

**ODUMUNC 2009 Issue Brief**  
**Historical Security Council**  
**The Hungarian Revolution**  
*William R. Patterson*



**Introduction:**

The Hungarian Revolution began on the afternoon of October 23, 1956 when approximately 20,000 people, galvanized by a student movement, gathered in Budapest in protest of the Soviet domination of their government. By the early evening the crowd had expanded to include more than 200,000 protesters. In an effort to broadcast their demands via radio, a contingent of the protesters entered the Radio Budapest building. They were detained inside the building by police. Rumor spread amongst the crowd outside that they had been shot and the crowd became increasingly unruly. In response, police within the Radio Budapest building began firing upon the crowd from upper-story windows, killing many. This only further emboldened the crowd which set fire to police vehicles, seized weapons from military depots, and vandalized communist symbols throughout the capital city. A contingent of Hungarian soldiers sent to quell the riots instead decided to join them.

In response to the widespread violence, the head of the Party Secretary of the Hungarian Working People's Party, Erno Gero, requested Soviet assistance. By the next morning Soviet soldiers and tanks were guarding the parliament and other important governmental buildings. The revolt continued, however, and the ruling government collapsed, forcing Gero and the former Prime Minister Andras Hegedus to flee to the Soviet Union. The protesters threw Molotov cocktails at Soviet tanks and continued to engage in armed resistance throughout the city. Believing that the communist government had been largely defeated, a cease-fire agreement was reached with Soviet forces on October 28th and most Soviet military units were withdrawn from Budapest by the 30th to positions in the nearby Hungarian countryside.

The Hungarians began forming a new "social democratic" government and Imre Nagy, a reform-minded Communist, became the new Prime Minister. Nagy appointed non-Communist ministers and abolished the one-party system. Initially the Soviets decided to limit their intervention. When the Hungarians declared their intention to withdraw from the Warsaw Pact, however, the Soviets decided that strong measures were needed in order to prevent that from taking place. The Soviets feared that if the Hungarians were allowed to withdraw from the Warsaw Pact then others might follow, thereby leading to its complete unraveling.

On November 3rd, 1957 the Soviets arrested Defense Minister Pal Maleter and his delegation after luring them to a meeting supposedly convened to discuss permanent Soviet withdrawal. The next morning the Soviets invaded Budapest with the overwhelming force of 17 army divisions. The attack included air strikes, tank and artillery fire, and occupying soldiers. Prime Minister Nagy made a radio appeal to the world for military assistance against the Soviet aggression. The Hungarian resistance fought bravely until they were completely overcome on November 10<sup>th</sup>. By this time more than 2,500 Hungarians and 700 Soviet troops had been killed.

In the aftermath of the Revolution the Soviets reasserted their will over the government. Prime Minister Nagy was deported to Romania where he was soon

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executed. Tens of thousands of resisters and protesters were imprisoned or deported to the Soviet Union.

**Historical Background:**

At the end of World War II the Soviet Union occupied much of Eastern Europe, including Hungary. Hungary's freely-elected government was gradually replaced with the Hungarian Communist Party which was largely a puppet government for the Soviets. The Communist Party had taken complete control of the government by 1949. The new Communist regime brought both economic decline and political repression. Intellectuals were arrested, tortured, and deported to the Soviet Union where they were imprisoned in concentration camps. The Soviet Union exacted "war reparations" which amounted to approximately \$300 million. This resulted in massive hyperinflation and further devastation of the already war-ravaged economy. The Soviets prevented Hungary from accepting Marshall Plan aid. Hungary was also forced to join the Warsaw Pact in 1955 which was the Soviet's response to the Western NATO alliance.

By the time of the Revolution the Cold War between the Americans and the Soviets was well under way. The Americans blustered about "rolling back" the Iron Curtain and Soviet advances in Europe while the Soviets continued to search out opportunities for the global advancement of communism. It is arguable that America's rhetoric encouraged the Hungarians to rebel since they expected Western, and particularly American, aid.

It is also important to place the Revolution within the context of the Suez Crisis which was going on at the same time. Tension was extremely high as the Soviets squared off with the West over the British, French, and Israeli invasion of Egypt. The Soviets believed that backing down in Hungary would display weakness which the Americans would exploit in the Suez Crisis and elsewhere. The Soviet fear of exuding weakness was especially salient since Joseph Stalin had died in 1953 and there had been a transition of power to Nikita Khrushchev. The Americans, on the other hand, worried that military intervention in either Egypt or Hungary could lead to a war with the Soviets that they greatly wished to avoid. The fact that the Revolution overlapped in time with the Suez Crisis likely caused a more aggressive response to it by the Soviets and a more restrained response by the Americans.

**Role of the United Nations:**

The United States called for the UN Security Council to convene on October 24th. Little action was taken, however, and no resolution was put forth. The Security Council discussed the issue again on November 4th in response to Prime Minister Nagy's plea for assistance. A resolution critical of Soviet actions was voted on but was of course vetoed by the Soviet delegation. The issue was moved to a Special Emergency Session of the General Assembly which passed a resolution calling on the Soviets to end their

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aggression. This resolution was ignored by the Soviets and the newly empowered Communist government in Hungary.

In 1957 UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld initiated an investigative body called the Special Committee on the Problem of Hungary. The committee interviewed hundreds of Hungarian refugees including members of the former government, soldiers, and ordinary people from all walks of life. The report issued by the Committee concluded that Soviet occupation and the puppet government that it controlled were violations of the Hungarian people's human rights. The General Assembly passed a resolution (Resolution 1312) condemning the occupation but no other action was taken.

**Country Positions:**

With the exception of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union itself, the Security Council was in consensus over condemning the Soviet occupation of Hungary. The Soviets, however, utilized their veto power to halt any activity that the Security Council might have hoped to take. Britain, France and the United States were all vigorously opposed to the Soviet Union's actions but felt powerless to oppose them with more than rhetoric. Since China's seat was still held by Taiwan, which America was backing in opposition to the mainland, it was also in agreement with the American position. Similarly, the U.S. had recently backed a military coup in Iran that installed a pro-American regime that it could count on for support in the Council. Cuba was also a member of the Council but was not yet in alignment with the Soviets. Condemnation of the Soviets' actions had strong support in the General Assembly. The vote to condemn the Soviet occupation of Hungary had 50 in favor 8 against and 15 abstentions.

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**Resources:**

Hungarian Revolution of 1956, Wikipedia:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hungarian\\_Revolution\\_of\\_1956](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hungarian_Revolution_of_1956)

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Csaba Bekes, Malcolm Byrne, and Janos Rainer, The 1956 Hungarian Revolution: A History in Documents, Central European University Press, 2003.

István Deák, "Did the Revolution Have to Fail?" *New York Review of Books*, v. 54, n. 3 (1 March 2007).

Geza Jeszenszky, William Raymond Smith, and reply by István Deák, "The Hungarian Revolution: An Exchange", *New York Review of Books*, v. 54, n. 7 (26 April 2007).