

## THE HUNGARIAN REVOLUTION OF 1956

Hungary was one of the Soviet 'satellites' in Europe. In 1956 its people joined in a revolution to break free of Soviet control. What caused them to do this, and what were the results?

### Soviet control of Hungary

The Soviet Union controlled Hungary in the same way that it controlled all its satellites. As you know, the Soviet Army occupied Eastern Europe at the end of the Second World War. The presence of the army gave Stalin the power to put men who supported him into the governments, armed forces and communist parties of these countries. By 1949 each satellite state was headed by a 'mini-Stalin' who was the country's Communist Party leader. In Hungary the 'mini-Stalin' was Matyas Rakosi.

With such people in power, Stalin was able to run the satellite states as if they were part of the Soviet Union. Their economies were run on Soviet lines, with five-year plans to build up heavy industry. Private farms were joined together to make state-owned collective farms. Opposition was crushed by a large secret police force. Moreover, the satellites were linked by two Soviet-dominated bodies: Comecon, created in 1949, set up a common market to boost trade between communist-controlled countries; and the Warsaw Pact, created in 1955, put their armies under joint control.

### Dislike of Soviet control

None of this was popular with the people of Eastern Europe. Collective farming led to food shortages. The emphasis on heavy industry led to a shortage of consumer goods, and living standards dropped. The secret police persecuted churchgoers and non-communists. The communist-controlled media stifled free speech.

But the secret police could not crush all opposition. When Stalin died in 1953, workers in East Germany went on strike and demonstrated for economic reform. Although the Soviet leaders who succeeded Stalin crushed the demonstrators with armed force, they could see that action was needed to stop further protests in the satellite states.

### Khrushchev's 'thaw'

Two events in 1955 raised people's hopes for more freedom in Eastern Europe. First, the new Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev, ended a long argument with the Yugoslav leader, Tito. Yugoslavia, although

communist, had never become a satellite because the Soviet Army did not occupy it in 1945. Tito had resisted Stalin's attempts to take control, and had broken off relations with him. Now Khrushchev restored relations and accepted that Yugoslavia had the right to be independent. This raised hopes of greater independence in the satellite states.

The second event concerned Austria. For the past ten years Austria, like Germany, had been occupied by the wartime Allies. Now, in 1955, an Austrian State Treaty ended the occupation. As Soviet troops left their zone of Austria, neighbouring East Europeans began to hope that Soviet troops would soon leave their countries.

People's hopes rose still further in 1956. In a speech to the Soviet Communist Party, Khrushchev criticised Stalin as a tyrant who had done much damage. Soon after he began a programme of 'de-stalinisation', allowing Soviet citizens a little more freedom. People in the satellite states began to expect a similar 'thaw'.

### Revolution in Hungary

In Hungary they demanded an end to the rule of the mini-Stalin, Rakosi. In mass demonstrations they called for democratic rights, for the sacking of Stalinists, and for the withdrawal of Soviet forces. They tore down statues and pictures of Stalin (see picture on page 33). When police fired on them, heavy street fighting began.



*Hungarian rebels burn official portraits of the Prime Minister, Matyas Rakosi, on 23 October 1956*



*Hungarian rebels walk past a Soviet tank during a lull in the fighting in Budapest in November 1956. The holes in the building behind them show the effects of Soviet gunfire on the city.*

Desperate to keep order in Hungary, Khrushchev at first allowed two moderate leaders to take power: Imre Nagy (pronounced *Noj*) became Prime Minister; Janos Kadar became Party leader. With demonstrations and street fighting continuing, both were under pressure to make big changes. At the end of October, Nagy announced that Hungary would leave the Warsaw Pact, that it would be a neutral country, and that there would be democratic elections.

This delighted the people, but appalled Khrushchev. He gave orders for the Soviet Army to

halt the revolution before it could go any further. On 4 November 1956, 2000 tanks and 60,000 troops invaded the capital, Budapest.

The people of Budapest did what they could to halt the tanks. They threw petrol bombs at them and poured barrels of liquid soap onto street corners to make them skid. But they could do nothing against the heavy guns of the troops. These destroyed half of Budapest, killed some 3000 people, and forced at least 160,000 people to flee from the country. Soon after, Nagy was arrested and later hanged.

### Questions

- A. Look at the picture on page 33. Find at least three reasons in the text on page 34 why these people wanted to destroy the statue of Stalin.
- B.
  1. Who was Rakosi, whose picture is being burnt in the photograph opposite?
  2. Why did these people want to burn his picture?
- C.
  1. The people in the photographs on these pages appear to be happy. Suggest why.
  2. How and why would these people's feelings change in the week after the photographs were taken?

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## CZECHOSLOVAKIA, 1968

For 12 years after the Hungarian revolution of 1956, few people in the satellite states dared to oppose the Soviet Union. They had seen what had happened to the Hungarians. This changed in 1968 when the people of Czechoslovakia mounted a new challenge to Soviet authority.

The countries which today are called Slovakia and the Czech Republic were a single country in 1968 – Czechoslovakia. Like the other Soviet satellites, it was a one-party state governed by Communists. Its economy was government-run. The emphasis was on heavy industry, rather than consumer goods, and on collective farming. Strict censorship made it difficult for opponents to criticise the government, and a large secret police force arrested anyone who did so.

In the early 1960s the Czech economy began to weaken. This was partly because the Iron Curtain prevented the Czechs from trading with two of their neighbours, West Germany and Austria. As trade slumped, factory output went down, so wages and living standards fell.

### Novotny's dictatorship

The Czech leader, Antonin Novotny, was a hard-line Communist. Although he could see that the economy was in trouble, he was unwilling to move away from Soviet-style control of the economy. As wages and living standards continued to fall, dislike of Novotny grew, and there were demonstrations against him. He was especially disliked in the eastern part of the country, Slovakia, because he would not allow the Slovaks equality with the Czechs.

Novotny cracked down in 1967, increasing censorship and arresting opponents, but this made him even more unpopular. Fearing that he was losing control, the Communist Party sacked him in 1968 and put in his place a man who favoured reform, Alexander Dubcek (pronounced *Doob-check*).

### The Prague Spring

Dubcek quickly got rid of the other hard-liners in the government and relaxed press censorship. Then he issued an Action Programme of plans for reform. The reforms included allowing minor parties to join the communist-run government, giving people more democratic rights, and allowing equal rights to the Slovaks. As it was announced in April, people saw the Action Programme as the start of a 'Prague Spring' (Prague was the Czech capital).

Dubcek's plans were similar to some of the reforms which the Hungarians demanded in 1956.

But there was one big difference: where the Hungarians were anti-communist and anti-soviet, Dubcek tried to keep on good terms with the Soviet Union, and he had no intention of getting rid of communism. His aim was to improve communism, to make a system of 'communism with a human face'.

The Soviet leader, Leonid Brezhnev, did not see it in the same light. Nor did the leaders of East Germany and Poland. They feared that the Czechs would leave the Warsaw Pact and become friendly with western countries. They also feared that the desire for reform would spread to their own countries. So, in July 1968, the leaders of five Warsaw Pact countries (the Soviet Union, Poland, East Germany, Hungary and Bulgaria) sent a message to Dubcek that he must end his 'anti-socialist' programme. In reply, Dubcek told them that he would not leave the Warsaw Pact and that his reforms would not endanger any of their countries.

### The invasion of Czechoslovakia

A week later, Dubcek started to put his Action Programme into effect. Fearing that there would be no end to the reforms, the Group of Five decided to remove him and his supporters from power. On 21 August 1968 Soviet troops, backed by units from the other four countries, invaded Czechoslovakia to end the Prague Spring.

Although half a million soldiers swept into the country, there was little bloodshed. The government told the people to make only passive resistance. So, for example, they removed almost every street sign in the country to confuse the tank drivers, but they did not fight the tanks as the Hungarians in 1956. Within a few days, the whole country was under occupation and Dubcek was under arrest.

Dubcek was very popular, and the Soviet forces could not find anyone to replace him. He was therefore allowed to stay in power for some time, although with restrictions on his power. In 1969 he was demoted to a much less powerful position before being expelled from the Party in 1970.

### The Brezhnev Doctrine

After the Prague Spring, Brezhnev made it clear to the world what would happen to any country which tried to follow Czechoslovakia's example. He said that if a communist country started to go back towards capitalism, other communist countries would take action to stop it doing so. This became known as the 'Brezhnev Doctrine'.



*Czech protesters in Prague following the Soviet invasion in August 1968*

### Questions

A. Make a copy of the blank table below. Use the information on pages 34–35 and 38–39 to write answers in the blank spaces to the questions in the left-hand column.

	Hungary in 1956	Czechoslovakia in 1968
Why did people dislike Soviet control?		
Who was the country's leader?		
Who replaced him as leader?		
What changes did the new leader make?		
How did the Soviet Union react?		
What were the results of its actions?		
What happened to the new leader?		

B. Look at your completed table. What similarities and differences were there between the events in Hungary in 1956 and the events in Czechoslovakia in 1968?