

The Hungarian uprising

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During the 1950s, the Hungarians, and more specifically intellectuals and students embittered by the Communist regime, demanded the withdrawal of Soviet troops and the organisation of free, pluralist elections. The people began to protest more and more openly against the fall in their standard of living and the alienation of national independence.

In late October 1956, following the news of the Polish rebellion against Soviet hegemony, Hungary's political opposition also demonstrated its discontent by marching peacefully through the streets of Budapest before organising armed conflict. Some members of the Hungarian army fought on the side of the rebels. A new Hungarian government, led by Imre Nagy, supported the rebels. It called for the withdrawal of Soviet troops and abolished the one-party system before announcing Hungary's unilateral withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact and proclaiming the country's neutrality.

On 1 November 1956, the Red Army seemed to be withdrawing. In reality, however, it continued to keep an eye on the country, which was foundering in a 'counter-revolution'. Between 4 and 8 November 1956, Nikita S. Khrushchev ordered the Red Army to put down the Hungarian uprising by force. Soviet troops attacked en masse and abolished the independent national government. Janos Kadar, First Secretary of the Communist Party, became Hungary's new head of government and restored a strict regime, which was not, however, opposed to certain economic reforms.

The moment chosen by the Soviets was very favourable to them because the Western powers were deeply divided and weakened by the Suez crisis, which coincided with the events in Eastern Europe. The West was in no position to react appropriately and was forced to stand helplessly by as the Russians returned to Hungary. Hungary was immediately subjected to merciless repression, and hundreds of thousands of Hungarians fled to the West. The new Hungarian Government, bankrolled by Moscow, restored a dictatorial regime in the country and closed all the borders again. This forceful intervention, which trampled democracy underfoot, resulted in the USSR's standing in the countries of Western Europe falling to its lowest level since the Second World War.