

Division and Realignment in Europe, 1945 – 1992 | Sample answer

Why was there an uprising in Hungary in 1956, and why did the Soviet Union take steps to crush it? (2018)

The Hungarian uprising of 1956 appeared to represent all that the Cold War stood for. The citizens of Hungary and the rest of the Eastern European 'satellite states' were governed by a Marxist-Leninist Russia. Those who challenged Soviet authority paid a harsh price. Before World War II, the Hungarian government had been anti-communist and anti-Russian, allying with Hitler in 1940. Following the defeat of German forces on Russian soil, the red army had pushed retreating Germans through Hungary, which the Soviet troops then began to occupy. In 1956, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev made a secret speech condemning Stalin's policy and announcing the de-Stalinisation policy, which he would follow. However, fierce opposition to Soviet rule in Hungary began to grow, leading to an uprising against Khrushchev's USSR.

Over a period of time, the Hungarian nation mourned its loss of identity in its Stalinist country. Russian culture and language became forced onto the Hungarian population. Hungarian street signs quickly were replaced by Russian ones, while Russian became the primary language in education. Hungarians had been devout Christians, but communism discouraged religious belief. The Hungarian Catholic church was penalised when its leader Cardinal Mindszenty was sentenced to life imprisonment. Discontent grew, and hatred towards the Soviet Union became a common sentiment. Once a proud nation with a strong sense of identity, Hungary was now a puppet state of the USSR.

Commonly referred to as the "Hungarian Stalin," Mátyás Rákosi was Hungary's de facto ruler between 1949 and 1956. He maintained his power through various methods of power and oppression. Under his rule, over 2,000 citizens were executed with some 100,000 imprisoned by his secret police, the State Protection Authority. Rákosi showcased little talent for running a country. His policies of collectivisation modeled on that of Stalin's failed disastrously, causing economic ruin and widespread famine. Rákosi's harsh and terror focused rule forced many Hungarian's to resent Soviet Russia and its communist policies, fuelling an uprising.

In 1953, Rákosi was replaced by the popular Imre Nagy. Nagy began to reform the Hungarian state, limiting harsh communist policies. Soon, he found himself removed from office as the Kremlin distrusted him. Despite his dismissal, Nagy had inspired the Hungarian population to continue his process of change and development. Following Khrushchev's famous secret speech condemning Stalin, frustration with Soviet rule was expressed through a demonstration held by another puppet state, Poland. Both Nagy's reform movement and Poland's rebellion were key catalysts in capturing the imagination of the Hungarian nation, inspiring them to seek freedom from Soviet control.

The Yugoslav press and its diplomatic representatives played a substantial role in influencing the uprising. The Yugoslavs had been ousted from the Cominform – the communist information bureau in 1948 as well as boycotted by Eastern European countries. After Khrushchev's speech in 1955, a USSR-Yugoslavia détente began to develop. Despite this, the Yugoslavs continued to display to other satellite states that there was an alternative way to communism in which Yugoslavia was a model. Yugoslav journalists and delegates frequently visited Hungary and attended the Petofi circle debates. The press played a pivotal role in informing the Hungarians about the uprising in Poland and also encouraged support of Nagy. The role of Yugoslavia was essential in bringing about the uprising in Hungary.

On the 23rd of October 1956, students supported by the Hungarian army took to the streets of Budapest to protest against the communist regime. Leading to bloodshed, thousands were wounded and killed in the uprising. Following Nagy's intervention, the Soviets agreed to the formation of a government under Nagy, and Soviet tanks slowly withdrew from the city. The new Hungarian liberal prime minister Nagy soon announced his decision to introduce free elections and the removal of Hungary from the Warsaw pact.

The Soviet leader Khrushchev refused to accept Hungary's proposal to abandon the Warsaw pact. This would prove detrimental to the USSR's buffer zone with Western Europe, leaving a gap in its defenses. Amidst growing tensions on a global scale, the Kremlin believed it was paramount to crush the uprising. 6,000 Soviet tanks crossed the Hungarian border, where bitter street fighting took place. Nagy was removed and later executed and replaced by a loyal communist János Kádár.

Despite its failure, the Hungarian Uprising of 1956 marked a significant turning point in the history of the USSR. It displayed the discontent associated with Soviet rule and altered the mindset of many of its puppet states, which would eventually lead to the fall of communism in 1989. While many factors contributed to the commencement of the uprising, domestic factors such as economics, culture, and harsh de facto leadership are arguably the most dominant causes. External factors such as inspiration from Poland and Yugoslavia also played an important role. The uprising claimed thousands of lives as a result of Khrushchev's determination to crush it to maintain an unbroken buffer zone amid the Cold war.