

Introduction

Sixty Years On: How the Superpowers Could Have Avoided the 1956 Hungarian Revolution

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Following the political transition in Hungary and in East-Central Europe in 1989-90 an archival revolution unfolded in the countries of the former Soviet bloc, including Russia after 1991. Thanks to this process, the previously taboo topic of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution has become one of the best researched events of the history of the Soviet Bloc by the time of the sixtieth anniversary of the events. This includes the international context of the revolt as well, which has been covered by scholars in Hungary and abroad based on multiarchival evidence.²

The editors of this special issue of the *Corvinus Journal of International Affairs* are glad to have brought together ten scholars dealing with either the broader theoretical implications of the Hungarian revolution in international politics or the reactions to it in specific countries and societies.

Therefore this introduction aims at addressing only the fundamental question, regularly raised ever since 1956, of whether there was any chance for the events to unfold in a different way. Investigating the policies of the two superpowers, the Soviet Union and the United States, we will find that in fact on both sides there were alternative options.

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Even if changing the course of events during the revolt was not possible once it had begun, it may have been possible to avoid the revolution itself.

Soviet strategic errors, the Mikoyan doctrine, and the myth of Soviet troop withdrawal

It is now clear that the outcome of the events in Hungary did not depend (as many have argued) on the West's behavior, but on how the Soviet leaders handled the political crisis that erupted on October 23. Tito, in his speech in Pula on November 11, 1956, is known to have called the first Soviet intervention on October 24 a mistaken decision, but remarkably little heed has been paid to weighing the historical chances of whether the Soviets, and only the Soviets, may have truly been in a position to decide on October 23, 1956—and if they could have decided otherwise.

It contradicts earlier assumptions to find that the Soviet leadership, preoccupied as they were with the Polish crisis that had broken out on October 19, 1956, were expressly reluctant to comply with Ernő Gerő's demand and deploy Soviet forces stationed in Hungary to break up the demonstrations in Budapest on October 23. The ultimate decision to intervene followed repeated appeals for help during the evening, and above all pressure from Ambassador Andropov who judged the situation to be very serious (Szereda and Rainer, 1996: 26–27).³

The CPSU (Communist Party of the Soviet Union) Presidium discussed the matter late in the evening of October 23. By that time armed clashes had occurred in Budapest, and the situation in Hungary was thought by the Soviet leaders to be far graver than the one in Warsaw. The idea of postponing the discussion until the following day, when the Soviet Union's allies could be consulted at the Moscow summit (originally convened to discuss the situation in Poland), was not even raised. At the summit, there would have been a chance to make the decision jointly on whether Soviet troops stationed in Hungary should be deployed as the country's leadership had requested. In the meantime, however, a compromise was reached on the Polish crisis, with Moscow dropping the idea of armed intervention and Gomułka assuring the Soviets that the envisaged reforms would not endanger communist power or the unity of the Soviet bloc. Indeed, the Polish scenario might have been applied in Hungary too, in spite of the limited armed conflict that had broken out there.

³ On the first Soviet intervention of October 24, 1956 see also Hajdu, 1992.

At the Presidium meeting this was put very plainly by Mikoyan, a respected member of the Soviet leadership and the one who knew the Hungarian situation best:

“There is no way of mastering the movement without [Imre] Nagy and so this will make it cheaper for us as well... What can we lose? Let the Hungarians restore order for themselves. Let us try political measures, and only after that send our troops in.”

(Kramer, 1996-1997b: 389).

In reality, this was the only rational option in the given situation, but the Presidium stood firm and eventually decided to order the Soviet troops stationing in Hungary to intervene and move into the capital.

The Soviet leadership, having tackled world political issues pragmatically since 1953—having, even in its last-minute solution to the Polish crisis, resisted its Cold War reflexes to use armed intervention on ideological and emotional grounds—proved incapable of biding its time and exercising such self-restraint in Hungary’s case. Khrushchev and his associates took the worst political decision *from their own point of view*, and gave rise to a process whose consequences would be just what armed intervention was supposed to spare them from. In other words, they achieved exactly the opposite of what they had wanted: not rapid pacification, but escalation of the sporadic armed actions into an extensive anti-Soviet war of liberation, of a kind unparalleled in the history of the Soviet bloc.⁴

Mikoyan’s rational proposal, although defeated by his colleagues in the Presidium deserves special attention as it might rightly be dubbed „the Mikoyan Doctrine.”⁵ It was no less than laying the ground for future Soviet crisis management strategy in case of the emergence of a serious crisis in one of the countries of the Soviet Bloc. This meant first trying to find a political solution to restore order (if need be, coupled with using armed forces) executed by local forces only, and thus to avoid Soviet military intervention, if at all possible. While Mikoyan’s proposal to this effect was voted down by the CPSU Presidium in 1956, in reality the Soviet leaders learned the lesson well. In their crisis management strategy during later conflicts they always sought initially and instinctively to use this doctrine: in 1968 in Czechoslovakia for eight months, and in Afghanistan in 1978–1979 for more than one and a half years. While these attempts eventually failed,

⁴ The Afghan partisan war precipitated by the Soviet intervention in 1979 is an exception, but the circumstances in that case were rather different.

⁵ For the first publication on this doctrine, see Békés (2002).

the first successful application of the Mikoyan doctrine occurred in December 1981 when General Jaruzelski introduced martial law in Poland.⁶

In fact we can argue that at almost every point in their treatment of the 1956 crisis in Hungary, Khrushchev and his associates were working against their own interests and committed three major strategic mistakes: 1) They did not pay attention to the expectations of Hungarian society for a more tolerable version of Communist rule promised by the CPSU 20th Congress; thus they decided too late to dismiss Rákosi, even though earlier on they did not hesitate to remove Chervenkov in Bulgaria already in April, 1956. 2) When they finally did this in mid-July, they did not replace Rákosi with János Kádár or some other lesser-known but acceptable leader, but with Ernő Gerő, the right-hand man of Rákosi, equally guilty for the past Stalinist crimes, and thus totally incapable of pacifying society. He was also known to have worked for the Soviet NKVD and being in charge of the bloody elimination of the non-Communist political opponents during the Spanish civil war. On top of that his character seemed to be even more negative than Rákosi's, as due to his stomach disease he almost never smiled. Therefore, while his predecessor occasionally could play the role of a jovial dictator and could make an impression even on Western diplomats, Gerő was simply a stern-looking dictator. In reality, thus, the Soviets succeeded in finding the worst possible option to replace Rákosi.⁷ Indeed, during the revolution Khrushchev confessed at a meeting of the Presidium that „Mikoyan and I made a mistake when we proposed Gerő instead of Kádár. We were taken in by Gerő” (Békés et al., 2002: 359).⁸ 3) Finally, their decision to intervene militarily on October 23 meant that there was only one direction for the events to take. Contrary to the Kremlin's expectations, the rapid Soviet intervention radicalized the masses to such a degree that now all chances of a political settlement were dispelled. Furthermore, the Soviets unwittingly misled Hungarian society with their method of intervention: they originally intended to pacify the situation through a show of force, but the military force they actually showed was rather limited and ineffective, especially as Soviet troops were ordered to shoot only when they were attacked. This “mild” version of military intervention might have seemed reasonable from a political perspective but the strategy of *intervention with a human face* eventually backfired. If Moscow had restored order

⁶ On the Polish crisis, see Paczkowski–Byrne, 2007.

⁷ Khrushchev was much more skilful in finding a proper candidate when he hand-picked Edward Ochab to succeed the Polish „small-Stalin,” Bierut, who died in Moscow in March 1956, right after the 20th Congress of the CPSU.

⁸ Working notes of Imre Horváth from the session of the CPSU CC Presidium, November 3, 1956.

right away on October 24 with the kind of massive and drastic military action they were to employ on November 4, thus signaling clearly its unqualified determination to preserve the communist system at any cost, the revolutionary events of October 24–November 3 probably would not have ensued. Instead, Khrushchev and his associates became trapped by their initial wrong decision. Now they tried out the *combination of an armed and a political solution*, which the revolutionary public interpreted as weakness and uncertainty. This misperception, quite a frequent feature of revolts against dictatorships, only further radicalized society.

The initial successes of the insurgent groups against the poorly organized Soviet units and the continual concessions by the Nagy government and the Kremlin eventually left the general impression that a revolutionary situation really had revolutionary possibilities: only persistence was needed to achieve the ultimate goal of a Western-type parliamentary democracy and full independence for the country. Yet present knowledge of the Soviet intentions makes it plain that any fundamental change was ruled out from the beginning and we can argue that the fate of the revolution was sealed even before it started, i.e. on October 22. The seed of ultimate catastrophe was sown in the demand for free elections, already one of the 16 Points compiled by students of the Technical University on that day, which became a nationwide general demand by the end of October. In Communist thinking, however, free, that is, multiparty, elections were tantamount to capitulation and treason, inevitably leading to the restoration of a bourgeois political system. Thus now there were only two possibilities. Either society would see in good time that the demand was excessive and voluntarily reduce its demands to a tolerable level—this seldom happens during a revolution, which is what makes it a revolution in the first place—or those exercising power in practice, in this case the Soviets, would decide to end the uncertainty and use force to inform the rebels of their error in thinking there was any chance for basic changes.

The most important new information on Soviet decision-making during the Hungarian Revolution emerging from the archives in Moscow was that the CPSU Presidium agreed unanimously on October 30 that the Soviet troops had to be withdrawn from Hungary, in case the Imre Nagy government requested this (Békés et al., 2002: 295–9). This truly surprising information was revealed by the so-called Malin notes, published in 1996 (Kramer, 1996–1997b). It was especially unforeseen because the next day, on October 31, the Presidium decided to crush the revolution, a fact that was known since 1992. Paradoxically, this crucial information did not lead to a general enlightenment

about Soviet policies, just the opposite in fact: this single piece of new evidence alone has led some scholars to conclude that the Soviet leaders were far more open in handling the crisis than previously thought, and that crushing the uprising had not been the only possible course, i.e. that the Soviet Union, for that brief historical moment, was ready to surrender Hungary. According to them, if circumstances (not usually detailed) had developed otherwise, there might have been a chance of the revolution succeeding, or even of the 1989–1990 liberation of East-Central Europe occurring thirty years earlier.⁹

In reality, however, this decision was not at all about recognizing the success of the revolution, much less about abandoning Hungary (Békés, 2006). The key to interpreting the often fragmented Malin notes is to use the still valid method of evaluating every new piece of information by analyzing the whole body of information, new and old, in the context of the overall world political situation and of East–West relations in their entirety. This approach makes it quite clear that the potential decision of the Soviet leadership could never have involved “letting Hungary go.” Just the opposite: full withdrawal of Soviet troops would have been the maximal political concession they were willing to make to thus help restore order in Hungary by non-military means, provided the Nagy government succeeded in (1) consolidating the situation while maintaining the Communist system, and (2) preserving membership in the Soviet bloc.

More importantly, there is much concrete evidence to be found in the Malin notes to show that the withdrawal would only have been considered on the basis of the satisfaction of the above mentioned two conditions. For now it is perhaps enough to mention just the two most strikingly phrased or documented opinions. Foreign minister Shepilov explained his support of the unanimous decision of the Presidium on October 30 as follows: „With the agreement of the government of Hungary, we are ready to withdraw troops. We will have to keep up a *struggle with national-Communism* [emphasis mine] for a long time” (Kramer, 1996–1997b: 392). It is characteristic that it was precisely Mikoyan who set forth the consequences of maintaining the status quo at any price in the most unambiguous terms—he, who otherwise consistently represented the most liberal viewpoint in the leadership regarding Hungary: „We simply cannot let Hungary to be removed from our camp,” he said at the November 1 session of the

⁹ This position has been taken most firmly by Mark Kramer (Kramer, 1996–1997a: 358–385.) An essentially similar position is held by Vladimir Zubok, who writes, “We can be sure that if the power setup around Khrushchev had developed differently and if a leader less given to violence than he had headed the Kremlin, Soviet tanks would not have rolled into Budapest and the history of Eastern Europe, including the Soviet Union, would have developed otherwise” (Zubok, 1997: 65).

Presidium, one day after the decision that the intervention was necessary, while in the meantime he tried to convince the others that the possibility of a political solution had not yet completely disappeared, and that they should wait another ten to fifteen days before invading (*ibid.*: 394).

The intended result of the Soviet concession on October 30 was thus not consenting to the restoration of the capitalist system and the independence of Hungary, but the consolidation of a situation akin to what happened in Poland, that is, the acceptance of the creation of a reformed communist system, displaying more independence internally, but remaining loyal to Moscow and within the confines of the Soviet bloc.¹⁰

Clearly the “lost” historical opportunity in 1956 that many still seek today cannot be that the Hungarian Revolution would have triumphed under luckier conditions, or that democracy and national independence may have been restored. The historical significance of the Soviet decision on October 30 about potential troop withdrawal is that Moscow at that juncture was still willing to make a bigger concession over Hungary than it had made over Poland, where the issue of Soviet troop withdrawal had never seriously been considered. The Kremlin was prepared to grant the privilege of relative internal or external self-determination (if the communist system and the unity of the Soviet bloc were retained) to a specific country—Hungary. Faced with that extraordinary critical situation, Khrushchev and his team would have made a complex concession, something the Soviet leadership would never again be willing to make in the decades to come. Moscow indeed tolerated in the post-1956 decades a type of internal development in Hungary and Poland that was relatively independent and more liberal than in other countries in the Soviet Bloc, but the price was loyalty in foreign policy. Romania, on the other hand, was allowed a semblance of independence in foreign policy, but its internal system remained in many respects more retrograde than the post-Stalinist Soviet one. Imperial interests dictated that quasi-independent domestic and foreign policies could not be allowed at the same time in any of the allied countries. The analysis of the first Soviet intervention on October 23 shows that the historical chances for the revolution were only theoretical, as the Soviet proposal of October 30 was contingent on retaining the communist system and the unity of the Soviet bloc. The Imre Nagy government—or any other government or leader—had (or would have had) no chance of complying with these expectations given the sweeping

¹⁰ For a detailed elaboration of this interpretation see Békés, 2002.

radical revolutionary changes that were triggered by the first Soviet intervention on October 24.

America: Inaction, non-intervention and indirect responsibility

The discord among the Western powers which came about as a result of the Middle Eastern conflict no doubt made things easier for the Soviets, though it is fairly certain that even without the Suez crisis they would have pursued a similar policy. To verify this statement, it is sufficient to examine the circumstances of the 1968 intervention in Czechoslovakia: at that time the Western alliance's freedom of movement was not restricted by any internal conflict, yet the West still responded to the invasion aimed at rescuing the communist regime with the same passivity as in 1956. Moreover, we now know that US President Lyndon B. Johnson, who at the end of August 1968 condemned the intervention in Czechoslovakia in a high-sounding declaration to the public, barely a few weeks (!) later, in September, proposed a summit meeting with Brezhnev via diplomatic channels on Vietnam, the situation in the Middle East, and to discuss the issue of anti-missile systems (Békés, 2004: 236.; Dobrynin, 1995: 189–195).

Therefore, Western passivity in 1956 was not caused by the Suez crisis, but by the limits to its range of options in Eastern Europe that were implicit in the prevailing European status quo and the notion of spheres of influence. The Suez crisis simply served as a handy excuse, especially for the United States, in order to explain why, after years of liberation propaganda, it was not capable of extending even the smallest amount of support to an East European nation which had risen in arms in an attempt to liberate itself from Soviet domination.

Against this background, it must be seen that there is no way that *direct* American or Western responsibility for the outbreak of the Hungarian Revolution can be deduced. We now know that in reality, the events which took place in Poland and, particularly, in Hungary in October of 1956 caught the US government completely by surprise. They thus found the news of the uprising in Hungary to be all the more disturbing, especially since Washington had no previously prepared strategy or scenario for dealing with such an unlikely extraordinary situation. It was at this time that the Eisenhower administration was confronted with the rather embarrassing fact that, contrary to the massive liberation propaganda it aimed at Eastern Europe since 1953, even the United States, the world's greatest military power, had no options regarding any sort of intervention within the Soviet sphere of influence. It was nonetheless very important for the United States to

conceal this impotence in order to preserve its international prestige. It was for this reason that at US initiative the issue of Soviet intervention in Hungary was put on the agenda of the UN Security Council on October 28. There, in line with Washington's policy of non-intervention, and due to a potential Soviet veto, it could conveniently be kept without the chance for any UN action up until November 4 (Békés, 1996: 14–21).

The United States, nevertheless, cannot be held responsible for not providing armed assistance to the Hungarian revolution as expected by many at the time. In the given Cold War context, applying a non-interventionist policy was in fact the only possible rational decision as intervention would have caused a direct danger of triggering a third World War. The potential instruments of political pressure were also fundamentally constrained by the system of spheres of influence established in 1945, because to extort any serious concessions from the Soviet Union could have been possible only through some significant compensation. Charles Gati regards as such the question of the occupation forces, and raises that Washington should have offered, in turn for the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Hungary, the withdrawal of its troops from one of the Western European states (Gati, 2006: 216).

But in itself the presence of Soviet troops in an allied country could not bear any significance concerning the maintenance of the communist regime: there were no Soviet troops in Bulgaria from late 1947, in Czechoslovakia between 1945 and 1968, and in 1958 they were completely withdrawn from Romania. Yet, the Communist system did not collapse in any of these countries. Furthermore, as we have seen, the decision of the CPSU Presidium of October 30 on pulling out Soviet troops from Hungary was made without any Western pressure, because for a very brief historical moment Moscow thought that this concession might facilitate the pacification of the situation and the consolidation of the communist system that was on the verge of collapse.

To take the thought experiment to an absurd extreme: if the West had really wanted to achieve that Moscow „give up” on Hungary, a country belonging to the Soviet empire, it should have proposed compensation of equal value. The exchange value of a concession of this magnitude might have been the “voluntary” Sovietization of a smaller NATO member state, e.g. Greece, Denmark or the Netherlands, and the transfer of that country to the Soviet sphere of influence. It is easy to realise that such an option would not have been an attractive alternative for Western policymakers or even the public.

Therefore, after the outbreak of the uprising, the US government had no political means by which it could have affected the events and facilitated the victory of the

Hungarian Revolution. Paradoxically, Washington had a historical chance to contribute to avoiding the revolution. We now know that the explosion in Hungary occurred basically for internal reasons, as well as because of the serious errors committed by the Soviets in their crisis management strategy during the year 1956. The nature of the revolt, however, might have been affected by the American liberation propaganda relentlessly pursued between 1953–1956, i.e. that social unrest took the most radical form possible: armed rebellion and war of independence against the Soviet army. The mostly young workers who risked their lives to take up arms against the overwhelmingly superior force of the Soviet army and the Hungarian state security forces were largely persuaded by massive American liberation propaganda,¹¹ and they believed that the United States had to look no further to find a better occasion to fulfil its promises than to support their fight for self-liberation.¹² This also explains why so many think even today that the West, and especially the US, abandoned and betrayed Hungary in 1956.

Therefore we can argue that there is some *indirect* responsibility on the part of the Eisenhower administration, whose double-faced policy and liberation propaganda, which had no basis at all, contributed to the emerging self-delusion in Hungary that getting rid of Soviet domination might be possible. Instead of conveying the originally well-intentioned, but overall tragically irresponsible promises of “liberation,” Washington should have introduced a much more differentiated approach no later than right after the bloody crushing of the Poznań uprising in June 1956, which clearly signaled the inherent dangers of US liberation rhetoric. They ought to have encouraged Central and Eastern European societies not to engage in hopeless active resistance but instead to accepting realities and work for the liberalization of their regimes, exactly as it happened later, from the 1960s on.

Just this undoubtedly „defeatist,” but at the same time realist attitude would have made it clear what for many people was still not at all clear in 1956: that an uprising in the Soviet empire was inevitably doomed to failure, and external help should not have been expected.

¹¹ For the transcripts of two Radio Free Europe broadcasts to Hungary during the revolution see: Békés et al., 2002: 286-289). The full text of the RFE’s Hungarian program during the revolt is published in Vámos (2009).

¹² According to a public opinion poll among Hungarian refugees in Austria, the great majority (96%) of the interviewed persons had expected some kind of US support, and of these 77% believed that it would be military support. International Research Associates, Inc. Hungary and the 1956 Uprising, Personal Interviews with 1,000 Hungarian Refugees in Austria, February 1957, as cited in Marchio, 1992: 417.

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