

# **Soviet Intervention in the Hungarian Revolution of 1956**

*By Sarah Streicker*

Khrushchev's Secret Speech to the Twentieth Party Congress initiated a drastic campaign of destalinization throughout the Soviet bloc. With respect to foreign relations, destalinization led to a policy of detente and peaceful coexistence both with the West and the satellite states. According to Khrushchev, no longer would the Soviet Union be the violent puppeteer of Eastern Europe. This new policy was exemplified in Poland in the summer and autumn of 1956. There, in the face of anti-Soviet rebellions and reform minded government, Khrushchev chose to negotiate and compromise rather than to send troops. Throughout Eastern Europe and the world, the peaceful conclusion to the Polish crisis of 1956 spread hope that a new era in Soviet foreign policy had dawned.

However, all of these hopes of detente in East Europe were soon dashed. During the final resolution of the Polish insurrection, a revolution began in neighboring Hungary. Unlike its response to Poland, Moscow sent troops to Hungary. Those troops brutally crushed the revolution and killed thousands of Hungarians. People around the world were shocked not only by the violence but by the stark contrast of the event to those in Poland only days earlier.

As a result of their closeness in time yet wide divergence in outcomes, many historians have compared and contrasted Soviet actions in Poland and Hungary. The question most asked by historians remains why the same leadership chose to compromise in Poland and employ violence in Hungary. With the recent opening of the Soviet archives, the answer to this question has finally emerged. It appears that the policies applied in Poland and Hungary were not actually different. In both situations, Khrushchev was determined to maintain the stability of the Communist bloc. At the same time, he was willing to allow the countries of Eastern Europe some flexibility in their governments. In Poland, though the government was more liberal than Moscow liked, its loyalty to the Communist bloc was never in doubt. The Hungarian government, on the other hand, renounced its allegiance to the Soviet Union and to the Warsaw Pact. It was this key difference between the rebellions in Poland and Hungary that dictated Moscow's seemingly contradictory responses. Khrushchev ordered the Hungarian Revolution to be crushed because the alternative - the loss of a satellite state - was unthinkable.

## **Soviet Foreign Policy During the 1950's**

Soviet actions in Hungary are best understood within the broader context of the regime's foreign policy of the 1950's. This foreign policy can be summarized into five goals:

1. Rapprochement with the West
2. Expansion of the Soviet sphere of influence into the Third World
3. Resolution of the problems in the Soviet bloc created by the break with Tito in 1948
4. Maintenance of stability
5. Maintenance of the Communist bloc in Eastern Europe

In order to meet these goals in Eastern Europe, Moscow implemented a process of “sovietization” 1948 to 1953. Coercion was the principal enforcement instrument of this process. Once Khrushchev came into power, sovietization was moderated by his desire for stability. He was willing to allow for flexibility within socialism in order to preserve the Communist bloc. As Thompson notes, “Khrushchev took up the principle of peaceful coexistence between states with differing social systems...Violence was no longer the only, or even the principal, way to remake society” (160).

Despite his pragmatism and desire for detente, Khrushchev was unwavering in his commitment to keep the Communist bloc intact in Eastern Europe. Between 1953 and 1956, the leadership in Moscow “never considered letting the satellite states desert the communist bloc” (Bekes, Working Paper #16, 4). Many believed that the establishment of the satellite states in Europe was the single greatest accomplishment of Stalinism and the Great Fatherland War. They were viewed as the reason for the Soviet Union’s reputation as a world super-power. Thus, the leadership in Moscow would not easily give up Soviet domination of Eastern Europe.

### **The Polish Rebellion**

The first major test of Khrushchev's policy of peaceful coexistence was the Polish rebellion of 1956. The events of the crisis and its subsequent resolution were to have a great impact upon Soviet policy towards Hungary. In order to properly investigate the motives of Moscow in sending troops to Hungary, one must first study why it chose not to in Poland.

Problems in Poland began in June of 1956 with the Poznan workers riots. Though they ended without Soviet involvement, other disruptions continued in throughout the country. In early October, a former Communist Party official named Gomulka (who was purged by Stalin for his liberal views) was allowed back into the Polish United Workers' Party. On October 19, the Party held a conference in which it was widely recognized that Gomulka would be named the leader of the Party. The Soviets were afraid of Gomulka as he had ties to Tito and wanted to drastically reform Poland. In an attempt to scare the Poles into not electing Gomulka as their leader, Khrushchev ordered Soviet troops to advance slowly towards Warsaw. The Soviet government intentionally leaked to the Workers' Party that the troops would “protect the most important state facilities in Poland” (Kramer 5). However, the Party stood strong in the face of Soviet threats and it elected Gomulka to its top post.

Heated debates ensued in the Soviet Presidium over the correct course of action to take in Poland. After hours of deliberation, Moscow decided on October 21, to “refrain from military intervention” and to “display patience” (Kramer 7). Soviet leaders did not believe that the situation was grave enough to warrant military involvement. Why was the Presidium so lenient with Poland? Because it was confident that regardless of the outcome of the riots, the Polish government would remain loyal to the Soviet Union. Gomulka declared his allegiance to the Soviet Union and to the Warsaw Pact in a speech on October 24. In fact, in that speech he called for stronger ties with the USSR. The Soviet delegation, therefore, returned to Moscow viewing the resolution of the crisis as a success:

The Polish United Workers' Party under Gomulka was popular, united and in firm control of the country, and Gomulka had assured him [Khrushchev] that the new leadership in Warsaw would pose no threat to Soviet security. (Tompson 167).

## **Legacy of Poland**

The experience of the Polish rebellion made a lasting impact on Soviet foreign policy. Moscow now had a blueprint for how to proceed in quelling rebellions in satellite states. Though this blueprint consisted of compromise and flexibility, but it was compromise and flexibility within limits. As Kramer writes, “The outcome of the Polish crisis demonstrated that some Soviet flexibility would continue and that a return to full fledged Stalinism was not in the offing, but it also set a precedent of what would be

tolerated” (Kramer 8). Moscow was willing to allow Eastern Europe to reform, but only within the bounds of allegiance to the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact.

### **The Hungarian Revolution**

Just as the Soviet government was resolving the crisis in Poland, a similar crisis began in Hungary. Hungary was a country ripe for an anti-communist revolution because its experience of “sovietization” had been especially harsh. During the late 1940's and early 1950's, the bloodiest purges in Eastern Europe under the leadership of Matyas Rakosi. His official policy was called the “law of large numbers,” which Rakosi himself describes as “killing some and corrupting the rest” (Zinner 114). Almost all members of the middle class and intelligentsia were deported to forced labor camps during sovietization. Workers and peasants suffered as well at the hands of Rakosi’s overly ambitious Five Year Plan.

Stalin's death brought a relaxation in the policies of the Hungarian government. The new leadership in Moscow feared that Rakosi's brutality and failing economic policies would provoke a revolt. In line with Khrushchev's pragmatic desire for stability and control in Eastern Europe over ideological purity, he forced Rakosi from his premiership. The far more liberal and well-liked Imre Nagy replaced Rakosi. On July 4, 1953, Nagy shocked the nation with a speech to the Parliament in which he condemned the Five Year Plan, police terror, and other policies of Rakosi. Nagy followed through with the promises made in this speech and conditions improved greatly throughout Hungary. Nagy remained in the premiership until April of 1955 when Moscow again intervened in Hungarian politics. This time, Soviet leaders worried that the liberalization of the government had gone too far. Thus, Rakosi was placed back into the post of Prime Minister. However, the political situation in Hungary soon became confused when Khrushchev took power in Moscow and began his campaign for destalinization. On the one hand, there was Rakosi who attempted to maintain his hard-line, Stalinist policies. On the other hand, there was Nagy who used the destalinization campaign to push for reform.

The situation in Hungary exploded after the revolt in Poland. Many Hungarians watched the liberal resolution of the revolt there and were no longer willing to live without reform in their country. Therefore, mass anti-Soviet demonstrations took place in Budapest in October 23, 1956. Yuri Andropov, the Soviet ambassador to Hungary, begged Moscow to send troops because the Hungarian military proved unable, and unwilling, to put down the revolt. The Soviet leadership ignored this request at first.

Khrushchev was very reluctant to send troops to Hungary while he was trying to peacefully solve the problems in Poland. As tensions increased, though, he was forced to take notice. Mikoyan, Serov, and other politicians were ordered to travel to Hungary for negotiations. They went with the firm belief that the situation would be resolved much like it was in Poland. It was assumed that a compromise could be reached with Nagy in which he, like Gomulka, would declare Hungarian allegiance to the Eastern bloc.

While waiting for a compromise to be reached, with great reluctance, Moscow sent troops to Hungary. In order to quickly end this troop involvement, Mikoyan agreed to make some concessions to the rebels and to pull out Soviet troops from Budapest. Nevertheless, no agreement was reached on the 26th and fighting continued. Two days later, on October 28, a cease-fire between Hungary and the Soviet Union was reached. The Soviet Union compromised and agreed to withdraw troops despite the fact that rebel strongholds remained. It was thus obvious that Moscow was willing to go to great lengths to avoid the use of violence in Hungary, just as it had been in Poland.

In order to prove its dedication to peace to the world, the Soviet Union issued the “Declaration on the Principles of Development and Further Strengthening of Friendship and Cooperation Between the USSR and Other Socialist Countries” on October 30, 1956. This document illustrates the lengths to which Khrushchev destalinized foreign relations. In it, the Soviet Union admits that Moscow had made not only errors but “egregious mistakes” in Eastern Europe and that it committed “violations of the principle of equality in relations between socialist countries.” It even suggested the removal of Soviet troops from Warsaw Pact countries. In conclusion, the Declaration pledged to “observe the full sovereignty of each socialist state.”

Under the auspices of the October 30 Declaration, there was a Presidium meeting in which the leadership in Moscow considered a withdrawal from Hungary. Khrushchev, Zhukov, Molotov and others conceded in a Presidium meeting on October 30 that “the peaceful path - the path of troop withdrawals and negotiations” should be followed in Hungary” (Kramer 20). Thus, it appeared that the Soviet Union was ready to allow events in Hungary to take their own course.

However, events in Hungary soon forced the Soviet Union to rethink its position of peace and compromise. Moscow began receiving reports from Mikoyan and Suslov stating that the situation was quickly deteriorating in the early morning of October 31. Rebels launched a successful attack at the Party headquarters in Budapest. Mikoyan and

Suslov advised Khrushchev that force was absolutely necessary. Furthermore, they warned that the employment of Hungarian troops was unwise because they would most likely defect to the side of the rebels. At the same time, Nagy was demanding the dissolution of the Communist party in Hungary and the creation of a multi-party state. Khrushchev could not risk losing a communist ally. He ordered Mikoyan to refuse to Nagy's demands. In fact, Moscow "never entertained the slightest notion of allowing the restoration of a parliamentary system in Hungary..." (Bekes, Working Paper #16, 30).

The last straw for the Soviet Union occurred on November 1 when Nagy announced that Hungary was withdrawing from the Warsaw Pact. In addition, he declared Hungary's neutrality and appealed to the United Nations for recognition of this neutrality. After Nagy's announcement, there was no doubt that Soviet troops would be deployed. On November 1, 1956, Moscow launched Operation Whirlwind with the mission of crushing the revolution. The campaign began three days later with 60,000 Soviet troops. These troops quickly, and brutally, gained control of the situation. In the end, almost 4,000 Hungarians and 700 Soviets died in the fighting (Bekes, New Findings, 3). The world was shocked by the brutally employed by the "peacemaker" Khrushchev. It seemed that the Hungarian crisis "undid in a fortnight much of what Khrushchev had achieved over the previous three and a half years. His talk of peace, non-interference and 'different paths' to socialism...all fell victim to the Soviet tanks in Budapest" (Tompson 170).

### **Why Did Khrushchev Order Operation Whirlwind?**

The method of resolution of the Hungary Revolution leaves historians with the question: Why did the Soviet Union change course from compromise in Poland to military might in Hungary? Of course, there were a number of factors that led to Moscow's decision to send troops. However, the key factor in the decision was Hungary's withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact. With that declaration, Imre Nagy "sealed the fate of Hungary" (Malashenko 245). The leadership in Moscow, while willing to negotiate reforms, was completely unwilling to lose a satellite state. As the Soviet General Malashenko, an eyewitness to the event, wrote:

The Soviet troop march into Hungary was necessary to defend the existing order and was intended to prevent Hungary from breaking away from the socialist camp, withdrawing from the Warsaw Pact and making peace with the West...(248).

As was discussed previously, the maintenance the Soviet bloc in Eastern Europe was one of the principle goals of Soviet foreign policy. Communist leaders agreed that

the allegiance of a satellite state could not be risked. Therefore, Hungary's withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact presented a critical problem for Khrushchev for a number of reasons. First, he knew that the loss of Hungary jeopardized his position within the Soviet Union. Many Soviet leaders blamed Khrushchev's policies of destalinization for the disruptions throughout Eastern Europe. These same politicians viewed the procurement of satellite states in Eastern Europe as one of the greatest achievements of Stalin. Khrushchev realized this and said, "there are, or would be, quite a few who would analyze the situation thus: while Stalin ruled, everybody shut up and there were no disturbances of any kind" (Gyorkei and Horvath 101). Thus, the loss of Hungary would have politically hurt, if not destroyed, Khrushchev. When Hungary withdrew from the Warsaw Pact, Khrushchev had to intervene in order to show his commitment to communism.

Secondly, Hungary's abandonment of the Warsaw Pact was a serious problem for Khrushchev because the Soviet Union had already lost Yugoslavia and made extensive concessions in Poland. Therefore, when Hungary threatened to abandon communism, Khrushchev panicked. As the historian William Tompson writes:

A change in the status of Hungary would have undermined the post-war status quo in Europe, and the potential ripple effects on other East European countries were extremely serious. If the Polish example had ignited Hungary, who could say what a successful Hungarian revolution would set off elsewhere in the bloc? (170). Also a factor in Khrushchev's fear of losing Hungary was the threat of the Soviet Union being replaced by the United States and/or United Nations troops in the country. Most Hungarians, and many in the Soviet Union, strongly believed that the West would support the Revolution in Hungary with troops and money. For many years, the United States had broadcasted democratic propaganda over the radio into Hungary. In addition, Western media was allowed to work unencumbered in the country. It was the only satellite state in which correspondents and camera crews "reported first hand" (Bekes, Working Paper #16, 27). The prospect of Western support of the Hungarian rebels served to enforce Soviet fears that Hungary would permanently abandon the Communist bloc.

### **Withdrawal from The Warsaw Pact**

There are numerous lines of evidence to prove that Hungary's withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact was the catalyst for Operation Whirlwind. For instance, the effect of Nagy's declaration of withdrawal becomes clear when compared to Gomulka's declaration of loyalty. Before Gomulka pledged Poland's allegiance to the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union, Soviet troops were marching towards Warsaw. This troop movement was stopped only when Gomulka publicly proclaimed loyalty to the Warsaw Pact. Of course, it cannot be stated with certainty that Moscow would have sent troops

had Gomulka withdrawn Poland from the Warsaw Pact. However, it is quite likely. As Mark Kramer writes, “Had Gomulka not been willing to keep Poland firmly within the Soviet bloc, a military confrontation might well have ensued” (Kramer 8).

Nevertheless, there are a number of historians who dispute the theory that it was Hungary’s withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact that led to Operation Whirlwind. For example, some historians have suggested that the Soviet Union sent troops to Hungary because it was sure that such measures would not provoke Western support the rebels. They point to the fact that the United States indirectly promised not to send troops to Hungary, even in the event of Soviet troop intervention (Bekes, Working Paper #16, 26). Furthermore, at the same time as the Hungarian crisis was unfolding, the Western powers were involved in the Suez crisis. Therefore, they did not have the time or the resources to enter the Hungarian crisis.

While there may be some truth to the assertion that Moscow was encouraged to send troops to Hungary by the likelihood of Western non-intervention, several facts dispute it. First, right up to November 3, the reaction of the United Nations to Soviet troop deployment was uncertain. From October 27 until November 3, representatives from France, Great Britain, and the United States met daily to discuss the Hungarian situation. And, in fact, On November 3, Britain and France moved to have the issue of Hungary taken up by the General Assembly in an emergency session. Though this did not end up occurring until after the Soviet intervention had commenced, the Soviet Union did not know at the time that it would not occur. Thus, even the possibility of the United Nations condemning Soviet intervention in the General Assembly (a possibility until November 3) did not prevent leadership in Moscow from launching Operation Whirlwind. As Bekes writes:

The Soviet Union, in light of its status as a world superpower and the reassuring pledges it had received from the United States, was by no means disposed to let the moral authority of UN resolutions prevent it from intervening militarily, if necessary, to restore order in a country within its own sphere of influence. (Bekes, Working Paper #16, 29).

In addition, it is clear from the events of the Polish crisis that the prospect of Western intervention was not important to the Soviet Union. During the revolt in that country, the Soviet Union received promises from the United States that American troops would not become involved. In fact, Secretary of State John Dulles stated publicly on the television show Face the Nation that “the United States would not send troops to Poland even in the event of Soviet armed intervention” (Bekes 18). Nevertheless, Moscow chose not to employ force in Poland. Therefore, there must be explanation other than that of

Western complacency for the brutal use of troops in Hungary.

Another theory concerning Soviet intervention in Hungary proposed by historians is that Hungary's withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact was the effect and not the cause of Operation Whirlwind. Jenő Györkei and Miklós Horváth, two Eastern European history scholars, argue that:

The fact is that, at the time of the declaration of neutrality, aggression was already taking place. Thus, it [Soviet aggression] was the cause rather than the effect of the declaration of neutrality" (Györkei and Horváth xiii).

The main line of evidence used to support this claim is the Presidium meeting of October 30-31. In that meeting, plans were initiated for a Soviet intervention. Györkei and Horváth argue that troops were ordered to start moving into Hungary at the same time. However, this statement is directly refuted by the memoirs of General Malashenko and by various Presidium documents. These papers maintain that Soviet troops in fact stopped fighting on the night of October 30 and withdrew on October 31. General Malashenko writes, "In accordance with the Soviet government decree, on the evening of October 31, we started to withdraw our troops from the city [Budapest]" (244). This is corroborated by noted Soviet historian Alexandr Kirov, who writes, "Soviet troop withdrawal from Budapest was completed by October 31" (Kirov 148).

Moreover, even assuming that Györkei and Horváth are correct in asserting that troops began to invade before the withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact this does not necessarily mean that these troop movements were part of Operation Whirlwind. They may have been on the scale of the original October 24 and 25 Soviet troop involvement. Whatever the case, the fact remains that the majority of the evidence suggests that it was not until Nagy's declaration that Moscow changed its position from withdrawal to deployment of troops. Therefore, it appears that Hungary's abandonment of the Warsaw Pact was the cause and not the effect of Soviet force in the country.

Other historians have suggested that the leadership in Moscow was actually not responsible for Operation Whirlwind. For instance, Olga Narciewicz argues that in fact Khrushchev did not order troops to invade Hungary on November 4. Instead, she claims that General Serov, the chief of the secret police (KGB), "acted on his own initiative, possibly in collusion with the military commander" (75). Her evidence is the fact the Serov's men were the first to be killed by the mob violence and that this would have angered Serov into starting the war against the rebels. Secondly, it was in Serov's best interest to attempt to crush the revolt. Without Rakosi in power, Serov faced a total loss

of power in Hungary. She then contrasts the handling of the Hungarian crisis to the Polish crisis. In her opinion, the Polish crisis was “handled with great subtlety and diplomatic skill” (Narkiewicz 73). On the other hand, Operation Whirlwind: was crudely and hastily arranged, and seems to have been planned by someone of low intelligence and little cunning. Whatever Khrushchev's faults, lack of cunning and intelligence were certainly not among them. Serov, on the other hand, was a crude operator... (76).

However, Narkiewicz's explanation of events is corroborated neither by the documents of time from the Presidium nor by Serov's reports to the Presidium. Presidium reports make it clear that Khrushchev was in favor of military intervention in Hungary from October 28th onward and was strongly considering the need to use troops after October 31. In fact, in the Central Committee meeting of October 30-31, Marshal Zhukov, Minister of Defense, was ordered to establish a plan for defeating the revolution. Thus, Zhukov's report to Khrushchev about Operation Whirlwind of November 4, 1956 states, “Acting according to an earlier though-out plan, our units mastered the most stubborn points of the reaction...” (Zhukov 1, italics added). Clearly, events in Hungary were planned in advance by Moscow. What Narkiewicz interprets as Serov's bungled handling of the situation, seems more likely to simply be confusion in Moscow.

In addition, it would have been a serious breach of the chain-of-command for KGB chief Serov to act independently of Khrushchev's orders. While it is probably true that General Serov wanted to attack the rebels, as chief of the secret police he was “directly under the orders of the First Secretary of the Communist Party [Khrushchev].” Therefore, “He could not carry out any major action without Khrushchev's direct order” (eyewitness to Soviet-Hungarian 1956 negotiations, in Narkiewicz 74).

## **Conclusions**

The historical evidence supports only one principle explanation for Khrushchev's decision to crush the rebellion in Hungary: Nagy's withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact. The importance of this declaration is clearly evident from the political documents, timeline, and memoirs from the events of 1956. Until Nagy's speech on November 1, Moscow was prepared to adopt a conciliatory policy towards Hungary, as is evidenced by the October 30 Declaration on the Principles of Development and Further Strengthening of Friendship and Cooperation Between the USSR and Other Socialist Countries. On the same, plans were made for the withdrawal of Soviet troops in Budapest. Therefore, it appears that despite promises from the West that it would not intervene. Khrushchev still

hoped that the crisis in Hungary would be resolved through compromise, as it was in Poland. However, when Nagy announced Hungary's withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact and its neutrality, the Presidium decided that there was "no comparison with Poland" and "Nagy is in fact turning against us" (Kramer 8). It was at that time, and not before, that Khrushchev finally gave up negotiations in Hungary and Operation Whirlwind was commenced. Thus, the massive and brutal Soviet military intervention in Hungary was the result of Hungary's abandonment of the Warsaw Pact.

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