

The Red Army in Budapest and Prague

In 1956 the Soviet Union shocked the world by sending troops to overthrow the government of Hungary. A similar invasion of Czechoslovakia took place in 1968.

Why did the Soviet Union invade Hungary and Czechoslovakia?

>> Activity

Imagine that you were working for the United Nations in 1956. You have been asked to write a report on why the Soviet Union invaded Hungary. In your report you should discuss:

- > why Hungarians disliked Soviet rule
- > how the death of Stalin created a new situation in Eastern Europe
- > the impact on Hungarians of events in Yugoslavia and Poland
- > how the Soviet Union reacted to changes in Hungary.

Hungary and the Soviet Empire

The Hungarians were a proud nation with a strong sense of identity. Before 1918 they played a key part in the running of the vast Austro-Hungarian Empire. Hungarian nationalists did not like being part of a Soviet Empire after the Second World War.

Stalin's actions increased anti-Soviet feelings in Hungary. Free elections were held in November 1945. The communists got less than 20 per cent of the vote. Stalin ignored the decision of the Hungarian people and imposed a government on the country in which communists had many of the most important posts. In August 1947 another election was held in Hungary. This time the Soviet Union made sure that the

SOURCE A



Cardinal Mindszenty, leader of the Catholic Church in Hungary. As an opponent of Soviet communism he was sentenced to life in prison.

election was rigged so that the communists won. Between 1949 and 1953 Hungary was badly treated by Stalin. Opponents of Soviet power were dealt with ruthlessly. In 1949 the leader of the Roman Catholic Church in Hungary, Cardinal Mindszenty, was sentenced to life imprisonment. Even Hungarian communists were attacked if they showed any signs of disagreeing with Stalin. The leading communist, Laszlo Rajk, was put on trial and hanged in 1949 because he was too independent-minded.

After Stalin

The death of Stalin in 1953 created a new uncertain situation in Eastern Europe. During the Stalinist years, Hungary had been ruled with considerable brutality by Mátyás Rákosi. Rákosi managed to hang on to power after 1953, but he was forced to invite a reformer called Imre Nagy to join his government. The two men got on badly and in 1955 Rákosi got the upper hand and threw Nagy out of the government and the party.

Hungarians were not sure how far the new Soviet leadership would allow Hungary to operate as an independent country. For a number of reasons Hungarians hoped that they might be able to have greater independence:

- > The new Soviet leadership was friendly to Tito's Yugoslavia. Yugoslavia had successfully broken away from Soviet control in 1948. People in Hungary thought that other countries could now follow the Yugoslav path.
- > Stalin was criticised by the new Soviet leader, Khrushchev, in a famous speech in February 1956. Hungarians hoped that Khrushchev would be very different from Stalin and would be happy with a new, independent Hungary.
- > In June 1956 there were anti-Soviet demonstrations in Poland. Khrushchev looked for a compromise. He allowed reforms and he appointed Gomulka, a man who had been imprisoned by Stalin, as the new leader of the Polish Communist Party.

The news from Poland seemed like further proof that the bad old days of Soviet control were over. In fact this was a mistake: the new Soviet leaders still wanted to control the countries of the Warsaw Pact. Hungarians listened to radio broadcasts from the West that criticised communism. Some felt that if Hungary challenged Soviet power they could expect help from the USA. Back in 1948 the Truman Doctrine had stated that the USA would help any people fighting against communism. In practice, the US theory of containment meant that America would only threaten force to stop the spread of communism; countries that were already communist could expect sympathy but no help.

SOURCE B

In 1955 Khrushchev visited Yugoslavia to make friends with Tito. He made a speech claiming that the USSR no longer wished to interfere in other states.

True to the teaching of the founder of the Soviet State, Lenin, the government of the Soviet Union bases its policy towards other countries, big and small, on the principle of peaceful co-existence. We believe in equality, non-interference, respect for sovereignty and national independence. The Soviet Union rejects aggression and believes that any invasion of another state is not to be permitted.

Alarm in Moscow

There was an air of excitement in Hungary in the summer of 1956. People heard the news from Poland. They wanted even more change in Hungary. They talked about Hungary breaking away from the Soviet bloc and becoming a neutral country. This was too much for Khrushchev. He could accept some changes but not Hungarian neutrality. If Hungary left the Warsaw Pact, other countries might follow. The protective buffer of friendly countries built up by Stalin might fall apart.

The Soviet leaders tried to stop the disturbances in Hungary by changing the leadership of the Hungarian communists. Realising that Rákosi was extremely unpopular, the Soviet leadership forced him to resign in July 1956. The new ruler was Ernő Gerő. However, Gerő was seen as a Stalinist by many Hungarians and the change of leader made little difference.

On 6 October 1956, Laszlo Rajk, the leading victim of Stalinist terror, was re-buried with a state funeral. A huge crowd turned out to show their support for the memory of Rajk and the idea of reform. Further demonstrations called for the removal of Gerő and the reinstatement of the popular reformer Nagy. On 24 October Nagy became Prime Minister. Khrushchev had hoped that this would end the disturbances. It did not. Across the country, workers set up revolutionary councils. They demanded a complete end to the Soviet system in Hungary. They called for free multi-party elections, a free Press and for Hungary to leave the Warsaw Pact. Nagy agreed to accept these reforms. At this point Khrushchev decided to invade.

SOURCE C



Laszlo Rajk, on trial for his life. Stalin was afraid that this communist leader would copy Tito and break away from Moscow. Stalin ensured that Rajk was executed.

SOURCE D

The Soviet leader, Khrushchev, expressed his anxiety over Hungary in July 1956.

If the situation in Hungary gets still worse, we here have decided to use all means at our disposal to bring the crisis to an end. The Soviet Union could not at any price allow a breach in the front in Eastern Europe.

SOURCE E

The Soviet Foreign Minister, Shepilov, explained Soviet actions to the General Assembly of the United Nations on 19 November 1956.

We could not overlook the fact that Hungary is a neighbour of the Soviet Union. A victory of the reactionary forces would have converted that country into a new jumping-off ground for an aggressive war not only against the Soviet Union but also against the other countries of Eastern Europe.

>> Activity

- 1 Look at Source B. Why do you think that Hungarians who wished for independence were encouraged by Khrushchev's speech in 1955?
- 2 Look at the Sources D and E. What do they tell us about Soviet motives in invading Hungary?

The Soviet invasion

The Soviet forces reached Budapest on 4 November 1956. The Red Army forces comprised 200,000 soldiers and 2,500 tanks. The Hungarians fought against the invaders. At least 3,000 Hungarians were killed (some estimates are much higher). Despite Nagy's desperate appeal (Source G) neither the United Nations nor the USA did anything to help. The powerful Soviet forces took control of Hungary and imposed a new pro-Soviet government.

SOURCE F



Hungarian nationalists engaged in street fighting in Budapest, 4 November 1956.

SOURCE G

When he heard of the invasion, Imre Nagy, the Hungarian Prime Minister, appealed to the United Nations for help.

Reliable reports have reached the government of the Hungarian People's Republic that further Soviet units are entering Hungary. The Hungarian government immediately repudiates the Warsaw Treaty and declares Hungary's neutrality, turns to the United Nations, and requests the help of the great powers in defending the country's neutrality. I request Your Excellency to put on the agenda of the forthcoming General Assembly of the United Nations the question of Hungary's neutrality and the defence of this neutrality by the great powers.

AFTER THE RISING

- > The new communist government of Hungary was led by a man called János Kádár. Under Kádár economic conditions in Hungary gradually improved.
- > The supporters of the Rising were severely punished. Imre Nagy was executed in 1958.
- > The Hungarian Uprising showed East Europeans that they could expect no help from the USA if they rose up against Soviet control. The US policy of 'containment' meant that the Americans would fight to stop the spread of communism but would not interfere if a country was already communist.
- > There was a period of uneasy peace in Eastern Europe for the next 10 years. It was not until the mid-1960s that people in the satellite states once again challenged Soviet control. In 1968 the government of Czechoslovakia decided to develop a new form of communism that was much more liberal than Soviet communism.
- > Communists around the world were dismayed by the way the Soviet Union used force against the Hungarian people. In Western Europe many communists were disillusioned. In China the leaders became more wary of Moscow.
- > The invasion was a blow to the reputation of the United Nations. It did nothing to stop an act of aggression by one member state on another member state.

Czechoslovakia: 1968

Economic problems were a major cause of calls for reform in Czechoslovakia. The country had been economically successful before the Second World War. By the mid-1960s many people were very disappointed with the standard of living under Soviet-style communism. Czechoslovakia had also been a democracy before the war and people resented their lack of freedom of speech under the Soviet system. In 1966 there were student demonstrations and public criticism of the way the Soviet Union controlled the economy of Czechoslovakia. The student protesters called for greater democracy and free speech.

In January 1968 a new communist leader, Alexander Dubček, was appointed. He was determined to improve communism. His plans were described as 'socialism with a human face', and the early months of 1968 have become known as the 'Prague Spring'. Dubček began to introduce a number of reforms:

- > the Soviet system of state planning would be altered to give more responsibility to farms and factories,
- > trade unions would be given greater freedom,
- > more foreign travel to the West would be allowed,
- > censorship of the Press would be abolished so that people could say and write what they liked,
- > criticism of the government would not be seen as a crime.

SOURCE H



Dubček during the early days of the Prague Spring.

At the same time Dubček was still a communist. He did not want to introduce Western-style capitalism. Dubček knew what had happened in 1956. He tried to re-assure the Soviet leaders that his reforms were less radical than those called for during the Hungarian Uprising. He stated repeatedly that he wanted Czechoslovakia to remain a loyal member of the Warsaw Pact. He insisted that changes in Czechoslovakia were no threat to the security of the Soviet Union.

Brezhnev, the Soviet leader, did not accept these assurances from Dubček. He was afraid that once the communist system allowed free speech the country would become chaotic. Brezhnev felt that the Czechoslovak reforms were the first step towards the country leaving the communist bloc and becoming a Western-style country, allied to the USA. He was not prepared to allow this. Czechoslovakia was in an important strategic position. If it was allied to the USA, it would provide a corridor along which American forces could march from West Germany to the Soviet Ukraine. Brezhnev was also under pressure from hard-line communists in East Germany. They argued that if free speech was allowed in Czechoslovakia, people in all other Eastern bloc countries would demand the same rights. This would weaken the power of the communist parties throughout Eastern Europe.

Help from the USA?

Brezhnev, the Soviet leader, began to plan an invasion of Czechoslovakia. By late July Soviet tanks and troops were massed on the Czechoslovak border. Brezhnev was encouraged by developments in the West. The American government was in crisis in the summer of 1968. There were race riots in the black districts of several cities. The war in Vietnam had gone disastrously wrong for the USA. Brezhnev calculated that there was no possibility of America taking any action to stop the invasion. The Vietnam crisis distracted attention from Czechoslovakia, just as in 1956 the Suez crisis reduced the impact of the invasion of Hungary.

SOURCE I

A letter of warning was sent by the Soviet leadership to the Czechoslovak Communist Party, 15 July 1968.

Developments in your country are causing deep anxiety among us. We are convinced that your country is being pushed off the road of socialism and that this puts in danger the interest of the whole socialist system.

We cannot agree to have hostile forces push your country away from the road of socialism. We cannot accept the risk of Czechoslovakia being cut off from the socialist community of countries. This is something more than your own concern. It is the common concern of all communist parties and states. It is the common concern of our countries, which have joined in the Warsaw Treaty to place an insurmountable barrier against the imperialist forces.

At great sacrifice the people of our countries achieved victory over Hitlerian fascism and won the opportunity to follow the path of socialism. The frontiers of the socialist world moved to the centre of Europe. And we shall never agree to these historic gains and the security of our peoples being placed in jeopardy. We shall never agree to imperialism making a breach in the socialist system of countries.

Dubček's response to the Soviet threat made matters worse. He invited Tito, the independent communist leader of Yugoslavia, to Prague. Tito arrived on 9 August. To Brezhnev this seemed like a signal that Dubček was moving away from the Warsaw Pact and towards the same independent position taken by Yugoslavia. Dubček also entered into negotiations with the Romanian leader, Nicolae Ceauşescu. A pact of friendship between Czechoslovakia and Romania was signed. The Romanian leader also resented control from Moscow. The closer ties between these two countries seemed like an attempt to undermine Soviet control of the Warsaw Pact.

SOURCE J



Rioting in Prague as Soviet tanks take over the city. In contrast with Budapest, there was relatively little bloodshed in Prague.

The Warsaw Pact forces invade

Soviet forces crossed the Czechoslovak frontier on 20 August 1968. They were joined by token forces from East Germany, Poland and Bulgaria. A day later the Warsaw Pact forces were in Prague, the capital of Czechoslovakia. Large-scale loss of life was avoided because the Czechoslovak government decided not to resist the invading army. People took to the streets to protest but there was none of the bloody street fighting that had taken place in Budapest in 1956. The Soviet troops took Dubček to Moscow and ordered him to abandon his reforms. He was finally removed from office in 1969. A pro-Soviet leader called Husák took his place. Soviet power was demonstrated in May 1970 when a Soviet–Czechoslovak treaty was signed. In this the Czechoslovaks were forced to thank the Soviets for the invasion.

THE AFTERMATH OF CZECHOSLOVAKIA 1968

After the invasion Brezhnev said that the Soviet Union was not prepared to let any communist country abandon communism. If a state did try to give up communism, the Soviet Union claimed the right to impose communism by force. This view became known as the Brezhnev Doctrine. The doctrine was finally abandoned in the 1980s.

The way the Soviet Union dealt with Czechoslovakia was less bloody than the treatment of Hungary after 1956. Nagy was executed. Dubček was thrown out of the communist party in 1970. He spent the 1970s and 1980s working as a forestry inspector. However, he kept his life and his freedom.

The government of China was unhappy at the invasion and it led to a further deterioration in relations between the two communist superpowers. The Chinese disliked the way the Soviet Union treated other communist countries. Afterwards, Mao encouraged Yugoslavia and Romania to remain independent of Moscow. There were border clashes between Soviet and Chinese troops in the months after the invasion.

The invasion disillusioned communists around the world. In Western Europe many communists stopped looking to Moscow for guidance. In the 1970s the powerful Italian and French communist parties called for a new style of communism that allowed free speech and free elections.

>> Activity

- 1 Explain in your own words why Brezhnev decided to invade Czechoslovakia in 1968.
- 2 Look back at the whole of this unit. What similarities and differences were there between the Hungarian Uprising and the invasion of Czechoslovakia? Think about the following aspects of each event:
 - > the causes of unrest,
 - > the aims of the people wanting change,
 - > the reasons why the Soviet Union found these changes unacceptable,
 - > the way the Soviet Union invaded,
 - > the treatment of the leadership after the invasion.