

6 PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE

Key Issue

- How secure was the USSR's control over eastern Europe?

AFTER STALIN

Stalin died in 1953 and the Cold War thawed a little. After a power struggle, Nikita Khrushchev emerged as the new Soviet leader. In 1955, he met western leaders at a **summit meeting** in Geneva. They agreed that Austria should now become an independent state. (They had jointly occupied it since 1945.)

In the following year, Khrushchev called for 'peaceful coexistence' with the USA. What he meant was that the two **superpowers** would have to learn to live peacefully with each other. This helped to begin a process called 'détente' in which tension between the two superpowers eased, leading to better relations. This policy of moving away from Stalin's harsh and confrontational policies is called **de-Stalinisation**. However, the process of détente regularly suffered setbacks, during which relations became tense again.

There were good reasons for following a policy of peaceful coexistence. As Khrushchev said in 1959: 'There are two ways: either peaceful coexistence or the most destructive war in history. There is no third way.' By 1960, each superpower already had enough nuclear weapons to destroy the other several times over. Khrushchev appreciated how stupid, as well as dangerous, the situation had become (see Source A). Neither side gained anything by increasing tension. There was a risk it might lead to a nuclear war which nobody wanted. Also, if the USA and USSR could agree on arms cuts, it would save money.

ARMS RACE

Yet the build-up of arms went on. In 1953, the USSR successfully tested its own H-bomb. In 1957, it produced an inter-continental ballistic missile (ICBM), just months before the USA produced its own ICBM. That same year, the USSR launched the first space satellite, Sputnik 1.

Another summit meeting was planned for May 1960 but, on 1 May, the Russians shot down an

American plane which had been flying over the USSR. It was a U-2 spy plane, designed to take photographs of Soviet military targets. These flights had been going on for three years. When President Eisenhower refused to apologise, the meeting collapsed. It had lasted just three hours. Overhead, a Soviet sputnik circled the globe twice.

The arms race continued into the 1960s as each superpower built more nuclear weapons and also developed new ones. In 1963, both the USA and the USSR produced their first nuclear submarines.

One key reason for this was money. Nuclear missiles were cheaper to make than many conventional weapons. Also, having nuclear weapons meant that the USA did not need a large army. It seemed as if building nuclear weapons saved money, but ordinary people in many nations were frightened of them.

THE TWENTIETH PARTY CONGRESS (1956)

In February 1956, Khrushchev made a secret speech at the Twentieth Party Congress in Moscow. He attacked Stalin, blaming him for much that had happened in the USSR before the war. Khrushchev told senior party officials that Stalin had been a ruthless, brutal dictator.

Most of the major communist leaders in eastern Europe owed their jobs to Stalin's support. People in these countries angrily discussed the 'secret' speech and attacked Stalinist leaders. In June 1956, there were strikes and riots at Poznan in Poland: 53 workers were killed. A popular leader, Gomulka, was brought back to carry out reforms.

In Hungary, it was far worse – there was open revolt. The Hungarians had resented Soviet control of their country ever since it became communist in 1948. Hungary was a religious nation but its Catholic schools had been **nationalised** and religion was frowned upon. Schoolchildren were forced to learn communist history. In addition, the secret police (the AVO) were feared and Soviet troops still remained in the country.

Khrushchev's speech made the Hungarians feel they now had a chance to get rid of their own Stalinist leaders. At first, they were successful. The USSR forced the local communist leader, Rákosi, to resign in July 1956. But the Hungarian people were still dissatisfied: the harvest was poor and fuel was in short supply.

THE HUNGARIAN UPRISING (1956)

On 23 October, students and workers in Budapest, the capital of Hungary, held a demonstration. The Communist Party leader rejected their demands and police fired into the crowd. What had begun peacefully quickly turned into a rebellion.

A huge statue of Stalin was pulled down and dragged round the streets on a rubbish cart. Secret police were lynched and communist leaders were hanged from the trees. To calm things down, Soviet troops began withdrawing from Hungary and a moderate communist, called Imre Nagy, came to power. (It is pronounced 'Nodj'.)



The Budapest statue of Stalin was destroyed.

Nagy brought non-communists into his government and released a leading Catholic called Cardinal Mindszenty. But the situation was going beyond Nagy's control. Communists and anti-communists had joined forces. Communists wanted to end Stalinist rule; anti-communists wanted to get rid of the communists altogether. The Communist Party itself began to fall apart. Its newspaper was not published.

On 30 October, Nagy accepted all the rebels' demands. On the following day, he asked the USSR to take its troops out of Hungary. On 1 November, he announced that Hungary would leave the Warsaw Pact and become neutral. He appealed to the United Nations and asked for western help in defending the country.

Khrushchev could not tolerate this. On 4 November, Soviet tanks moved into Budapest to put down the uprising. The Hungarian people fought back with home-made weapons, such as petrol bombs, but it was a one-sided fight.

About 3000–4000 Hungarians were killed and another 150,000 fled abroad. Nagy took refuge in the Yugoslav Embassy. Later in November, he was tricked out and arrested. He was executed in 1958. Cardinal Mindszenty was forced to spend the next 15 years hiding in the US Embassy before he was allowed to leave Hungary.

Nagy was replaced by the pro-Soviet Janos Kádár. He later carried out many of the reforms which Nagy had suggested. However, Hungary did not leave the Warsaw Pact. Nor did it become neutral.

Khrushchev's process of de-Stalinisation went slower after 1956 but he had shown that, in one respect, he differed little from Stalin. He had shown that eastern Europe was firmly under Soviet control and was going to stay that way.

A SOURCE

Nikita Khrushchev, quoted in *Overkill: The Story of Modern Weapons*, J Cox (1981).

President Kennedy once stated that the United States had the [missiles] to wipe out the Soviet Union two times over, while the Soviet Union had enough atomic weapons to wipe out the United States only once. Journalists asked me to comment. I said jokingly, 'He's quite right. But I'm not complaining. Once is quite enough. What good does it do to [destroy] a country twice? We're not a bloodthirsty people.'

B SOURCE

Radio Kossuth, a Hungarian radio station, 24 October 1956.

Fascist reactionary elements have started an armed attack against our public buildings and have also attacked our police. In the interest of restoring order, and until further notice is given, we announce that it is forbidden to hold any meetings, rallies and parades.

C SOURCE

Hungarian news report, 4 November 1956.

People are jumping up at the tanks, throwing hand grenades inside and then slamming the driver's windows. The Hungarian people are not afraid of death. It is only a pity that we can't stand for long.

Questions

- Study Source C. Explain the point the writer was making. Support your answer by referring to details in the source and your own knowledge. [6 marks]
- Explain why the people of Hungary rebelled against their government in 1956. [9 marks]

8 CZECHOSLOVAKIA (1968)

Key Issue

- Why did the USSR invade Czechoslovakia?

ANTI-SOVIET FEELINGS

In 1956, Soviet tanks had crushed the uprising in Hungary. This action showed that the USSR would not tolerate countries in eastern Europe who wanted to go their own way. It was 1968 before another communist country tried to win some independence from the USSR. This time, it was Czechoslovakia.

Czechoslovakia had been a democratic country before World War II. Its standard of living had been high. Even under communist control, it was more industrialised than most of the **satellite** states. However, its economic achievements were not as great as its people hoped.

The country was suffering from severe **inflation** and people complained that it was being exploited by the Soviet Union. There were student protests and criticism of the Czech Communist Party.

In January 1968, a new man was chosen as First Secretary of the Communist Party. His name was Alexander Dubcek. He wanted to improve the economy. He planned to do this by having less central planning, with more privately owned businesses. People would be able to travel to the West and the Communist Party would change, allowing criticisms of its methods and policies. There would be new freedoms for the people:

- freedom of assembly, allowing people to organise meetings and political parties;
- freedom of religion;
- political prisoners freed;
- trade unions allowed;
- limits on the powers of the security police;
- press censorship to end; and
- a new National Assembly would be elected, in which communists would not have all the power.

These changes would make Czechoslovakia very different to other communist nations, so Dubcek tried to reassure the USSR. He told them that Czechoslovakia would not leave the Warsaw Pact.

THE PRAGUE SPRING

Dubcek called his plans 'socialism with a human face'. This meant that his style of socialism would also allow freedom for the people. The Czechoslovak people discussed politics openly for the first time in years. People called it 'the Prague Spring': it was as if the nation were being reborn.

The Czech people supported Dubcek's reforms, as did Yugoslavia and Romania, but the USSR did not. Soviet leaders tried to persuade Dubcek to give up his reforms. They were afraid that Czechoslovakia might leave the Warsaw Pact, whatever Dubcek said. They were also worried about the effect his changes might have on other communist countries.

The Prague Spring gave way to early summer. Soviet politicians continued to talk to Dubcek. Meanwhile, behind the scenes, they planned to invade Czechoslovakia, just as they had invaded Hungary in 1956. In early May, Soviet tanks began moving through Poland and East Germany towards Czechoslovakia. By late July, about 75,000 Soviet troops were in position just outside the Czechoslovakian border.

In July, the USSR and four other Warsaw Pact countries sent a message to Dubcek. In effect, they asked him to change his policy. He did not. Dubcek did not believe the USSR would invade Czechoslovakia; nor did Tito, the Yugoslav president, who visited the country in August.

According to the USSR, what happened next was that they received a letter from leading Czech communists. It asked for Soviet help in putting down a **counter-revolution**. (No one is sure whether this is true or whether the letter was made up.)

On the night of 20–21 August 1968, Soviet troops entered Czechoslovakia. There were also a few troops from Poland, Bulgaria, Hungary and East Germany to make it look like a Warsaw Pact joint exercise.



Czech students burning Communist Party newspapers in August 1968.

One Czech official who saw them thought they were shooting a film: he did not believe his country was being invaded. Most Czechs did not resist because they knew there was no point: they could not hope to win. Faced with Soviet rifles, they placed flowers in the barrels.

However, some fought back. Barricades were set up in the streets and tanks were blown up. Students tore down street names to confuse the invaders. Anti-Soviet broadcasters stayed on the air by moving from one hiding place to another.

Meanwhile, Dubcek had been arrested and taken to Moscow where he was forced to sign an agreement, ending most of his reforms. The official Soviet version of the invasion bore no relation to the truth (see Source D). He returned to Czechoslovakia but could not bring the Czech resistance under control. In April 1969, he was forced out of office and a pro-Soviet leader called Gustav Husák took over. He clamped down on all opposition inside the country.

A SOURCE

April 1968: Svoboda, the Czech president (holding a hat) stands beside Alexander Dubcek (to his right) outside the cathedral in Prague.



B SOURCE

Dubcek described his thoughts at this moment in *Hope Dies Last* (1993).

I thought that we could [win] against the Soviets because in the end their bullying would not exceed certain limits. The 1956 crushing of Hungary was way behind us: they would not repeat that. Most of the world agreed.

C SOURCE

Spot the difference. This photograph was used in Czechoslovakia after 1969. Compare it with Source A.



D SOURCE

The official Soviet version was given by Tass, the Soviet news agency, 21 August 1968.

Party and government leaders of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic have asked the Soviet Union and other states to give brotherly help to the Czechoslovak people with armed forces. This request was brought about by the threat from counter-revolutionary forces. The troops will be withdrawn as soon as the threat to Czechoslovakia and neighbouring communist countries has been eliminated.

Questions

- What was the Prague Spring? [6 marks]
- What does Source C tell us about Czechoslovakia after Dubcek's removal? [3 marks]
- How reliable is Source C to an historian studying the methods of communist governments? Use Source C and your own knowledge to explain your answer. [6 marks]