

THE HUNGARIAN REVOLUTION OF 1956 IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COLD WAR MILITARY CONFRONTATION

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This paper will look at the East-West military balance in 1956 and at each side's (i.e., Moscow's and Washington's) understanding of the balance. It will look also at the way in which each side regarded the danger of nuclear war, and at how each side regarded the other's approach to nuclear war. Finally, the paper will address Moscow and Washington's views of the danger that the Hungarian revolution might escalate to general war, and at the communication between the two sides on that score during the revolution.

Keywords: Hungarian revolution, Cold War, nuclear weapons, general war, communication

Introduction

The United States and its NATO allies took no military action in 1956 to help the Hungarian revolution. Many participants in the revolution felt betrayed by this lack of help, especially because the Eisenhower Administration had espoused the language of liberation for the countries of Eastern Europe. Not only did the United States not attempt to provide military support to the revolution; President Eisenhower and his top advisors did not even think of providing such support. They did not ask the Joint Chiefs of Staff to consider the question of employing military force to aid the revolution.¹ The Soviet leaders, for their part, did not expect the West to intervene with military force. The Soviet leaders mentioned the possibility of a wider war only to dismiss it, according to the notes we now have of their deliberations in the Central Committee Presidium.

Eisenhower in his memoirs recalls that the Soviet military operation in Hungary “almost automatically had posed to us the question of employing force to oppose this barbaric invasion”, but geographical and political factors made a military response impracticable. Hungary was a landlocked state that could be reached only by crossing the territory of neutral Austria, Titoist Yugoslavia, or communist Czechoslovakia. Britain and France could not have joined in such an operation,

because they were preoccupied with the Suez crisis, and it would have been unthinkable to use Italian or West German forces. “I still wonder”, Eisenhower wrote,

what would have been my recommendation to the Congress and the American people had Hungary been accessible by sea or through the territory of allies who might have agreed to react positively to the tragic fate of the Hungarian people ... Sending United States troops alone into Hungary through hostile or neutral territory would have involved us in general war.²

Khrushchev’s son, Sergei Khrushchev, recalls that on November 4, 1956 he asked his father why the Americans had not intervened with military force in Hungary. Khrushchev’s reply was:

Everything happened so quickly that possibly they simply did not have time to do so. The Americans cannot, of course, be taken at their word, they respect only force, but unofficially they told us that they would not interfere in Hungarian affairs with their armed forces or with direct deliveries of arms. They consider Hungary to be in our sphere of interests.³

The absence of any serious discussion of Western military intervention in either Washington or Moscow is an important aspect of the Hungarian revolution. In this paper we explore the military-political context of the revolution and how it may have shaped the responses of both the Soviet Union and the United States to the revolution.

The Military-Political Context

Significant changes were taking place in the East-West military balance in the mid-1950s. First and foremost, a relationship of mutual deterrence was beginning to emerge between the United States and the Soviet Union. The United States had lost its atomic monopoly in 1949. In 1956 it still enjoyed considerable numerical superiority in nuclear weapons – about 4,600 to an estimated 400 for the Soviet Union. (Besides, Britain had tested a fission bomb in 1952 and was acquiring a nuclear arsenal of its own.) Nevertheless, the Soviet nuclear arsenal was growing, and with it the Soviet capability to deliver nuclear weapons against targets in the United States and Western Europe.

The US capacity to strike the Soviet Union was much greater than the Soviet ability to strike the United States. US Strategic Air Command had more and better bombers than the Soviet Long Range Air Force. Besides, the United States had bases in Europe, North Africa, and Asia from which bombers could take off on

bombing raids against the Soviet Union; the Soviet Union had no equivalent bases close to the United States. Nevertheless, by 1956 the Soviet Union did have a substantial force of medium bombers, which could strike targets in Europe, including US air bases, and in that year the Miasishchev M-4 intercontinental bomber entered service with the Long-Range Air Force.

The Eisenhower Administration took the view that Soviet capabilities were already sufficient to inflict considerable damage on the United States and its European allies. NSC 5501, "Basic National Security Policy", adopted on 7 January 1955 by the National Security Council, concluded: "Soviet air-atomic capabilities are rapidly increasing. Already the USSR has the capacity to inflict widespread devastation [sic] on major free world countries allied to the U.S. and serious damage to the U.S. itself."⁴

A second development of great importance took place in the mid-1950s, reinforcing the emergence of mutual deterrence. The United States and the Soviet Union tested thermonuclear weapons with explosive yields very much greater than those of the fission bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In November 1952 the United States tested (in the "Mike" shot) a device that showed it had mastered the design of a "superbomb" that could produce almost infinite explosive yields. In the spring of 1954 it conducted a series of tests in the South Pacific. One of those tests produced a yield of 15 megatons – more than 1,000 times greater than the yield of the bomb dropped on Hiroshima. In November 1955 the Soviet Union tested a bomb that showed that it too had mastered the design of the superbomb. Each side could now inflict enormous damage on the other by dropping a small number of bombs.⁵

These tests shocked public opinion around the world. They also shook the political leaders of the three nuclear powers. After his election as president, Eisenhower received a report on the US Mike shot. He was troubled by the report and in his inaugural address declared: "science seems ready to confer upon us, as its final gift, the power to erase human life from this planet."⁶ On March 9, 1954 Churchill wrote to Eisenhower after reading an account of that same Mike shot: "You can imagine what my thoughts are about London. I am told that several million people would certainly be obliterated by four or five of the latest H Bombs."⁷ On March 12, 1954 the Soviet Premier, G. M. Malenkov, made a speech in which he said that "a new world war ... with modern weapons means the end of world civilization".⁸ Khrushchev too had been briefed about nuclear weapons when he was appointed First Secretary of the CPSU in September 1953. "When I ... learned all the facts about nuclear power", he recalled some years later, "I couldn't sleep for several days. Then I became convinced that we could never possibly use these weapons, and when I realized that I was able to sleep again."⁹

The third important development followed from the first two: the emergence of "common knowledge" about the unacceptability of nuclear war. Eisenhower was

convinced that the Soviet leaders did not want war, because war would put at risk their hold on power, but the prospect of growing Soviet nuclear strength impelled him to make sure that the Soviet leaders understood just how destructive a nuclear war would be. At the Geneva Summit in July 1955 – the first since Potsdam – he made a special effort to impress upon them the terrible consequences of a nuclear war, pointing in particular to the danger of nuclear fallout. At dinner one evening he explained with great earnestness that the development of modern weapons was such that the country that used them “genuinely risked destroying itself”. Because of the prevailing winds, he added, a major war would destroy the Northern Hemisphere.¹⁰

The Geneva Summit did not yield any major agreements, but Eisenhower returned to Washington believing, as he put it in a television broadcast, “there seems to be a growing realization by all that nuclear warfare, pursued to the ultimate, could be practically race suicide”.¹¹ Anthony Eden, the British Prime Minister, drew very much the same conclusion: “Each country present learnt that no country attending wanted war and each understood why. The Russians realized, as we did, that this situation had been created by the deterrent power of thermo-nuclear weapons.”¹² Khrushchev recalled in his memoirs that he returned from Geneva “encouraged, realizing that our enemies probably feared us as much as we feared them”.¹³ Khrushchev apparently saw Eisenhower’s homily on nuclear war as evidence that the United States was as anxious as the Soviet Union to avoid such a war.

By the mid-1950s the political leaders of each of the nuclear states understood that nuclear war was unacceptable in some profound, if ill-defined, way. Each of them knew that the others understood this too, and each of them knew that each knew that the others understood it, and so on. The unacceptability of nuclear war had thus become “common knowledge” among those who had the authority to use nuclear weapons.¹⁴ Khrushchev summed this up neatly in a conversation with Harold Stassen, Eisenhower’s special assistant on disarmament, during his visit to London in April 1956. Stassen said to Khrushchev “it was evident, as President Eisenhower had pointed out, that a war would be very adverse to both systems, to both nations, and to a great portion of the world. Khrushchev said he agreed, that he knew that there was only a small percentage of madmen in both countries who think otherwise. Nearly everyone knew that war was unacceptable and that coexistence was elementary.”¹⁵

The American and Soviet leaders converged upon this common knowledge from different points of departure. For Washington it meant accepting the loss of an atomic monopoly and recognizing that the Soviet Union could now inflict nuclear devastation on the United States. Eisenhower rejected the option of preventive war against the Soviet Union. In doing so, he was making the judgment that it would be possible for the United States to live with a Soviet Union that possessed

thermonuclear weapons. His basic national security document, NSC 162/2, adopted in October 1953, emphasized the need to be ready for rivalry “over the long pull”.¹⁶

For Moscow the common knowledge about nuclear war meant that Washington recognized growing Soviet nuclear might. Khrushchev returned from Geneva in July 1955 “encouraged” because the United States and Britain now recognized the Soviet capacity to inflict devastation on the United States and its allies. He received new boost to his confidence in November, when the Soviet Union tested its first “superbomb”, and in February 1956, when the R-5 missile, which had a range of 1,200 km, was flight-tested with a nuclear warhead.¹⁷

At the 20th Party Congress in February 1956 Khrushchev rejected the Leninist thesis that war was inevitable as long as imperialism existed. In an obvious reference to nuclear weapons, he declared that “today there are mighty social and political forces possessing formidable means to prevent the imperialists from unleashing war and, if they actually try to start it, to give a smashing rebuff to the aggressors and frustrate their adventurist plans”. “Either peaceful coexistence or the most destructive war in history”, he told the Congress, “There is no third way.”¹⁸ The Soviet concept of “peaceful coexistence” was Khrushchev’s counterpart to Eisenhower’s idea of rivalry “over the long pull”.

The changing strategic balance had important consequences for military relationships in Europe. In 1950, after the outbreak of the Korean War, the NATO had committed itself to a large buildup of ground and air forces to match what it saw as conventional superiority on the part of the Soviet Union and the East European states. Eisenhower decided that such a policy was not feasible in economic terms, and in 1953 he adopted a policy that placed a heavy reliance on nuclear retaliation to deter Soviet aggression wherever it might occur. In line with this policy, the NATO adopted MC 48 in December 1954; this was a new strategy that placed primary reliance on nuclear weapons and on combat forces in being. The aim of the strategy was to convince the Soviet Union that “in the event of aggression [it] will be subjected immediately to devastating counter-attack employing atomic weapons”.¹⁹ West Germany was admitted into the NATO in 1955 and had begun to organize the *Bundeswehr* helping to offset Soviet conventional superiority. Nevertheless, US and the NATO strategy continued to rely heavily on nuclear weapons, including tactical nuclear weapons, which the United States had begun to deploy in Europe in the mid 1950s.

Eisenhower did not believe that war in Europe could be limited. He told the Joint Chiefs of Staff in March 1956 that “any war in which Russian troops were involved directly against United States forces or the United States” would be general war, and any Soviet attack would be met by launching SAC [Strategic Air Command] “as soon as he found out that Russian troops were on the move”.²⁰ The aim of his national security doctrine was to use the threat of nuclear war to deter

aggression on a local scale. In other words, he aimed to deter the Soviet Union by threatening rapid escalation from local conventional war to general nuclear war in the event of a Soviet attack.

Similar, though less far-reaching, changes were taking place in Eastern Europe. Soviet military doctrine was adapting to the nuclear age. The Soviet Union had begun to train its forces for operations on the “nuclear battlefield”. In September 1954 it conducted an exercise at Totskoe, in the province of Orenburg in the South Urals Military District, in which an atomic bomb was detonated. The 1955 Field Regulations of the Soviet Army assumed that nuclear weapons would be used on the battlefield as well as against strategic targets. Soviet military thinking now stressed the importance of surprise and envisaged the possible use of weapons of all kinds from the very beginning of a war.²¹ The Warsaw Treaty was signed in May 1955, the same month as the Austrian State Treaty, but the Warsaw Treaty Organization had as yet no real substance as a military alliance. Soviet control over the armed forces of Eastern Europe was still bilateral, exercised through Soviet military “advisors”.²²

By 1956 the military balance in Europe had attained a certain kind of stability, but – notwithstanding the withdrawal of forces following the Austrian State Treaty the year before – that stability rested on a confrontation in which large numbers of Soviet and US forces, along with those of their allies, faced one another across the central front, equipped not only with conventional arms but with nuclear weapons too. Any military clash in Europe would run the risk of escalation to general war, which neither side wanted and each understood the other did not want, and each understood that the other understood it did not want it either.

There remained, however, the danger of war by miscalculation. NSC 5501 pointed out in January 1955 that, in the context of emerging mutual deterrence, the one remaining possible cause of general war (besides the highly unlikely possibility of a dramatic technological breakthrough by the Soviet Union) was the possibility of war by miscalculation: “war would remain a possibility, if only because of the element of miscalculation by either side or because of a technological break-through by the Soviets leading them to believe they could destroy the U.S. without effective retaliation”.²³ The same document made the argument that the Soviet leaders would risk war only if the United States posed a fundamental threat to Soviet security: “they probably would not be deterred by the risk of general war from taking military counter-action against Western actions considered to be an imminent threat to their security”. It warned: “general war might occur as the climax of a series of actions and counter-actions which neither side originally intended to lead to that result”.²⁴

“Common knowledge” that nuclear war was unacceptable did not completely rule out the possibility of such a war. Other conventions, understandings, or rules of the game were needed if the two sides were not to stumble into war by accident

or miscalculation. That was particularly true of Central Europe where the two alliances confronted each other with huge forces equipped with nuclear weapons. The discussions in the National Security Council in 1955 and 1956 point to an appreciation by the Eisenhower Administration of two important “rules of the game:” neither side should try to pose an “imminent threat” to the other’s security; and US and Soviet forces should not fight each other directly. To cross either of those barriers would be to run the risk of escalation to general war.

The Soviet Decision to Use Force

In 1956 Soviet forces in Hungary comprised two mechanized divisions and two air divisions (one fighter division and one bomber division) as well as air defense artillery, a bridging regiment, and logistics groups. This group of forces was known as the “Special Corps”. Its mission was to cooperate with units of the Hungarian People’s Army to cover the border with Austria and to secure the most important communications in case Soviet forces should need to advance from the territory of the Soviet Union.

In July 1956, shortly after the large protests in Poznań, the Special Corps was instructed to develop a plan of action for maintaining and restoring public order in Budapest. The Special Corps was subordinated to the Soviet Ministry of Defense through the General Staff, and Lieutenant-General P. Lashchenko was appointed commander. The plan was approved on July 20. It was given the codename “Volna” (wave) and was to be initiated with the codeword “Kompass”.

At 11 p.m. on October 23 the Chief of the Soviet General Staff, Marshal V.D. Sokolovskii, ordered the commander of the Special Corps to move troops into Budapest, where they were to take control of key buildings and locations in the city and restore public order. A small number of troops was sent to the border with Austria. The Soviet forces began to move at midnight. At the same time one Soviet mechanized division deployed in Romania, and two divisions (one rifle and one mechanized) in the Carpathian Military District of the Soviet Union, began to move to the Hungarian border; these forces crossed into Hungary on the 24th. Fighter and bomber divisions were made combat ready, as well as an anti-air division from the Carpathian Military District. The total number of troops involved in the operation was 31,550, with about 6,000 entering Budapest.²⁵

There is no mention of the possibility of military intervention by the Western powers in any of the discussions among Soviet leaders – in the Central Committee Presidium meeting on the evening of October 23, in the situation report from Budapest by A. I. Mikoian and M. A. Suslov on October 24, or in the meeting on October 24 in which Khrushchev informed East European leaders about the situation in Poland and Hungary.²⁶ The Soviet leaders clearly regarded the revolution in

Hungary as an internal affair of the socialist camp, and they evidently believed that that was how Western leaders regarded it too. One interesting aspect of the Soviet deployment is that the number of troops sent to border with Austria was too small to seal the border. Opening of the border had begun in the spring of 1956, and it was this that made it possible for 190,000 people to flee to the West when the Revolution failed.²⁷

Operation “Volna” proved to be counterproductive. Opposition to the Hungarian government increased. On October 24 Ernő Gerő, first secretary of the Hungarian Party, told the Soviet leaders by telephone that the “arrival of Soviet troops into the city has had a negative effect on the mood of the residents”.²⁸ The situation grew worse, with hundreds of Hungarians and Soviet soldiers killed in the fighting. Splits emerged in the Soviet leadership, which was uncertain how to act. The tensions were especially apparent in the Central Committee Presidium discussion on October 28.²⁹ Two days later, on October 30, Khrushchev noted at the conclusion of the Presidium meeting that there were two courses of action: “the military – the path of occupation; the peaceful – withdrawal of forces, negotiations”.³⁰ The Soviet leadership opted for the latter. Orders were sent to withdraw Soviet forces from Budapest, and this was done on October 31. Those forces then concentrated about 15–20 kilometers from the capital.³¹

On the following day, October 31, the Presidium changed its mind. Khrushchev stated his position as follows, after reporting on a telephone conversation with Władisław Gomułka: “Reexamine our assessment, do not withdraw troops from Hungary and Budapest, and take the initiative in restoring order in Hungary.” The reasons he gave for this decision are worth quoting:

If we leave Hungary, that will encourage the Americans, the British, and the French, the imperialists. They will see it as our weakness and they will take the offensive. We would then expose the weakness of our positions.

He went on to say that the Party would not understand if that happened. “We would then add Hungary to Egypt for them”, he said. After proposing that a provisional revolutionary government be formed under János Kádár, he returned to the international dimensions of the crisis: they would have to talk it over with Tito and inform the Chinese, the Czechs, the Romanians, and the Bulgarians. “There will not be a big war”, he concluded.³² Khrushchev’s proposal was approved by the Presidium.

Soviet forces were continuing to enter Hungary, mainly from the Carpathian Military District, though one mechanized division came through Romania from the Odessa Military District. Between October 27 and November 4 five mechanized divisions, one tank division, and two airborne divisions crossed the border into Hungary.³³ On the morning of November 4 Soviet forces launched Operation

“Vikhr” (Whirlwind), under the overall command of Marshal I. Konev, commander-in-chief of the Joint Forces of the Warsaw Pact. This time the military operation was more successful. Open armed resistance ended within a week, and a new government, under János Kádár, was imposed on Hungary.

Our aim in this paper is not to explain the shifts in Soviet policy or the ultimate decision to suppress the Hungarian revolution by force. It was clear to the Soviet leaders that the revolution posed a profound challenge to Soviet hegemony in Eastern Europe and to the Soviet model of socialism. There was no disagreement among the Soviet leaders about the need to keep Hungary in the socialist camp. Even Anastas Mikoian, who consistently opposed the use of force throughout the crisis, told the Central Committee Presidium on November 1: “Hungary cannot be permitted to leave the camp.”³⁴ The disagreements and hesitations in the Soviet leadership centered on the means to be employed, not on the ultimate goal to be attained.

When Khrushchev presented to the Central Committee Presidium, on October 31, his decision to use military force to restore order, he drew attention to the international dimensions of the crisis. If Hungary quit the socialist camp, that would be a huge loss for the Soviet Union. The Western powers would gain new heart and would pursue a more aggressive strategy against the Soviet Union. Britain and France had just begun military operations against Egypt, and Khrushchev evidently thought that they would succeed in regaining control over the Suez Canal. If the Soviet Union lost Hungary and the Western powers defeated Egypt, it would be a double blow, and Soviet policy would be very much on the defensive.

Khrushchev’s comment that there would not be a “big war” indicates that he was not concerned about the possibility of Western military intervention in response to Soviet action to “restore order”. Charles Bohlen, the US Ambassador to Moscow during the crisis was asked in an oral history project in 1970: “Was there ever any genuine fear on the part of the Russians that you could determine that the US might intervene in Hungary?” Bohlen replied: “You never saw any sign of that. As an American I knew perfectly well that it would have been impossible for us really. The Russians must have known this.”³⁵

Any thought of military intervention by the United States or the NATO would have had to face the fact of Soviet conventional superiority in Europe, and more specifically the presence of Soviet forces in Hungary, Romania, and in the adjoining parts of the Soviet Union. Intervention would have involved direct clashes between Soviet and NATO forces, thereby risking escalation to general war. Nor, as Bohlen later pointed out, was there any thought of trying to deter Soviet military action by making nuclear threats: “Nothing would have deterred them from going in there. We didn’t have any force in Europe to do it. Nobody was thinking of atomic weapons, for God’s sake. But the Russians would pour in any number of divisions right from a common border with the Soviet Union.”³⁶

The Joint Chiefs of Staff were not asked to consider military options for intervening in Hungary. Eisenhower did, however, ask them in November to study whether the United States should support the United Nations in using force to prevent the Soviet Union from suppressing the Gomulka regime in Poland. The Joint Chiefs concluded that military intervention in Poland was feasible, but that it ran the risk of leading to general war.³⁷ US policy during the Hungarian crisis was shaped not only by the military balance in and around Hungary, but also by the fear that a local conflict could lead to general war.

On November 12 Khrushchev told the Yugoslav ambassador, Veljko Micunovic:

The Russians knew there had been real fear in the NATO about the more serious steps the Soviet Army might take in Europe. The Soviet armed forces in Eastern Germany alone were stronger than what NATO had at its disposal at the moment in Europe. This had been stated to a group of NATO experts, Khrushchev said.

The Americans had forbidden any movement of the NATO forces in Europe during the latest armed intervention by the Soviet Union in Hungary so as not to provoke the Russians, Khrushchev said.³⁸

Khrushchev understood that the combination of local Soviet military superiority and the risk of nuclear war would restrain the West from military intervention.

The American Reaction

When word of the Hungarian revolution reached Washington, it caught the Eisenhower Administration by surprise.³⁹ The events of October 1956 contradicted previous American assumptions about the durability of Communist rule in the satellites and the ability of Soviet forces to suppress immediately any outbreak of resistance. In January 1956 a National Intelligence Estimate had concluded: “the military, political, and economic significance of the Satellites to the USSR is so great that Moscow almost certainly regards the maintenance of control over the area as an essential element of the power position”. The Soviet Union, it argued, was unlikely to allow any East European state to exit the Warsaw Pact or assume a non-Communist form of government.⁴⁰ An NSC report of July 1956 argued that “Soviet political domination of the satellites remains a basic fact”, unaffected by the opening in Soviet policy following Stalin’s death and the 20th Party Congress. These conclusions applied as much to Hungary as to the Warsaw Pact in general. “The Kremlin will take all measures necessary to keep Hungary within the Bloc”, a 1955 intelligence report concluded. If an open revolt did break out, the combina-

tion of Hungarian Communist and Soviet forces would be “sufficient to cope with any active resistance” and would assure that there was “little likelihood that Communist control over Hungary will be jeopardized” at any time during the mid-to-late-1950s.⁴¹

Washington understood at once the seriousness of the crisis in Hungary. At a meeting of the National Security Council on the morning of October 26, Allen Dulles, the Director of Central Intelligence, asserted that “the revolt in Hungary constituted the most serious threat yet to be posed to continued Soviet control of the satellites”. The Soviet leadership had been thrown on the defensive, and Khrushchev’s position as leader in Moscow might even be threatened. Rather than viewing Allen Dulles’ report as an opportunity to put the rhetoric of liberation into action, Eisenhower’s response was to worry about the possibility of general war. Faced with the prospect of losing their satellites in Eastern Europe, he worried, might the Soviets not “be tempted to resort to very extreme measures and even to precipitate global war?”⁴² Eisenhower’s diary for October 26 records that he “warned both the Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff and the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency to be unusually watchful and alert during the crisis occasioned by the Hungarian revolt”. A central consideration in Eisenhower’s mind during the Hungarian crisis was the necessity of preventing nuclear war between the US and the USSR. It would be dangerous, he believed, to press the Soviet leaders while they felt threatened by developments in Eastern Europe.

Harold Stassen, special assistant to the President for disarmament, spoke up in response to Eisenhower’s warning about inadvertent war. Stassen argued that the Soviet leadership would soon have to make a choice between allowing liberalization in Hungary, and suppressing the rebellion by force. He also suggested that the US might influence this decision by contacting the Soviet military leadership:

Stassen wondered if it would not be prudent to try to get some message to Marshal Zhukov indicating that the achievement of freedom in the Soviet satellites should not be considered by the Soviet Union as posing any real threat to the national security of the USSR. We should make it clear that this development would not impel the Western powers to make any warlike move against the Soviet Union.⁴³

Stassen’s proposal carried with it a certain degree of ambiguity. It may have been intended to convince the Soviet leaders that an independent Hungary would not pose any threat to the security of the Soviet Union. If successful, such a reassurance might convince the Soviet leadership not to suppress the revolution. The circumstances of the proposal, however, suggest an alternative explanation, more in keeping with Eisenhower’s fear that the Hungarian crisis might develop into general war. The Stassen proposal may have been intended as a reassurance to

Moscow that the US would not intervene in the Hungarian conflict. This US message to Moscow would prevent the Soviet leaders from overreacting to an imagined American threat, and thus forestall the danger of nuclear war.

Stassen's proposal initially did not meet with an enthusiastic reception from Eisenhower. The President declared "that he did not believe such a move would be worthwhile. He doubted if the Soviet leaders genuinely feared an invasion by the Western powers".⁴⁴ Eisenhower's statement is an illustration of "common knowledge" during the Hungarian crisis. Not only did the US never plan to intervene; the Soviet leaders knew they did not plan to intervene; and US leaders knew that the Soviet leaders understood that there was no possibility of US intervention – hence no message of reassurance to Moscow was needed. What we now know about decision-making on the Soviet side shows that Eisenhower was right in his evaluation of the Soviet leaders' assessment of the possibility of Western intervention.

Stassen revised his proposal in a conversation with Secretary of State John Foster Dulles on the afternoon of October 26. He suggested that the US "let the Russians know that we would accept for the satellites some neutralized status like that of Austria". Stassen apparently hoped to convince Moscow that Hungary should be allowed to become an independent and neutral state that would pose no military threat to the USSR. Eisenhower also spoke with Dulles later that afternoon, and made it known that he favored Hungarian neutralization. If the Soviet leaders feared that an independent Hungary would be incorporated into NATO, the President thought, they would be forced to crush the uprising quickly and completely. Allaying this Soviet fear might ensure that the Hungarian people might not "get such a hard time of it". Self-determination for Hungary and neutralization on the Austrian model, Eisenhower thought, might be acceptable to the Soviet Union, and would help to reduce tensions between the Communist bloc and the West. If the Hungarians could "choose their own government", the President told Dulles, "this would be of far greater effect than any alliance".⁴⁵

Dulles responded unenthusiastically to the idea of neutrality for Hungary and the other states of Eastern Europe. He told Eisenhower that he doubted that "we should go so far as to seem to commit these countries to an Austria-style neutralization". The US should not place itself in a position of appearing to conduct "backstage talks" with the Soviets, he said to Eisenhower.⁴⁶ Dulles may have feared that negotiating with Moscow during the crisis would give the appearance that the US was deciding the future of Hungary without reference to the wishes of the Hungarian people themselves.

Dulles did include a version of the Stassen proposal in his speech in Dallas, Texas, on October 27. This speech is the source of the much-cited statement that the US did not regard the nations of Eastern Europe as potential allies. The Dallas

speech, however, did not propose the formal neutralization of Hungary, and its overall meaning was unclear. The relevant paragraph of the speech reads:

The United States has no ulterior purpose in desiring the independence of the satellite countries. Our unadulterated wish is that these peoples, from whom so much of our own national life derives, should have sovereignty restored to them and that they should have governments of their own free choosing. We do not look upon these nations as potential military allies. We see them as friends and as part of a new and friendly and no longer divided Europe. We are confident that their independence, if promptly accorded, will contribute immediately to stabilize peace throughout all of Europe, West and East.⁴⁷

It is not clear why Dulles failed to include the proposal of Austrian-style neutralization, a proposal that was apparently supported by both Stassen and President Eisenhower himself. Dulles may have believed that it was more important to reassure the Soviet Union that no American intervention in Hungary was forthcoming, a meaning that Moscow could read into the speech he delivered at Dallas. If Dulles' statement had been more explicit in proposing Hungarian neutrality, the Soviet leaders might have interpreted it as interference in the affairs of the Warsaw Pact rather than as a disavowal of American interest in Hungary.

The idea of Hungarian neutrality also met opposition elsewhere in the US leadership. The Joint Chiefs of Staff objected immediately when the NSC Planning Board proposed, on October 31, 1956, that the US provide Moscow with assurances that the United States did not view Hungary as a potential ally. The Joint Chiefs declared that such assurances would "tend to undermine such influence as the United States may have on the government which is established in Hungary, and could in the future operate to our military disadvantage". They evidently believed that the US should not foreclose the option of incorporating Hungary into NATO at some point in the future. They may also have worried that a US proposal for Hungarian neutralization would be countered by a Soviet proposal for the neutralization of Germany or the withdrawal of American troops from the NATO nations. This fear may help account for the reluctance of the Joint Chiefs, Dulles, and others, to support Stassen's proposal for the formal neutralization of Hungary.⁴⁸

Following Dulles's speech, the Administration decided to convey his assurance privately to the Soviet leadership. On October 29 Dulles suggested to Eisenhower that Charles Bohlen should transmit a message to the Soviet leaders. He warned, however, that the US "would have to be very careful not to do anything that would look to the satellite world as though we were selling them out".⁴⁹ Eisenhower agreed, and later that day Dulles cabled Bohlen, sending him the relevant passage from the Dallas speech and telling him that "we would like this to come to attention of highest Soviet authorities, including Zhukov, and to know

that they appreciate it is a high level policy statement". Dulles warned, again, that the proposal needed to be kept confidential, telling Bohlen that "it is of course highly important that nothing done under this authorization should emerge publicly as a demarche attributable to Washington".⁵⁰ It is perhaps significant that Dulles specifically asked Bohlen to bring the matter to the attention of Marshal Zhukov, the Soviet Minister of Defense. This may indicate that Dulles believed the primary purpose of the proposal was to reassure the Soviet military leadership that the US would not exploit Hungary's independence for its own military advantage.

Bohlen transmitted Dulles' message to Zhukov and Molotov at a reception in Moscow on October 30. Bohlen reported to Dulles as follows:

I told Zhukov and Molotov I wanted to direct their attention to your Dallas speech and paragraph in it concerning our policy in regard to Eastern European countries and gave them from memory translation text paragraph.

Molotov listened and made no particular comment, but said he would look up speech in question, which he felt sure they had from press reports. Zhukov, however, said that he found difficult to reconcile this statement with President's encouragement of "rebels" in Hungary, which he thought represented interference Hungarian internal affairs. I said President's statement was general and reflected feelings American people and in any case words were less of intervention than bullets, to which Zhukov made no reply.⁵¹

Bohlen's telegram is revealing. It is clear that Zhukov interpreted the passage in Dulles' speech of October 27 not as a proposal for the neutralization of Hungary, but as an American disclaimer of any intention to interfere in Hungarian affairs. Bohlen did nothing to disabuse Zhukov of this notion, but instead implied that while Eisenhower and others in the US government might make rhetorical statements about freedom in Hungary, there would be no American military support ("bullets") for the revolutionaries. Khrushchev's comment to his son, quoted in the introduction to this paper, indicates that the Soviet leaders did indeed understand Bohlen's communication in this way. That is also the interpretation of the Russian historians V. T. Sereda and A. S. Stykalin, who write that Bohlen "informed the Soviet leaders that the United States had no particular interests in Hungary".⁵²

A further indication that the Eisenhower Administration's policy during the Hungarian crisis was heavily influenced by a fear of sparking nuclear war is provided by an exchange between Eisenhower and C.D. Jackson, his former Special Assistant on international affairs and psychological warfare. In a telegram to the President on November 8, Jackson wrote: "Under cover of United Nations total preoccupation with Middle Eastern problems and the new general war threat, the

Russians are getting away with murder in Hungary.” He told Eisenhower that action was urgently needed to protect the Hungarian people, and that much stronger international pressure should be put on Moscow. Eisenhower responded with a lecture on the evils of nuclear war. “To annihilate Hungary”, Eisenhower argued, “should it become the scene of a bitter conflict, is in no way to help her.” A general war triggered by the Hungarian crisis, he continued, would be “so terrible that the human mind cannot comprehend it”.⁵³

Eisenhower’s response is illuminating, because it reveals the degree to which the fear of nuclear war shaped his thinking during the Hungarian crisis. He apparently believed that even pressuring Moscow through the UN would pose the risk of sparking general war between the US and the USSR.

Conclusion

The United States did not consider intervening with military force in the Hungarian revolution, and the Soviet leadership did not think that the United States would intervene. In this paper we have explored why that was so. This of course is only one of the international aspects of the crisis, but it is an important one, and the behavior of the two sides provides insight into the way in which they understood the military confrontation at the time.

The most obvious explanation lies in the military balance in Europe – and specifically in and around Hungary – which greatly restricted Western military options and made it very likely that any military intervention would escalate, perhaps to the use of nuclear weapons. Each side wanted to avoid general war, each side understood that the other wanted to avoid it, and so on; and, as a consequence, each side wanted to avoid a local conflict that might escalate to general war, and each side understood that the other wanted to avoid it, and so on. That seems to provide a sufficient explanation for the US non-intervention. It is true that the West was in disarray over the Suez crisis, but it is not at all clear that the West would have taken military action over Hungary even if it had not been divided over Suez. It seems therefore disingenuous of Eisenhower, in his memoirs, to place part of the blame on Britain and France for US inaction – though there are of course other reasons to criticize Britain and France for the Suez crisis.

Common knowledge about the unacceptability of nuclear war became an important element in the US-Soviet relationship in the mid-1950s. It needed to be complemented, however, by other conventions and guidelines if the two superpowers were not to stumble into war by accident or miscalculation. It was already clear before the Hungarian crisis that the Eisenhower Administration regarded domination of Eastern Europe as a vital Soviet interest, which it would do everything to defend; to challenge it by military means would therefore create a risk of

general war. The Soviet leaders took the same view. The recognition by both sides of spheres of interest in Europe was all the easier to accept because powerful military forces demarcated the borders of those spheres.

During the Hungarian crisis Washington and Moscow showed a reasonably clear understanding of each other's policies and of the dangers that would arise if the conflict were to escalate. The Stassen proposal is particularly interesting in that regard. It appears to have meant different things to different people at different times, but was the product of two main impulses:

1. To reassure the Soviet Union that the US would not intervene in Hungary. This reassurance would reduce the danger of general war arising from the crisis.
2. To propose a compromise over Hungary's status, denying any American desire to incorporate Hungary into NATO, and establishing Hungary as a neutral nation similar to Austria.

These two impulses do not appear as distinct formulations in the FRUS documents or Eisenhower's papers, but were instead blended together in the minds of US decision-makers (or at least, do not appear ever to have been debated as competing proposals). The message that was eventually delivered to Soviet leaders was much closer to a military reassurance than a political proposal for Hungarian neutralization. Did Khrushchev have Bohlen's message in mind when he told the Presidium on October 31 that "there will not be a big war?" Did that message make a difference? Probably not, because the Soviet leaders seem to have been secure in their minds already that the West would not intervene militarily.

The Hungarian crisis is a revealing illustration of the effect that fear of inadvertent war had on US policymakers. The national security framework they had erected as a way of deterring Soviet aggression also deterred them from taking aggressive action to support the Hungarian revolution. Deterrence was balanced by self-deterrence. The fear of escalation was supposed to deter Soviet aggression in Europe, but it also served to inhibit the United States. The Eisenhower Administration was self-deterred, not only by the lack of good military options for US intervention in Hungary, but also by the fear that a larger war could result from the crisis. Even though the Soviets never issued an explicit warning to Washington, the implicit threat of nuclear war was enough to prevent any thought of intervention on the US side.

We have focused in this paper on the United States and the Soviet Union rather than on Hungary itself, even though the revolution was above all about the future of Hungary. This was not the first time – nor the last – that the independence of a small state was sacrificed on the altar of an international order defined by the great powers. Knowing that does not, however, make it any more agreeable to contemplate.

Notes

- ¹ Kenneth Condit, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy, 1955–1956* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1992), p. 126.
- ² Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Waging Peace* (New York, 1965), pp. 88–89.
- ³ Sergei Khrushchev, *Rozhdenie sverkhderzhavy: kniga ob otse* (Moscow: Vremia, 2000), p. 182.
- ⁴ NSC 5501, “Basic National Security Policy”, 7 January 1955, from Foreign Relations of the United States (hereafter FRUS) 1955–1957 XIX (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1990), p. 25.
- ⁵ Herbert York, *The Advisors. Oppenheimer, Teller, and the Superbomb* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1976).
- ⁶ Richard G. Hewlett and Jack M. Holl, *Atoms for Peace and War 1953–1961: Eisenhower and the Atomic Energy Commission* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 3–4, 34.
- ⁷ Churchill to Eisenhower, March 9, 1954, in Peter G. Boyle (ed.), *The Churchill-Eisenhower Correspondence 1953–1955* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), p. 123.
- ⁸ ‘Rech’ tovarishcha G. M. Malenkova’, *Izvestiia*, March 13, 1954, p. 2.
- ⁹ Mohammed Heikal, *Sphinx and Commissar: The Rise and Fall of Soviet Influence in the Third World* (London: Collins, 1978), p. 129.
- ¹⁰ “Memorandum for the Record of the President’s Dinner, President’s Villa, Geneva, July 18, 1955, 8 p.m.”, FRUS 1955–1957 V, p. 376.
- ¹¹ Quoted by McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival* (New York: Random House, 1988), p. 302.
- ¹² Anthony Eden, *Full Circle* (London: Cassell, 1960), p. 306.
- ¹³ N. S. Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers* Vol. 1 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p. 427.
- ¹⁴ Something is “common knowledge” in a group if each member knows it, knows that the others know it, knows that each one knows that the others know it, and so on. It is important for coordinated action. See David K. Lewis, *Convention: A Philosophical Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969) pp. 52–60. Lewis acknowledges (on p. 3) his intellectual debt to Thomas C. Schelling’s *The Strategy of Conflict* (New York: Galaxy Books, 1963).
- ¹⁵ “Telegram from the Embassy in the United Kingdom to the Department of State”, FRUS 1955–1957 XX (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1990), p. 380.
- ¹⁶ NSC 162/2 “Basic National Security Policy”, FRUS 1952–1954, II (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1984), p. 582.
- ¹⁷ David Holloway, *Stalin and the Bomb* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 343; Pavel Podvig (ed.), *Russian Strategic Nuclear Forces* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), p. 178.
- ¹⁸ Holloway, *Stalin and the Bomb*, pp. 343–344.
- ¹⁹ Gregory W. Pedlow (ed.), *NATO Strategy Documents 1945–1969*, p. 232. Accessed at www.nato.int/archives/strategy.htm.
- ²⁰ David Rosenberg, “The Origins of Overkill”, *International Security* 7, no. 4 (Spring 1983), p. 42.
- ²¹ Holloway, *Stalin and the Bomb*, pp. 326–333.
- ²² Vojtech Mastny and Malcolm Byrne (eds), *A Cardboard Castle? An Inside History of the Warsaw Pact 1955–1991* (Budapest: Central European Press, 2005).
- ²³ NSC 5501, FRUS 1955–1957, XIX, p. 26.
- ²⁴ NSC 5501, FRUS 1955–1957, XIX, p. 29.
- ²⁵ V. A. Zolotarev (ed.), *Rossiia (SSSR) v lokal’nykh voynakh* (Moscow: Kuchkovo polie; Poligrafresursy, 2000), pp. 139–148, 238–239; “Dokladnaia zapiska Ministerstva oborony SSSR v TsK KPSS o deistviiakh sovetskikh voisk ‘po pokazaniiu pomoshchi Pravitelstvu

- VNR v sviazi s voznikshimi v strane besporiadkami””, in *Sovetskii Soiuz i vengerskii krizis 1956 goda: Dokumenty* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 1998), pp. 367–368; Jenő Györkei and Miklós Horváth, *Soviet Military Intervention in Hungary, 1956* (Budapest: CEU Press, 1999), p. 7. The Soviet divisions must have been at no more than two-thirds combat strength for five divisions to amount to 31,550 men.
- 26 Csaba Békés, Malcom Byrne, János M. Rainer (eds.), *The 1956 Hungarian Revolution: A History in Documents* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2002), pp. 216–227.
- 27 We are grateful to Csaba Békés for this point.
- 28 Mark Kramer, “New Evidence on Soviet Decision-Making and the 1956 Polish and Hungarian Crises”, *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* Issues 8–9 (Winter 1996/1997), p. 367.
- 29 *Sovetskii Soiuz i vengerskii krizis*, pp. 432–439.
- 30 *Sovetskii Soiuz i vengerskii krizis*, p. 462. At the Presidium meeting on October 30, Zhukov reported that military transport aircraft were being assembled near Vienna, but there was no further discussion of the point. Apparently the Vienna airport was used for humanitarian aid from the West for Hungary. *Ibid.*, pp. 457, 462.
- 31 Zolotarev, *Rossiia (SSSR) v lokal'nykh voynakh*, p. 143.
- 32 *Sovetskii soiuz i vengerskii krizis*, pp. 479–480.
- 33 *Sovetskii soiuz i vengerskii krizis*, pp. 376–377.
- 34 *Sovetskii soiuz i vengerskii krizis*, p. 494.
- 35 Interview with Ambassador Charles Bohlen, December 17, 1970, New York Times Oral History Project (Columbia University oral history collection, pt. 4, no. 23), p. 11.
- 36 Interview with Bohlen, pp. 9–10.
- 37 Condit, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy*, pp. 127–128.
- 38 Veljko Micunovic, *Moscow Diary* (New York: Doubleday, 1980), p. 156.
- 39 In an NSC meeting on November 1, Allen Dulles, the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, expressed his astonishment that the revolutionaries had been able to achieve any success in fighting Soviet troops. “In a sense”, he declared, “what had occurred there was a miracle. Events had belied all our past views that a popular revolt in the face of modern weapons was an utter impossibility.” Csaba Békés et al., *The 1956 Hungarian Revolution*, p. 324.
- 40 “Probable Developments in the European Satellites”, from Békés et al., *The 1956 Hungarian Revolution*, p. 69.
- 41 NIE 12.5-55, “Current Situation and Probable Developments in Hungary”, FRUS 1955-1957, XXV (Washington, 1990), pp. 17–23.
- 42 “Memorandum of Discussion at the 301st Meeting of the National Security Council”, 26 October 1956, from FRUS 1955-1957, XXV (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1990), pp. 295–299. Also see Eisenhower's diary entry for 26 October 1956, from the papers of Dwight D. Eisenhower as President of the United States as maintained by his Personal Secretary, Ann Whitman.
- 43 NSC Meeting 26 October 1956, FRUS 1955-1957 XXV, p. 299.
- 44 *Ibid.*, p. 299.
- 45 Eisenhower Diaries, Whitman file. Also see “Memorandum of a Telephone Conversation Between the President and the Secretary of State”, 26 October 1956, 7:06 p.m., FRUS 1955-1957 XXV, pp. 306–307.
- 46 “Memorandum of a Telephone Conversation Between the President and the Secretary of State, 26 October 1956, 5:50 p.m.”, FRUS 1955-1957 XXV, p. 305.
- 47 “Address by the Secretary of State Before the Dallas Council on World Affairs, 27 October 1956”, FRUS 1955-1957 XXV, p. 318.

- ⁴⁸ For the objections of the JCS to the proposed NSC draft, see “Draft Statement of Policy by the Planning Board of the National Security Council”, 31 October 1956, FRUS 1955–1957 XXV, p. 357. The danger that the Soviets would attempt to force withdrawal of US troops from Western Europe was addressed in NSC 5602/1, the “Basic National Security Policy” of 15 March 1956. See FRUS 1955–1957 XIX, pp. 267–268.
- ⁴⁹ “Memorandum of a Telephone Conversation Between the President and the Secretary of State”, 29 October 1956, FRUS 1955–1957 XXV, pp. 321–322.
- ⁵⁰ “Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in the Soviet Union”, 29 October 1956, FRUS 1955–1957 XXV, p. 328.
- ⁵¹ “Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in the Soviet Union”, 30 October 1956, FRUS 1955–1957 XXV, p. 348.
- ⁵² *Sovetskii soiuz i vengerskii krizis*, p. 334.
- ⁵³ C. D. Jackson to Eisenhower, 8 November 1956, 12:58 p.m., and Eisenhower to Jackson, 19 November 1956, from the Eisenhower Diaries, Whitman files.

