ Gati, *Failed Illusions*, 5.

On June 28, 1956, workers at the Poznań Metal Works, together with thousands of protestors from other industrial factories, rallied at the streets, to denounce food shortages, the increase in labour quotas and deteriorating working conditions. The communist authorities in Poland chose to use force against the strikers, mobilising two armoured divisions and two infantry divisions; the outcome of this intervention was severe, leaving 650 people injured; 58 others were killed.²⁰ The uprising in Poland altered Khrushchev's calculations. The Soviet leadership became wary of the potential for wider unrest in the Eastern Bloc, which affected how they monitored and approached Hungary. The Soviets were sensitive to the spread of unrest, which is why they intervened decisively in Hungary once events escalated.

Indeed, one of the main motivations for the large-scale military intervention in Hungary was the concern that the upheaval in the country might spread to other parts of the Soviet bloc. Huge rallies in favour of the Hungarians had already taken place across Poland, with some 300,000 people attending a protest in Warsaw.²¹ In Romania, students staged large-scale protest marches in Bucharest and many Transylvanian cities, including Cluj, Timisoara, and Târgu Mureş. Student protests also occurred in Bratislava and other provincial cities. The Czechoslovak government even acknowledged in a telegram to the Kremlin that the

events in Hungary had a psychological effect, and that some Czechoslovak troops who had been deployed to bolster security along the country's border with Hungary were developing a "hostile anti-socialist mood."²² Those developments further bolstered the decision in Moscow to authorise the invasion of Hungary in November 1956.²³

The reaction of the UN regarding the 1956 uprising was multifaceted. On November 4, 1956, during the Soviet military intervention in Budapest, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution, urging the USSR to end its military intervention, to evacuate its soldiers, and to allow observers to travel to Hungary. The UN Resolution also acknowledged Hungary's aspirations for independence, supporting Hungary's rights to self-determination.²⁴

Nevertheless, the USSR, in its endeavours to preserve its sphere of influence over Eastern Europe, openly disobeyed the provisions of this resolution, which is why the UN was unable to end the military intervention of Soviet forces in Hungary. Owing to this development, the UN General Assembly enacted another resolution in November 1956, calling yet again on the USSR to end its military intervention and to withdraw its military from Hungary. Most importantly, the resolution demanded democratic elections under UN supervision, following the restoration of law and order in Hungary.²⁵

²⁰ Anna Mazurkiewicz, *Voice of the Silenced Peoples in the Global Cold War: The Assembly of Captive European Nations, 1954–1972*, (Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2021), 124.

²¹ Sebastyen, *Twelve Days*, 217.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Mazurkiewicz, *Voice of the Silenced Peoples in the Global Cold War*, 162.

²⁵ Ibid.



Guards standing at a barricade, Budapest. (Fortepan/Album088).

Global Fallout

Within the USSR, news about the events of the 1956 uprising could not be adequately contained by authorities and quickly spread among students and intellectuals across the Soviet sphere. Information about the Hungarian uprising filtered through “samizdat” underground publications and word of mouth, despite censorship. Students at Moscow universities had been informed through Yugoslav newspapers from Belgrade, which became available at “Soyuzpechat” Kiosk newsstands, a new medium for information; news in those newspapers could also contradict Soviet propaganda and even criticise the policies of the USSR and its satellite states, which was tolerated by the Yugoslav dictator Josip Broz Tito.²⁶

The aftermath of the 1956 Soviet military intervention in Hungary was also discussed by members of the left intelligentsia, including writers and students, who inevitably began questioning the legitimacy of the Soviet regime itself. Owing to these developments, the 1956 Revolution influenced dissident thinkers within the Soviet bloc.

Alongside the 1953 uprising in East Germany, the 1956 Poznań uprising, the 1968 Revolt in Poland and Czechoslovakia, and the Poland-based strikes of 1971 and 1976, the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 facilitated the so-called “post-Helsinki” protest movements. The latter protest movements include the Charter 77, the Polish Workers’ Defence Committee (Komitet Obrony Robotników “KOR”), and, of course, Solidarność.²⁷ Those movements influenced the Soviet Union’s internal political and societal trajectory, which culminated in its dissolution in 1991.

The 1956 Hungarian Revolution emboldened underground literature, which demanded reform and national sovereignty and decried the moral failings of Soviet socialism. Andrej Sakharov’s memoirs look back at the events in Hungary in 1956, examining them next to those in Czechoslovakia, in his assessment of the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan, which

he judges to have been a “major blunder.”²⁸ The 1956 Hungarian Revolution influenced Soviet dissident Grigory Pomerantz, as did the public persecution of the Soviet writer Boris Pasternak; these two events led Pomerantz to consider direct political resistance to the Soviet regime. A year after the Hungarian revolt, he already began holding a private seminar on philosophy, history, and political economy, which took place semi-conspiratorially and without any fixed organizational structure.²⁹ In 1960, his acquaintance with dissidents such as Alexander Ginzburg, Natalya Gorbanevskaya, and Yuri Galanskov allowed him to gain a different perspective on working without regard for censorship. Owing to his contacts, he participated in the creation of the Moscow samizdat magazine *Sintaksis*, on whose editorial board Pomerantz then sat.³⁰

Reports also suggest a connection between the 1956 Hungarian Revolution and the Soviet composer and pianist Dimitrij Shostakovich. His Eleventh Symphony is regarded as one of the most characteristic examples of socialist realism and can be associated with the period of Khrushchev’s thaw.³¹ Its thematic nature is linked to the political and social unrest of the 1905 Russian Revolution. Nevertheless, reports emerged that Shostakovich privately claimed that in fact, he created a musical image of the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956 in his Eleventh Symphony.³²

Globally, the Soviet invasion of Hungary fractured the global communist movement, also among Western intellectuals and left-wing sympathisers. It should be noted that following the events, prominent leftists broke with the Communist Party. The aftermath of the 1956 uprising also delegitimised Soviet claims of representing a “workers’ state” and exposed the empire’s reliance on military repression. This clear disillusionment also fed into internal Soviet criticism, as more people recognised the contradiction between socialist ideals and the brutal reality of Soviet policies.

²⁶ O. A. Jakimenko, “Vengerskij teatr i 1956 god,” in *Vengerskij krizis 1956 goda: Vzgljad iz Rossii*, ed. O. A. Jakimenko (Nestor-Istorija, 2018), 201.

²⁷ Cristina Petrescu, “Free Conversations in an Occupied Country: Cultural Transfer, Social Networking, and Political Dissent in Romanian Tamizdat,” in *Samizdat, Tamizdat, and Beyond: Transnational Media During and After Socialism*, ed. Friederike Kind-Kovács and Jessie Labov (Berghahn Books, 2013), 116.

²⁸ Andrei D. Sakharov, *Memoirs*, trans. Richard Lourie (Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 509.

²⁹ Grigory Pomerantz, *Grigory Pomerantz Personal Website*, accessed October 1, 2025, <http://pomerantz.ru/p/index.html>.

³⁰ Dmitri Jermolcew, “Grigori Pomerantz,” *Dissidenten.eu – Bundesstiftung Aufarbeitung, Biografisches Lexikon*, accessed October 1, 2025, <https://www.dissidenten.eu/laender/russland/biografien/grigori-pomerantz/grigori-pomerantz-teil-1>.

³¹ Kšištof Mejer, *Šostakovič: Žizn, tvorčestvo, vremja* (Kompozitor, 1998), 348.

³² Ibid.

The impact of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution on the left intelligentsia in France was evident in the reaction of Jean-Paul Sartre, a French philosopher and a key figure in French Marxism. After 1956, his views on Stalinism were torn.³³ On 9 November 1956, he gave an interview with the news magazine *L'Express* in which he denounced the Soviet intervention, even declaring that he would break off relations with Soviet writers who failed to denounce it.³⁴ In his interview, he argued that the Soviet claim of “saving socialism in Hungary” was misleading. True socialism in Hungary would have survived on its own; the Red Army’s intervention was however not about helping Hungarians but about protecting the interests and security of powerholders in the Soviet Union.³⁵

In the United Kingdom, the 1956 Hungarian Revolution had particular long-lasting impacts on the political left. The events of 1956 contributed to discontent within the British Communist Party (BCP). In just under one year after the Hungarian uprising, thousands of members left the BCP, thereby also facilitating the foundation of the British “New Left”, which was a movement of dissident communists.³⁶

The detrimental effects of the events of 1956 for the BCP were seen in January 1957; by that time, the BCP had lost some 9,000 disillusioned members, which represented a quarter of its total strength.³⁷ To comment on this event in popular culture, the American playwright and screenwriter Robert Ardrey even composed a five-play act, titled “Shadow of Heroes”, which outlined the violent repression of the Hungarian Revolution.³⁸ It debuted in the UK on the BBC’s “Sunday Night Theatre” television show in 1958 and was

staged at the Piccadilly Theatre in London, in 1959.³⁹ The reaction of British Marxist historian Edward P. Thompson illustrates just how fractured the political left in the UK truly was. Following Khrushchev’s “Secret Speech” in 1956, he co-founded *The Reasoner*, a dissident publication within the BCP, openly criticising crimes committed by Stalin.⁴⁰ Thompson composed in 1956 an essay titled “Through the Smoke of Budapest”, which he wrote during the Soviet military intervention in Hungary. In this essay, he perceived the events in Hungary as a potential tragedy for socialism worldwide, questioned the legitimacy and role of the Hungarian Communist Party, and compared the Hungarian 1956 Revolution with the Revolution of 1848. In this essay, he wrote:

*No chapter would be more tragic in international socialist history, if the Hungarian people, who once before lost their revolution to armed reaction, were driven into the arms of the capitalist powers by the crimes of a Communist government and the uncomprehending violence of Soviet armies. And so I hope that the Communist Party, my party, will regain the support of the working people. But where is my party in Hungary? Was it in the broadcasting station or on the barricades? And what is it? Is it a cluster of security officials and discredited bureaucrats? Or is it a party “rooted in the people” of town and countryside, capable of self-purification and new growth?*⁴¹

The Hungarian Revolution of 1956 had indeed a lasting impact on him, as he was one of the disillusioned intellectuals who left the BCP following the Soviet military intervention, becoming one of the founders of the British New Left.⁴²

³³Ian H. Birchall, *Sartre Against Stalinism* (Berghahn Books, 2004), 174.

³⁴Ibid., 163.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ian Black, “How Soviet Tanks Crushed Dreams of British Communists.” *The Guardian*, October 21, 2006. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/oct/21/politics.past>.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸János Kenyeres, “[G]reat stone on our knees’: Reflections of the Hungarian Revolution in World Literature,” *Hungarian Studies Review* 34, nos. 1–2 (Spring–Fall 2007), 209.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Black, “How Soviet Tanks Crushed Dreams of British Communists.” *The Guardian*.

⁴¹Edward P. Thompson, *E.P. Thompson and the Making of the New Left: Essays & Polemics*, ed. Cal Winslow (Monthly Review Press, 2014), 37.

⁴²Cal Winslow, “Introduction,” in *E.P. Thompson and the Making of the New Left: Essays & Polemics*, ed. Cal Winslow (Monthly Review Press, 2014), 10.

*Protesters assemble on Rákóczi út, Budapest.
(Fortepan/Nagy Gyula).*



Hungary Between Empires: 1848 Versus 1956

One can quickly assess that Hungary's relations with Russia are historically burdened, not only by the 1956 Hungarian uprising but also by Russia's role in suppressing the Hungarian Revolution of 1848/49. Even though the Hungarian Revolution of 1848/49 and the uprising of 1956 were separated by over 100 years, striking continuities in Hungarian political culture and in Russia's recurring role as the arbiter of power in Central Europe can be recognised when observing both events. At first glance, the two events appear closely connected: both revolutions arose from demands for reform, sovereignty, and freedom, and both were suppressed by eastern military intervention—Tsarist Russia in 1848 and the Soviet Union in 1956.

The similarity in the outcome of the 1848 and 1956 revolutions highlights an interesting, nuanced structural pattern: both of Hungary's political upheavals initially threatened the prevailing order of Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries. In 1848, it threatened the state system based on monarchical power, established in the Congress of Vienna (1815). In 1956, the revolution threatened Soviet Russia's hegemonic position in Central Europe. In both cases, Russia intervened to preserve the stability of its continental sphere of influence. The difference between the two interventions lies in the ideological context: monarchical "conservatism" of the 19th century versus Marxism-Leninism in the 20th century; and in the international systems in which these interventions took place: the 1815 system and the post-WWII system, respectively.

The 1848 Revolution itself took place in a tumultuous time for Europe, part of the broader Spring of Nations, a European continent-wide wave of uprisings based on the ideologies of liberalism and nationalism. Those ideologies inspired Hungarian reformers such as Lajos Kossuth, who demanded a constitutional government and more autonomy from Habsburg rule. With the April Laws, Kossuth aimed to transform the Kingdom of Hungary into a parliamentary democracy and a nation-state. Those endeavours were initially successful, with Austrian Emperor Ferdinand V giving his royal assent to these laws in April 1848, thereby establishing the framework of a nearly autonomous Hungar-

ian kingdom under the Habsburg crown.⁴³ Nevertheless, this success should not last long: the Austrian Empire decided to roll back these reforms under a new young Austrian monarch, Francis Joseph, with tensions escalating further into a full-scale war of independence.⁴⁴

Finally, in 1849, Tsar Nicholas I, also known as the "Gendarme of Europe", intervened decisively in Hungary under the "Holy Alliance"—a coalition between Russia, Prussia, and Austria, aimed at preserving the monarchical conservative order in Europe. The motives of this intervention were both ideological and strategic. Primarily, the Russian Tsar perceived the Hungarian revolution as a mortal threat to the conservative order of Europe, which had been reestablished after 1815, following the Napoleonic Wars. Nicholas I also feared the contagion of liberal nationalism within his sphere of influence, particularly its potential to inspire additional uprisings and revolts in Poland and the western borderlands of the Russian Empire.⁴⁵ Russian troops finally intervened in Hungary in the summer of 1849, overwhelming the Hungarian army and forcing Kossuth to flee into exile.⁴⁶ Even though Hungary's brief experiment in constitutional self-rule was extinguished, the revolution's memory endured, and, after 1867, it granted legitimacy to the so-called Compromise (*Ausgleich*) that created the Austro-Hungarian Dual Monarchy.

Comparing the Russian interventions in Hungary in 1849 and 1956, it is evident that both were mainly driven by the perception that upheaval in Central Europe could destabilise and undermine the broader European system. Russian Tsar Nicholas I acted under the principles of dynastic solidarity with the Holy Alliance, while Khrushchev acted under the imperatives of Cold War geopolitics. The structural motivation for both interventions was consistent, though, since both Nicholas I and Khrushchev regarded Hungary not as a distant, peripheral problem, but as a strategic corridor whose instability could invite systemic collapse. In 1849, failure to act might have emboldened revolutionaries across Europe; in 1956, it might have further encouraged anti-Soviet movements within the Soviet sphere of influence, particularly in Poland and Czechoslovakia.

⁴³ Ferenc Hörcher, "Reforming or Replacing the Historical Constitution? Lajos Kossuth and the April Laws of 1848," in *A History of the Hungarian Constitution: Law, Government and Political Culture in Central Europe*, ed. Ferenc Hörcher and Thomas Lorman (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), 92–93.

⁴⁴ Philip Barker and Thomas Lorman, "Introduction" in *A History of the Hungarian Constitution: Law, Government and Political Culture in Central Europe*, ed. Ferenc Hörcher and Thomas Lorman (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), 16.

⁴⁵ Ian W. Roberts, *Nicholas I and the Russian Intervention in Hungary* (Macmillan Academic and Professional Ltd, 1991), 16.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 178–179.

While the outcomes of both interventions were tragic, they remained historically consequential for the development of Hungary's autonomy and self-determination in the 19th and 20th centuries. Although the defeat of 1849, following Russia's intervention, extinguished Hungarian autonomy aspirations for nearly two decades, it laid the groundwork for the 1867 Austro-Hungarian Compromise, which recognised Hungary's distinct political identity within the

framework of a dual monarchy. While the suppression of the 1956 Revolution restored Soviet dominance over Hungary for another 30 years, it also fatally undermined the overall legitimacy of communism and the Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern and Central Europe. On both occasions, Russia was successful in repressing and crushing the revolts by force but failed to erase the aspirations that produced them.



Soldier waves to crowd from tank, Budapest. (Fortepan/Virány László).

Conclusion

The Hungarian Uprising of 1956, though ultimately suppressed by Soviet military force, revealed without a doubt the deep fissures within the communist system and exposed the limits of Moscow's control over its sphere of influence. It must be stressed as well that the events of 1956 in Hungary ignited a wave of intellectual and cultural dissent, transcending Hungary's borders and the Soviet bloc. Within the Communist bloc and across Western Europe, the intelligentsia and members of the left political spectrum—which included writers, artists, students, and philosophers—began to question and even challenge the legitimacy of Soviet rule and dominance in Eastern Europe.

In the Soviet bloc, underground publications, samizdat literature, and intellectual circles (such as the Petőfi Circle) became essential vehicles for resistance, fostering a culture of critical thought and opposition. Figures like the Russian philosopher Grigory Pomerants even cited the Hungarian uprising as formative in their ideological development. In the West, the revolution of 1956 also evidently fractured the global communist movement, prompting disillusionment among leftist intellectuals. Jean-Paul Sartre's condemnation of Soviet aggression and Edward P. Thompson's break with the British Communist Party exemplified how 1956 catalysed a re-evaluation of Marxist ideals and the moral contradictions of Soviet socialism.

The events of 1956 must be understood not only in the context of Cold War geopolitics but also as part of a longer historical continuum of Hungarian resistance, which echoed with the 1848 Revolution against Habsburg dominance and

Russian imperialism. The parallel between 1848–49 and 1956 therefore also reveals a linkage of Russia's geopolitical patterns and interests, both as an imperial and a Soviet power. Whether under Tsar Nicholas I or Khrushchev, Moscow precariously observed the developments in Central Europe through the lens of security and self-interest. The Hungarian revolutions of 1848 and 1956 tested the limits of Russian power in preserving a particular European system, and both times Moscow chose coercion over accommodation. From a European point of view, these episodes reveal a persistent conflict between national self-determination in Central Europe and the great-power policies which have crushed it. In both cases, Hungary's desire for independence was met with foreign interference, but the ideas of those revolutions survived and shaped the political image of Hungary as a nation to this day.

In hindsight, the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 was no mere national calamity—it was a historical catalyst, influencing later movements within the Soviet bloc which advocated reform and resistance – from the Prague Spring to Solidarność. It also inspired future generations of reformers, dissidents, and intellectuals across Europe and the Soviet bloc, which also contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Empire in 1991. The Hungarian uprising in 1956 remains a testament to Hungary's aspiration for freedom, dignity, and self-determination. Its legacy continues to live on in the intellectual courage it awakened—it was an event whose aftermath has been shaped by the enduring belief that even in the face of fearful odds and an overwhelming force, the human spirit can resist, remember, and rebuild.

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Hungarian flag bearing the Kossuth coat of arms, Andrassy út. (Fortepan/Nagy Gyula).





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