

# Conceptualising the Events of 1956: The Elusive Quest for a Conveniently Simple Definition

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## Abstract

The objective of the following article is to give the reader a perspective on the events of 1956 in Hungary – known commonly as the 1956 Hungarian Uprising or Revolution (or as it is sometimes called in Hungary: the 1956 Revolution and Freedom Fight) – from the point of view of counterinsurgency theory. The author intends to show that the current theory has many problems and shortcomings when it comes to the analysis of the events of 1956 because of the unique set of circumstances which prevailed at that time.

**Keywords:** insurgency, „counter-revolution,” Hungary, revolution, Soviet Union, uprising

## Introduction

Recently, the author had the opportunity to spend lunch with a group of historians during the lunch break of a conference. Given that it is the 60th anniversary of the Revolution of 1956 this year, the topic of what happened then was an unavoidable subject of the discussion. However, sitting with scholars who have studied said subject extensively, it was an interesting experience to realise just how difficult it is for us to define exactly what had taken place 60 years ago. Was it war? Was it a civil conflict with a Russian intervention? And when does a mass protest without a central leadership become a revolution?

It is a difficult task to define from a counterinsurgency theoretical standpoint what happened in those October weeks of 1956. On the one hand there is a lack of clear definitions for such basic types of events as revolutions, civil wars, etc.

In this article, the author will first offer a chronological overview of the key events, which are important to take into account in classifying what happened. In the

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second part of the article the author will introduce the currently available definitions for the categories mentioned above in order to arrive at a clearer view of the problems. In the third section, the author will conclude with some thoughts on how it may be possible to view the events of 1956 from a theoretical standpoint.

### **The Events**

It was not the first time the Soviet Bloc was rocked by protests unanticipated. Shortly before the Hungarian events, a wave of demonstrations took place in Poland. Before that, East Germany was rocked by violent street protests in 1953. Because of the historical background in the Polish case, and the death of Stalin in the East German case these outbursts against Soviet domination were at least not really surprising in hindsight. In Hungary, however, which was until then considered a stable regime, the mass protests for reforms were completely unexpected. Another major difference was how the Hungarian and Soviet authorities tried to handle the situation in the unique setting of the situation in the wake of the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and the de-Stalinisation announced there. Also unprecedented was how rapidly a(n up to that point) seemingly stable communist regime first crumbled, and eventually quickly collapsed under its own failures and under the pressure of its own citizenry.

For a quick overview and description of the events that took place in the fateful months of October and November 1956, the author will use the *History of the Soviet Bloc 1945-1991 Chronology of the Cold War History Research Center* in Budapest.

- October 22<sup>nd</sup>: Hungarian students put forward demands; the 16 points include free elections and the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Hungary. The leaders of the Petőfi Circle meet and demand that the Hungarian Workers' Party (HWP) dismiss Mátyás Rákosi from the Central Committee and allow Imre Nagy and other more reform-minded members into the Central Committee.
- October 23<sup>rd</sup>:
  - student demonstrations begin and the Ministry of the Interior gives confusing messages about banning the demonstrations. In the afternoon an estimated 200,000 people gather at the Kossuth Square; other demonstrations are also taking place elsewhere.
  - The protestors surround the building of the Hungarian State Radio in order to get their demands publicised, they gain control over the building the next day.
  - The HWP leadership asks for Soviet intervention. Later in the day Soviet forces stationed in Hungary are given orders to intervene.
  - Imre Nagy gives a speech, which falls short of the expectations of the demonstrators.
- October 24<sup>th</sup>:
  - Soviet armored forces arrive in Budapest.

- Ernő Gerő is confirmed as first secretary of the Party. Imre Nagy is appointed as Prime Minister, he calls repeatedly for calm.
- A state of emergency is declared.
- The first Workers' Council is formed. Armed groups are established in some districts of Budapest, seizing large amounts of weapons from the Hungarian People's Army.
- October 25<sup>th</sup>
  - Soviet and Hungarian forces open fire at protestors in front of the Parliament.
  - Gerő is dismissed as first secretary, János Kádár succeeds him. The Imre Nagy Government is formed.
  - Fighting is ongoing as Soviet reinforcements arrive. Workers' Councils are formed in Budapest and in the countryside.
- October 26<sup>th</sup>: fighting becomes more widespread and authorities use live fire on many occasions against protestors in cities across Hungary.
- October 27<sup>th</sup>: government and municipal buildings are seized while armed citizens mount small attacks on Soviet and Hungarian troops.
- October 28<sup>th</sup>:
  - the Nagy Government is sworn in. The same day Nagy publicly states, that he supports the revolutionaries.
  - unsuccessful Soviet attack in Budapest. A ceasefire is announced.
  - compromised party leaders flee Hungary.
- October 29<sup>th</sup>: the withdrawal of Soviet forces is announced.
- October 30<sup>th</sup>: Imre Nagy announces the end of the one-party system, and forms a coalition government. Old parties are re-established accordingly.
- October 31<sup>st</sup>:
  - the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Budapest is completed.
  - Soviet troop reinforcements enter Hungary.
- November 1<sup>st</sup>:
  - Soviet troops encircle Budapest.
  - Nagy announces withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact and declares the neutrality of Hungary.
  - The government forbids Hungarian military units to resist Soviet troops.
  - Kádár leaves Hungary for the Soviet Union.
- November 4-20<sup>th</sup>: a general offensive is launched by the Soviet forces, in the course of which all resistance against Soviet forces is crushed in the country. The Nagy Government orders the Hungarian People's Army not to resist. The fighting in Budapest ends on the 11<sup>th</sup> of November, after heavy fighting and extensive casualties on both sides.
- November 7<sup>th</sup>: János Kádár returns to Hungary in a Soviet armored column to form a government in Budapest. (Békés, 2013)

As we can see from this short chronological overview, there are many important elements which need to be considered, when thinking about the nature of the conflict. On the political side, these are: inner party conflicts, the resentment of the population against the HWP leadership because of failed policies, resentment against outside interference, and, finally, the act by the Imre Nagy Government of openly breaking with the Soviets and the Warsaw Pact, and the declaration of neutrality. On the military side, it is important to note

that the groups involved in the fighting on the Hungarian side were mostly volunteers, and that the size and the level of organisation of the groups concerned varied greatly. As already stated, conventional formations of the Hungarian People's Army did not take part in the fighting – some of the soldiers and army officers did nevertheless join the armed groups. The Hungarian State Protection Authority (SPA) remained the only force which unequivocally and actively defended the old system, while parts of the police and the military also remained loyal to the „old order.” However, the bulk of the fighting was done by Soviet troops.

### **Some basic observations regarding the theorisation of the events**

The quest for defining what happened in 1956 started immediately. The Gerő leadership labelled the event a „counter-revolution” and the Soviets shared this view. On the Hungarian side opposed to the old order, the events were called a „revolution,” and later the term „freedom fight” also appeared in the description of the events. These are, however, politically charged attempts to capture what happened, with an intent to justify the actions of the respective sides and to claim legitimacy therefore. For this reason it is important to categorise the events according to universal definitions that are in use at the present.

The protestors, a part of whom became street fighters of the urban battle that followed, came from politically very different backgrounds, and they could not formulate a unified long-term political vision (the events unfolded so fast that this would have been simply impossible). The support of the reformist Nagy Government became a common point for these groups. Though they supported the new government, they were not state-sanctioned, and they disregarded the orders not to resist the Soviet troops. It can thus be stated that on the Hungarian side loosely organised armed groups were fighting for a reformist government which they helped come to power through street protests, even as they were not under the direct command of this government.

On the Soviet side, the cause of the intervention is clear from a political point of view (they did not want to lose Hungary as a part of their sphere of influence). However, in order to achieve this aim, the Soviet leadership had to rely on a very shaky legal justification, and also had to suffer surprising setbacks on the military side.

Although the Soviet Union had by this point in time faced several conflicts where it was confronted with non-state armed groups in an urban environment, Soviet troops were not prepared adequately for the kind of combat they had to engage in. This is no

surprise considering that the earlier conflicts where Soviet forces engaged in counterinsurgency were fought without the participation of the regular army, mainly by organisations such as the NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs) and later the KGB (the Soviet state security service from 1954 to 1991), the GUBB (Chief Directorate for the Struggle against Banditry) and the police. Indeed, the Red Army was barred early on in its history from fighting insurgent forces (Statiev, 2010: 7). This therefore constitutes an important part of the explanation for the poor results from the Soviet point of view at the beginning of the fighting. Also, the Soviet units were mostly armored forces unsuited for the type of urban combat which awaited them in Budapest.

Making the picture more complicated is the fact that Soviet troops joined the battle shortly after the first instances of violent encounters. At first they were asked by the Hungarian governing authorities to intervene, but after the formation of the Nagy Government they continued in their role. The Soviet Government broke its promises about ending military operations in Hungary. Thus the role of the Soviet forces transformed from supporting the Hungarian security forces (which in many instances meant fighting without actual Hungarian support) to changing the Hungarian government of the day and defeating the forces fighting in its support.

The members of the Hungarian armed groups mostly did not have any practical knowledge of urban fighting either. The partisan movement, which was active in Hungary during the Second World War, was small, and guerrilla warfare did not have a tradition in Hungary – there was no culture of this kind of fighting. Hungarian insurgents thus relied on improvised anti-armor tactics and mostly improvised weaponry, such as the Molotov cocktail.

Finally, there is the issue of Western interference in the information sphere of the events. Later official Hungarian publications put the blame squarely on *Radio Free Europe* and *Voice of America*, going as far as stating that these radio channels were actively directing the actions of the armed groups. What is true is – as Richard Schultz writes – that the aim of U.S. „psywar” efforts at the time was liberation through encouraging opposition, and the programming of the two stations was managed accordingly. This nourished false hopes of Western intervention on the part of otherwise undirected insurgents (Schultz, 2000: 164-165).

### **Finding the Relevant Definitions for the Events**

Although intra-state conflicts were on the rise in the 20th century, and are a very relevant factor of today's international system, their appropriate theorisation was neglected for most of the 20th century. This is a difficult challenge, as in the case of intra-state armed conflicts political, economic, information and military dimensions cut across each other to form a theoretical and practical field of study, where no easy answers are usually found. But it must also be stated that scholarship on these issues made great leaps, leaving behind the concept of „small” wars (as opposed to „big” or – in the perspective of some – „real” wars fought against „peers” or „near peers”, or by states against states in other words), thus creating the grounds for new theoretical concepts for classifying and interpreting conflicts.

*Resistance.* The most basic notion with which one can operate in this field is the one of resistance. Resistance can be broadly defined and has several variants (it may suffice to mention the most basic classification: violent and non-violent resistance). The U.S. Army defines a resistance movement as „An organised effort by some portion of the civil population of a country to resist the legally established government or an occupying power and to disrupt civil order and stability” (JP 1-02, 2016:203).

Using this definition one can argue that the short period before the 22nd of October and the first few hours of the 23rd can be considered as the formation of a non-violent resistance movement, which intended to force some changes in policies through demonstrations. However, the events overtook this approach quite quickly. We can thus conclude that what happened was neither an unorganised nor an organised form of resistance.

*Insurgency.* The last decade brought a revival to the field of research dealing with insurgencies. There are, however, a number of definitions concentrating on different aspects of this type of conflict.

The U.S. Army defines insurgency today as „The organised use of subversion and violence to seize, nullify, or challenge political control of a region” (JP 1-02, 2016: 113). This definition may be in need of some clarification, as the definition of „subversion” is also problematic. According to the U.S. Army's *Joint Publication 1-02* subversion is defined as „Actions designed to undermine the military, economic, psychological, or political strength or morale of a governing authority” (JP 1-02, 2016: 228).

It is difficult to tell if there was a subversive approach at the time of the first protests. According to the definition above, peaceful protests may also be understood as subversive activity insofar as they aim to „undermine the political strength or morale of

the governing authority.” The protests were orchestrated by civil groups in order to achieve political aims. However, these were at first not openly challenging the governing authority. Against this speaks the fact that subversion is usually part of a more complex approach used by a clandestine group. In the Hungarian case there is no evidence of such a background to the events.

As already stated, the violence was initiated by the state, not by non-state actors. It is thus safe to say that the first violent actions on the part of non-state actors were a reaction to the approach of the security authorities. Also, at first the violence was unorganised from the non-state side. The lack of organisation was not only a distinctive trait of the use of violence, but it was also manifest in the ever more radical political demands of the different groups involved. It may be said that the protestors were in agreement only regarding the need for change. What came next was either open to discussion, or it was connected to differing visions of the future of Hungary.

Bard O’Neill, in his seminal book on *Insurgency and Terrorism* uses a wider definition for insurgency: „Insurgency may be defined as a struggle between a nonruling group and the ruling authorities, in which the nonruling group consciously uses political resources (e.g., organisational expertise, propaganda and demonstrations) and violence to destroy, reformulate, or sustain the basis of legitimacy of one or more aspects of politics” (O’Neill, 2005: 15). This definition places the organised use of different „political resources” at the center of the definition. As already stated, one cannot speak of an organised approach in the political sense in the case at hand. Also, there was a great variety of demands, on a broad spectrum. The most important and most common were the exit of Soviet troops from Hungary and a change in the composition of the leadership – at that point, however, demands have not included a change of the system. So it is debatable if political action targeted the legitimacy of the system as a whole. The events thus do not satisfy the definition of O’Neill.

The basic U.S. Army definitions and the definition of O’Neill do not therefore bring us closer to a resolution of the issue of the appropriate definition, because these definitions concentrate on the type and use of violence. Because of the quick changes in the situation and the limited timeframe within which these took place, issues related to the above definitions are difficult to assess.

Considering the political dimensions, Ted Gurr’s seminal work on *Why Men Rebel* offers some prospectively enlightening definitions.

*Revolution.* In Gurr's view, a revolution is „fundamental sociopolitical change accomplished through violence” (Gurr, 1971: 4). It is impossible to know how fundamental the changes brought by a Nagy Government would have been, had it had the chance to stay in position. However, for the first few days, the „revolution” framework may well apply to the events: the protests started a process of radical change in the Hungarian Workers' Party, at the end of which the Nagy Government declared itself willing to get out of the Warsaw Pact and also declared the neutrality of the country. Also, the initiation of violence was originated not by non-state actors, but by the state itself, through its oppressive measures, which is an important factor with a view to classification as a revolution.

*Civil War.* Stathis N. Kalyvas offers a definition in his work, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, a widely cited definition of civil war. According to this definition, civil war should be defined as „armed combat within the boundaries of a recognised sovereign entity between parties subject to a common authority at the outset of the hostilities” (Kalyvas, 2009: 17). This definition places emphasis on the territory where the fighting is taking place and the common authority to which each party taking part in the fighting belong at the start. As for the territory, the fighting was confined to within the borders of Hungary. However, it is difficult to clarify what „common authority” means in this case, regarding the Soviet forces. Using this definition, one could argue that the events of the first days, until the Nagy Government came to power, constituted a civil war, in which Soviet troops took part as an ally of the official Hungarian governing authorities. Within days, with the consolidation of the Nagy Government, the conflict transformed into a conflict between the Soviet Union and Hungary, and the usage of the term „civil war” would be misleading for this conflict, considering that nowadays the term is applied to long-running internal conflicts rather (even as these often take place with significant external involvement).

## **Conclusion**

The events of October and November are difficult to categorise. The aspects, because of which this undertaking is made difficult are plenty: the chaotic manner in which the events unfolded, the shortness of time, the status of Soviet forces, the role of other outside forces, etc. Accordingly, most of the current definitions are in themselves not enough to describe what has taken place. Therefore it is useful for definitional purposes to interpret the course of events in two distinct stages. Firstly, the political protests and the ensuing



violence, which helped Imre Nagy into power. Secondly, the fight of the Nagy Government and its supporters against the Soviet role in Hungary.

It is regarding the first stage that we have the arguably easier task. Using Gurr's definition, we can state that the events were indeed revolutionary in nature: the movement born on the 23rd of October was indeed a remarkable socio-political transformation in Hungarian political affairs.

This success was so fundamental, the swiftness with which the old order crumbled and gave way to the new, reform-minded leadership, that according to Mitrokhin's account, Yuri Andropov, the Soviet ambassador at the time in Budapest, became infected with a „Hungarian complex.” As chairman of the KGB and as the leader of the Soviet Union, he later on actively sought to prevent any possible recurrence of similar events anywhere in the Soviet Bloc (Andrew and Mitrokhin, 2000: 7).

Regarding the second stage of the events, the task of definition is much more difficult. Soviet troops were stationed in Hungary in the framework of the Warsaw Pact, and were asked by the Hungarian leadership to join the fight against armed (but, in reality, probably unarmed) protestors. Subsequently, the Soviet role transformed quickly from supporting Hungarian forces against armed groups to fighting against the new Hungarian government, which was nominally an ally of the Soviet Union. Making things more complicated, the Nagy Government encouraged a peaceful solution and discouraged fighting against Soviet forces. It was using János Kádár as a legitimizing figure that the Soviet leadership attempted to portray its actions internationally as legitimate, further complicating a classification of what they were doing.

In the end, based on a false pretext, they used conventional military forces and tactics to break all organised armed opposition in the country, but left the political complexities for the new Hungarian leadership to manage. The Nagy Government, in the meantime, discouraged armed opposition, but went for a complete political break with Moscow.

It is thus difficult to define the Soviet actions from the Hungarian point of view: was it a case of armed interference in Hungarian domestic affairs, or was it more? In conclusion, it is safe to say that the complexity of the events of 1956 defies attempts at a simple definition of what happened.

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