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The Hungarian Uprising

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Introduction

The Hungarian Uprising was a nationwide act of rebellion, in 1956, against the system and policies of the People's Republic of Hungary imposed by the Soviet Union. During the aftermath of World War II, many economic and political reforms by the Soviet Union took place across Europe, triggering various factors that accounted for the widespread discontent of the Hungarian public. Serving as a symbol of the political fight between the Soviet Union's strong presence over the satellite states and the people's desire for national sovereignty, the Hungarian Uprising played a shaping role in European History.

In 1955, the Warsaw Pact was signed between the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc Socialist Republics in Europe, including Hungary. Shortly after, Hungary was under the Soviet Union's totalitarian regime after the Second World War. This regime imposed heavy control and restrictions on the public's freedom. The protests quickly escalated as workers, soldiers, and other segments of society joined the movement. In 1958, the Soviet Leader Khrushchev gave what was later ironically known as the "secret speech" denouncing the actions and ideologies of Joseph Stalin, the former USSR Leader. This speech then reached a widespread among the population of Hungary which fueled hopes and triggered reactions from the public.

The uprisings gained much attention, especially from the Soviet Union. This led to a public declaration stating that the Soviet Government was open to negotiations with Hungary and other members of the Warsaw Treaty. However, after the release of this declaration, the Soviet Union retaliated to put an end to the protests and acts of violence going on in Hungarian territories. This move played a symbolic role in representing the unrelenting presence of the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe, especially the Warsaw Pact Countries.

Many details played into the tensions between the People's Republic of Hungary and the Soviet Union. Therefore, this issue should be looked at from the perspective focusing on the root causes that led to the uprising in order to get the best understanding.

Definition of Key Terms

Cold War

Cold War is the state of ongoing political and economic threats between countries caused by ideological differences and contrasting propaganda. These types of conflicts are fueled through measures short of military action.

Communism

Communism refers to a management system of a society with no private property, and communal control of production and consumption, commonly referred to as a higher and more political form of socialism where consuming behavior is also revolutionized.

Eastern Bloc

The phrase "Eastern Bloc" is commonly used to refer to the Eastern European countries, especially during the aftermath of World War II.

Iron Curtain

The Iron Curtain is a geographically used term for the border between USSR-controlled satellite states and the rest of Europe.

Martial Law

Martial Law is a jurisdiction during a vital area of time where the rule of civil authorities is temporarily in the hands of military authorities. The declaration of Martial Law happens under extreme and emergency circumstances where civil control is unable to function.

Satellite States

This term is used to refer to countries that are heavily reliant on or controlled by another state. It is commonly seen in terms of economic, political and military influence on external policies. In this issue, this term represents the Warsaw Pact Countries under the control of the Soviet Union.

Show Trials

These trials are legal proceedings, which are already determined, and being presented in front of the public. The exhibition of a verdict in such a manner usually has the aim of serving as an example to the public.

Socialism

Socialism is a socio-economic system where the major industries and the control over production are held by workers rather than private businesses. This is a system where the government seeks equality among citizens.

Totalitarian Regime

Totalitarianism is a governmental system that allows no personal freedom and aims to submit all areas of individual activities to the state's control.

Warsaw Pact

The Warsaw Pact Treaty was signed by the Soviet Union and seven other Eastern European countries as a military alliance with the mutual benefit of cooperation and assistance.

Workers' Councils

Workers' Councils were organizations formed during the uprising to represent employees and maintain governance in the workplace.

General Overview

The Hungarian Uprising in 1956 was a significant reflection of the discontent between the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries including, Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland and Romania. Following World War II, Hungary was influenced by the Soviet Union to become a communist state, and its citizens were subject to a totalitarian government that severely curtailed their liberties.

The Hungarian citizens, against the Warsaw Pact's Soviet-imposed totalitarian regime, showed a great desire for independence and socio-economic freedom. As the reaction of the public grew, what was once a political alliance after World War II became a cause for protests and rebellions. The repressive Soviet-backed government of Hungary's leader, Mátyás Rákosi, and the nation's financial challenges were widely resented by the middle of the 1950s. Following Joseph Stalin's death in 1953, the Soviet Union underwent significant changes, and there was optimism that the Soviet rule over Hungary would also be loosened.

The Political History of the Soviet Union and Hungary

At the end of World War II, United States President Franklin Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Soviet Leader Joseph Stalin met in Crimea to discuss the aftermath of the war. This conference is known as the Yalta Conference and was followed by the Potsdam Conference. One important decision made was the recognition of a Soviet controlled government of Poland which was an initiation for the Warsaw Pact Treaty, giving political control of Eastern Europe to the Soviet Union. Accordingly, the Soviet Union and its communist influence had a strong economic presence after World War II. As Soviet armies moved into Eastern Europe in 1944, Hungary, which had previously sided with Nazi Germany during the war, changed its alignment.

In 1949, the Soviet Army's (otherwise known as the Red Army) occupation in Hungary resulted in the formal declaration of a Socialist Republic led by the leader of the Communist Party Mátyás Rákosi. Several factors played into this change. Although it was decided that the Soviet Union would not hold total power over the Eastern Bloc and allow free elections, in Poland for instance, the Soviet Leader Stalin followed different policies. To ensure their domination in Eastern Europe, the Soviet troops took action to eliminate the possibility of resistance against communist parties. Subsequently, with the 1947 elections in Poland, the administration of the provisional government was under the control of the Soviet Union's communist policies.



Figure 1: A Map of Eastern Europe showing the Soviet-controlled territories (1945-1949)

As can be seen from the figure, the Soviet Union had significant political and military dominance over the Eastern European Region. This was an important influence that reflects the reasoning behind the Hungarian public's rebellion and the uprising.

The Start of the Uprising

After several years of Soviet rule, the Hungarian people became increasingly dissatisfied with the country's political management. They were experiencing not only economic stagnation but also the repression of fundamental liberties, which worsened their rising anger towards the communist system. The death of the Soviet Leader Joseph Stalin in 1953 sparked hope amongst the public that official reforms were possible, especially considering that their current leader at the time, Mátyás Rákosi, was a Stalinist. His harsh policies and autocratic control had made him exceedingly unpopular among civilians and reformist Hungarian Communist Party members.

Shortly after, Nikita Khrushchev became the First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and Imre Nagy became the Prime Minister of Hungary. This process was perceived by the Eastern Bloc Countries' citizens as an opportunity to revolt and express their displeasure. For the first time in years, Hungarians began to hope that more autonomy and reform were possible. A relaxation period began with Nikita Khrushchev's de-Stalinization policies. Furthermore, Nagy implemented novel economic plans, shifting the focus from heavy industry to consumer commodities. Although Imre Nagy's reformist views aligned with the changes brought and enforced by Nikita Khrushchev, these efforts were short-lived. After some time, the policies enforced by the Soviet Union would change once again.

In 1955, with the help of the Soviet Union, the unyielding politicians within the Communist Party of Hungary restored Mátyás Rákosi's position. With that, agriculture was once again centralized, industries became nationalized, and any opposition to these changes was suppressed. However, as this still did not stop the public's reaction, the Hungarians who showed any resistance were imprisoned and sent to show trial. In 1956, Rákosi was brought down and replaced by Ernő Gerő as the First Secretary of the Hungarian Working People's Party. At this point, the Soviet forces in Hungary seemed to be backing up; however, their influence was still present. This paved the way for the protests to increase and the voices of the Hungarian people to be raised.

On October 23rd, a student-led protest occurred in Hungary's capital, Budapest. This served as an inspiration to Polish citizens to also rebel against their current Soviet-imposed regime. This gained the reaction of the Soviet Union. On November 1st, Imre Nagy made a declaration of neutrality for Hungary. This was followed by the announcement of Hungary's withdrawal from the Warsaw Treaty and briefly translated to its attempt to become independent from the Soviet Union's authoritative policies. Nagy, along with the peace fighters sought the support of third parties such as the United Nations and Western countries. Although this appeal was met with positive responses, the Soviet Union saw this action as a threat and betrayal of a political alliance. Shortly after, on November 4th, Nikita Khrushchev gave the order for the Red Army to suppress any acts of opposition committed by the freedom fighters against the Soviet Union. A four-day period of attacks and merciless repression overthrew the independent national government of Hungary.

The effects of the Uprising

After the intervention, Hungary was immediately subjected to brutal persecution, and hundreds of thousands migrated to the West which led to the Hungarian Refugee Crisis, one of the greatest refugee flows in post-World War II Europe. The departure comprised academics, skilled laborers, and entire families, depriving Hungary of much of its professional and cultural capital. The government's retaliation was rapid and brutal, with mass arrests, show trials, and killings of anybody accused of engaging in or supporting the revolt. The new Hungarian government, backed by Moscow, reinstated a totalitarian system in the nation and closed all borders. These proceedings led to Hungary being referred to as “a nation torn”, a phrase that represents the deep effects faced by the nation. As a result, democracy was crushed and Europe in general reached its lowest point since World War II. Many were executed including Imre Nagy. Nagy was apprehended after seeking refuge in the Yugoslav embassy, prosecuted in secret, and executed for his part in the uprising in 1958 becoming a symbol of Hungary's struggle for independence. This reinforced the brutal reality of Cold War geopolitics, in which the Soviet Union's rule over Eastern Europe remained untouched. The aftermath of the revolt highlighted the harsh limits of freedom within the Soviet bloc and had a long-lasting influence on opinions of the communist rule.

Timeline of Key Events

Date	Event
February 4-11, 1945	The Yalta Conference
February 23, 1945	Mátyás Rákosi becomes the First Secretary of Hungary
July 17-August 2, 1945	The Potsdam Conference
September 2, 1945	The end of WW2
March 5, 1953	The death of Joseph Stalin
July 4, 1953	Imre Nagy becomes Prime Minister of Hungary

May 14, 1955	The establishment of the Warsaw Pact as a response to the alliance of Germany with NATO
July 18, 1956	Ernő Gerő becomes the First Secretary of Hungary
October 23, 1956	The beginning of the Uprising by a student-led protest against the USSR's geopolitical domination of Hungary
November 1, 1956	Hungary's Neutrality Declaration
November 4, 1956	The Soviet intervention of Hungary ordered by Nikita Khrushchev for the Red Army
June 6, 1958	The execution of Imre Nagy

Major Parties Involved

Hungary

Hungary's role as a major country in the Hungarian Uprising of 1956 was rooted in its position as a key Soviet satellite state within the Eastern Bloc. Accordingly, Hungary became an important factor in the opposition of Warsaw Pact countries against the Soviet Union. After World War II, the Soviet dominance over the country resulted in protests and displeasure among the public. What started as a small development, quickly evolved into a nationwide uprising. As mentioned before, Hungarian politicians Mátyás Rákosi, Ernő Gerő and Imre Nagy played a major role in the country's political trajectory. Imre Nagy was a reformist who fought for the independence of Hungary whereas Mátyás Rákosi was a Stalinist politician. The capital Budapest was the location of the Red Army's intervention which transpired shortly after the beginning of the nationwide uprising. Shortly after, many Hungarians had to face immigration issues. Therefore, Hungary was not only a major party in the uprising, but it was also an initiator of the Eastern Bloc's rebellion against the Soviet Union.

Soviet Union (USSR)

After World War II, the Soviet Union followed an authoritarian policy in Eastern Europe. With the Warsaw Pact Treaty, the country's goal was to increase and strengthen its control and Soviet dominance. Considering the USSR's geopolitical interest in the Eastern Bloc countries, Hungary's intentions to leave the Warsaw Pact were deemed unacceptable. Therefore, trying to stop a dangerous precedent spreading across Europe, Soviet Leader Nikita Khrushchev ordered the Red Army's intervention in Budapest. These actions were later justified by the Soviet Union as counter-revolutionary forces. The Soviet Union's territorial claim was marked by what was called an "Iron Curtain" which separated Warsaw Pact countries from the rest of Europe.

United States

As a party representing the Cold War geopolitics, the US played an important role in the aftermath of World War II. As seen from both the Yalta and Potsdam conferences, although the country restrained from direct military action during the Hungarian Uprising, the US pursued a strategy of moral and diplomatic support, using platforms like Radio Free Europe to broadcast messages of solidarity and encourage Eastern Bloc nations to seek autonomy. However, the U.S. was also criticized for raising false hopes among Hungarian revolutionaries by implying potential assistance that never materialized.

United Kingdom

The United Kingdom was also another important party during the Yalta and Potsdam Conferences. The UK primarily responded to the issue through diplomatic channels and, similarly to the US, refrained from military intervention. However, the UK's presence played an important role in pressuring the Soviet Union to allow national elections in the satellite states, especially in Poland. While this effort was bypassed by the USSR later on, it was an important step toward the Warsaw Pact Countries' independence.

Poland

As a satellite state, Poland had the same viewpoints on the issue of Eastern European opposition towards the Soviet Union. Before the Hungarian Uprising, in October 1956, Poland experienced a crisis during which workers' protests and demands for political reform led to a secure degree of autonomy within the region. The relative success of the Polish encouraged the Hungarian people to realize that reforms, and possibly even independence, were possible. However, unlike Poland, the Hungarian Uprising rapidly grew into an entire revolution and open conflict with Soviet forces, which was brutally suppressed.

East Germany

A part of the Warsaw Pact, East Germany played an important role in the Hungarian Uprising as an ally of the Soviet Union. Germany's internal opposition and the role of NATO led to the Warsaw Treaty which then became a tool for the Soviet Union to assert its dominance over Eastern Europe. Accordingly, internalizing the USSR's communist policies, East Germany supported the Soviet Union's actions against the Hungarian Uprising and reinforced the narrative of counter-revolutionary forces when it came to Soviet repression.

Possible Solutions

- Since this issue is both a border control concern and a political distinction between countries, it is important to have a solution-oriented approach. Therefore, delegates should consider long-term solutions that entail various perspectives. For instance, a diplomatic intervention supervised by the United Nations could play a crucial role in mediating the political relations between the major parties involved. Furthermore, gradual reforms that aim to foster autonomy while maintaining stability could be implemented into countries' policies. Efforts to provide humanitarian aid to the regions that have faced conflict and led people to migrate is yet an important perspective. Finally, a negotiated compromise could be reached between the involved parties to reach a mutual and long-lasting solution.

Further Reading

- <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB76/>
(An extract from a briefing book on the 1956 Hungarian Revolution which is based on historical documents and provides a clear understanding of the factors that led to the uprising.)
- <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/z3h9mnb/revision/11>
(A news site summarizing the events that led to the Hungarian Uprising and its effects.)
- <https://europe.unc.edu/the-end-of-wwii-and-the-division-of-europe/>
(A text on the aftermath of World War II and the division of Europe)
- https://www.nato.int/cps/pt/natohq/declassified_138294.htm
(A text on how the Warsaw Pact formed and what it represents)

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