



Historical Security Council

The distribution of power and maintaining peace in autumn of 1956

The Polish Thaw

The international situation in 1956 was marked by a series of explosive developments. Early that year Soviet party leader Nikita Khrushchev suddenly denounced the dead dictator, Stalin, as a cruel tyrant. Khrushchev's exposure of Stalin's crimes led people in the Russian-dominated countries of Eastern Europe to demand freedom both from Soviet control and in internal affairs. On the 24th February of 1956 in a speech to the 20th Party Congress Khrushchev denounced Stalin and called for a "peaceful coexistence" between the superpowers and an end to the arms race, as well as stating that Moscow would relax its controls at home and over international Communism. This led to a build up of pressure for de-Stalinisation in Eastern Europe and the demand for change spread rapidly.

After the death of the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin, the rigidly authoritarian communist regime in Poland relaxed some of its policies. It abolished the powerful and tyrannical Ministry of Security, demoting or arresting many of its chief officials, and declared an amnesty for 100,000 political prisoners. These changes stimulated a popular desire for more-radical reforms, but the Polish leadership, which included a substantial number of conservative Stalinists, was reluctant. Consequently, the impatient industrial workers of Poznań, seeking better standards of living—including wage increases, lower food prices, and less-demanding work quotas—staged a strike on June 28, 1956. Brandishing slogan-laden banners demanding bread and freedom, 30,000 demonstrators marched through the city. Riots soon broke out, the local offices of the secret police and party functionaries were attacked, and a police security officer was lynched. The following day the minister of defense, Konstantin Rokossovsky (a former Soviet officer), ordered the local military commander to suppress the uprising, and within a few days nearly 60 people were killed, more than 200 were wounded, and order was restored in Poznań.

But the Poles gained some concessions from Moscow. Wladyslaw Gomulka, who had been accused of Titoism in the late forties, was released from prison. He became the head of Poland's Communist Party. Poland is said to have won control over its own economy while remaining loyal to the Warsaw Pact and friendly toward the Soviet Union. On October 22, Secretary of State Dulles stated that the world was seeing the beginning of Poland's return to independence and liberty. Describing the Eisenhower administration's position, he barred use of US arms to help the Poles, stating that outside military action could lead to a world war.

Hungarian Uprising

Inspired by the Polish example, the Hungarian people revolted in October 1956, installed a liberal government, and demanded the withdrawal of Soviet troops. After the workers in Poznan had staged mass protests earlier in June 1956 (which although they were violently put down by government forces, worried the Soviets in Moscow), Wladyslaw Gomulka has managed to negotiate wider autonomy and liberalization for Poland. There was hope by many Hungarians that something similar could be achieved for Hungary, and when students of the Technical University (who had become a strong political voice) heard that the Hungarian Writers Union planned to lay a wreath at the statue of Polish-born General Bem to express solidarity with pro-reform movements in Poland, they decided to join them.

Communists in Hungary also sought changes, as did university students, who were expressing solidarity with the Poles. Here resentment remained over the looting and raping by Russian troops in 1945, and resentment over the punishment of people who did not deny that such things happened. In 1955, Khrushchev had replaced the more liberal communist Imre Nagy with the hardliner Matyas Rakosi, believing that Rakosi might better be able to hold Hungary together under communist leadership. Then in 1956, in response to troubles in Poland, demonstrators appeared in the streets of Hungary's capital, Budapest. A party hardliner made a truculent speech over the radio which expanded the protest. Armed workers and others overwhelmed the secret police and the hardline government. The government called for help from Soviet troops. Soviet troops arrived, but Soviet authorities concluded that Hungary's communist leadership had acted stupidly, and in mid-July the Soviet authorities removed the offending communists from power.

On October 23rd, students in Budapest protested. The Hungarian police denied them access to a radio station to broadcast their demands for independence and the withdrawal of Soviet troops. The next day street fighting erupted in Budapest. Dulles suggested that the UN Security Council should convene to discuss the situation in Hungary. On October 25th, Soviet tanks fired upon the demonstrators. On the 26th, uprisings spread to Hungary's countryside. On the 28th, Nagy was made prime minister again. Nagy, on the radio, promised reforms and declared that the Soviet troops would be leaving the country, that the secret police, the AVH, would be disbanded and that Hungary's traditional flag would return. On October 30th, the Russians left. Hungarians were joyous. Caught up in the nationalistic joy, Nagy abolished the one-party system and announced the coming of elections, but this was too much for the Russians, who sensed this would swing Hungary to the capitalist West. On October 31st, Russian troops turned around and headed back to Budapest. Fighting erupted between Soviet tanks and those called freedom fighters. Nagy complained that a new entry by Soviet troops violated the Warsaw Pact Treaty, and he announced that unless the troops withdrew he would withdraw Hungary from the Warsaw Treaty.

Hungarian resistance continued until the 10th of November. More than 2,500 Hungarians died in the conflict, as did 700 Soviet troops. The Russians elevated Kadar from Nagy's deputy to head of a new regime. Kadar became General Secretary of Hungary's Communist Party. Nagy was taken to the Soviet Union and imprisoned. He was secretly charged with organizing the overthrow of the Hungary's government and treason. He was secretly tried, found guilty, sentenced to death and would be executed by hanging in June 1958.

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Egypt and the Suez Crisis

In 1954, Gamal Abdel Nasser became the president of Egypt. Nasser pursued a policy of non-alignment, which was inspired by the Bandung Conference in April 1955 – a meeting of numerous African and Asian countries that desired to avoid the Cold War. Yet Nasser saw the Cold War as an opportunity for Egypt rather than a threat. He didn't plan to become an ally of either the USSR, or the United States. Because by letting both the USSR and the US compete for his alliance, he would eventually be able extract concessions from both powers.

The Czechoslovakia arms deal

Nasser's attitude towards the state of Israel was always very suspicious and scornful. Nonetheless, Israel, due to its army, soon developed into a significant regional power. Nasser saw Israel as a very immediate threat to Egypt and sought ways to acquire larger quantities of modern military equipment for the Egypt's military. The US was willing to provide Egypt with weapons and military equipment under the circumstances that Egypt would only use them for defensive purposes, and that the weapons would be accompanied by US military personnel for supervision and training. Nasser however thought of these measures as overly entangling Egypt to the United States. Instead, Nasser sought the help of the USSR and in October 1955, a substantial arms deal with Czechoslovakia was announced.

Shocked by the arms deal as well as worried about losing control over the region, the US and Britain tried to tip the balance in their favour by improving relations with Egypt. Hence, the US and Britain offered Egypt via World Bank to raise \$270 million towards the development of the Aswan High Dam in order to improve irrigation in the Nile Valley and develop hydro-electricity. Nasser became suspicious that the World Bank could try to some extent control the Egypt's economy, so he also considered to ask Soviets for assistance. The Soviet Union championed the US and Britain's offer by providing Egypt with an enormous \$1,12 billion loan with interest rate short of 2%. Thus Nasser found himself in a strong bargaining position, yet the US and Britain lost temper and decided to withdraw their offer.

The Suez Crisis

Nationalization of the Suez Canal gave Britain, France, and Israel the reason for overthrowing Nasser. For Britain and France, Nasser undermined the colonial influence Britain and France had over the region as well as the rest of Northern Africa. For Israel, Egypt has been a permanent threat since the Arab-Israeli War in 1948. Furthermore, Israel wanted to take control of the Sinai Peninsula and to reaffirm its position in the region.

The coalition created a plan of a joint invasion of Egypt. Firstly, Israel troops would invade the Sinai Peninsula, which would give Britain and France the reason to legally intervene by appealing to the Anglo-Egyptian Agreement from 1954. When Israel attacked on the 29th October of 1956, Britain and France immediately demanded the withdrawal of both the Israeli and Egyptian forces from the Canal. Nevertheless, Nasser refused to withdraw and on 31st October, British air force bombed Egypt's airfields.

On the 5th of November, Anglo-French forces landed along the Suez Canal. The coalition forces assumed that they would obtain US support. But as Eisenhower was in the middle of an election campaign, he firmly refused to support this operation. US condemned the attack in the United Nations and also put a massive diplomatic and financial pressure onto both Britain and France. These actions resulted in a halt of the fighting. The United States also chose to not support Britain and France in their campaign, as it would result in distrust of many Arab nations towards the US. Khrushchev also used this split in NATO and exploited it by threatening Britain, France, and Israel with nuclear attacks. Although it was known that the Soviet Union didn't possess any missiles capable of delivering the payload all the way to Britain, it appeared as if the Soviet Union was to be credited for the halt in fighting and not the United States.

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