

History: The Cold War
Lesson 16 of 30

Worksheet:

How significant was the Hungarian Uprising?



How did the Soviets respond to the Hungarian Uprising?

On **4th November 1956, 200,000 Soviet troops and 6,000 tanks invaded Hungary.** Scared that Hungary was about to leave the **Warsaw Pact**, which would inspire other Eastern European countries to do the same, **Nikita Khrushchev** ordered the Soviet army to put down the uprising with **brutal force.** The **Soviet army captured airports, bridges and key road junctions** to prevent the Hungarians from successfully overthrowing communist control. **Imre Nagy**, the leader of the new **revolutionary** government, went into hiding in the Yugoslav embassy. On the streets, thousands of Hungarians fought the invading Soviet forces, using **guerrilla tactics.** They communicated with the West via radio broadcast, crying out 'Help help' in the desperate hope that someone will listen. No help came.



How did the Soviets respond to the Hungarian Uprising?

By **mid-November 1956**, the Hungarian Uprising had been crushed by the invading Soviet forces. Approximately **7,000 Russians were dead along with as many as 20,000 Hungarians**. Another **200,000 Hungarians had fled across the border to Austria**, to escape the wrath of the Communist forces. **János Kádár** had become the new leader of Hungary and was supported by the USSR. **Imre Nagy** was **arrested and imprisoned**. He would be **executed by hanging two years later**. In the months following the uprising, **Kádár** also arrested around **35,000 anti-Communist activists, 300 of whom were executed**. While he did begin to cautiously introduce some of the reforms that the Hungarian people were demanding, he never wavered on the most important issue to the USSR – Hungary's membership of the Warsaw Pact.



What was the international response to the Hungarian Uprising?

The USA and its allies

Despite having intervened very little to help the Hungarians, the USA and its allies in the West harshly **condemned** the Soviet response to the Hungarian Uprising. *Time* magazine named the 'Hungarian freedom fighter' its 'Man of the Year' for 1956 while a **1957 American appeal for financial support for Hungarian refugees raised \$6 million**. However, to the Hungarians, this support felt like **far too little, far too late. No Western countries had sent any military support** largely due to fears that open support of an anti-Soviet uprising could result in nuclear war.



What was the international response to the Hungarian Uprising?

Also, at almost exactly the same time as the Hungarian Uprising, the USA, Britain and France were **distracted by a crisis** concerning the **Suez Canal** in Egypt. In November 1956, exactly the same month as the Hungarian Uprising took its violent turn, **Britain had invaded Egypt to reclaim the canal, prompting international condemnation of its actions.** This made it **very difficult for the West to criticise the USSR** for a similar action and also meant that they were **too preoccupied to provide any significant support** to the Hungarians. This meant that, not only were the Hungarians left unaided in their battle against communist control, but **later condemnation of the USSR's actions appeared both meaningless and hypocritical** and failed to have any impact.



What was the international response to the Hungarian Uprising?

The UN

The **UN** took **slightly more decisive** action against the USSR. It **set up a special inquiry** into the events of October-November 1956 but this also **failed to have any significant impact**: both the new Hungarian government and the Soviet government **refused to participate**. The inquiry concluded by **condemning Kádár's government** and its regime but **did not take any further action** against it. This meant that **Kádár** was **free to continue with his Soviet-backed repression of anti-Communist opponents** and to allow for **Nagy** to be removed from Hungary and executed. The **USSR also escaped from any real reckoning** for its use of extreme force against the Hungarians.



Why was the Hungarian Uprising significant?

The Hungarian Uprising was **significant for Hungary and other Eastern European states** because it revealed the extent to which **resistance of communist rule was futile**. Hungary **lost 20,000 of its own people** at the hands of the USSR while **Kádár's** Communist 're-education' programmes and mass arrests over the following years proved that **repressive communism** was now to be enforced within Hungary with **more power than ever before** and with the **active, continuous support of the Soviet Red Army**. This **discouraged other Eastern European countries from revolting** against the influence and control of the USSR, for fear that they would face the same fate. This fear was only compelled by the fact that the West had failed to support Hungary in its hour of need. This discouraged many states from resistance as they knew they **did not have the military or manpower capacity to take on the USSR** successfully.



Why was the Hungarian Uprising significant?

Also, the USSR's violent reaction to the Hungarian Uprising had **revealed the limits of Khrushchev's policy of de-Stalinisation**. Despite claiming to be different from **Stalin, Khrushchev's** implementation of incredible force against Hungarian rebels had shown that he was **willing to do whatever it took to protect Soviet control over Eastern Europe**. This was significant because it revealed to both the countries of Eastern Europe and the West that **Khrushchev's 'thaw' was more apparent than real** and that the **USSR intended to strengthen its control over Eastern Europe**. **Khrushchev's** crushing of the Hungarian Uprising had sent out a **clear message that resistance would not be tolerated** and that, despite earlier claims to the contrary, he was **willing to use brutal force** to put down any attempts to challenge Soviet control.



Why was the Hungarian Uprising significant?

Consequently, the Hungarian Uprising was also very **significant for superpower relations and the Cold War** because it **resulted in the relationship between the USSR and the West becoming even more strained**. For example, the USA and its allies **harshly condemned the actions of the USSR** and saw **Khrushchev** as a leader with whom they could not compromise. At the same time, the West also now saw **Khrushchev's** apparent **attempts to improve relations as a sham**; he really was not that different a leader than Stalin after all and the West **could not trust him**. On the other hand, the Hungarian Uprising had revealed to **Khrushchev** how **unwilling the West was to get involved in Eastern European affairs**. **President Eisenhower's** failure to provide any form of direct support for the Hungarians had made it clear that he was **unwilling to risk peace for the sake of an Eastern European nation**. This appeared to **Khrushchev** as a **'green light' to do whatever he wished in Eastern Europe**, safe in the knowledge that the USA, its allies and even the UN would do little more than verbally condemn his actions.



Why was the Hungarian Uprising significant?

Therefore, the Hungarian Uprising was significant for superpower relations because it **ended any hopes that the USSR would loosen its systems of repressive control over Eastern Europe** while also revealing to the USSR that the **West was likely to do very little to directly challenge the USSR's authority** over the communist countries of Eastern Europe. Consequently, the Hungarian Uprising only served to **deepen the sense of 'difference' and distrust** felt by each superpower towards the other and **showed the extremes to which these nations would go** to keep control of their empires.



Glossary

Condemn – to call wrong, evil or inadequate or to disapprove of

Guerrilla tactics – the use of ambushes, raids, sabotage and hit-and-run by a smaller group of fighters, usually against a more traditional military force

Revolutionary – creating or leading to great change

Suez Canal – a canal in northeast Egypt that connects the Mediterranean Sea with the Red Sea. For this reason, it is a very important route for trade.



Comprehension Questions

1. What happened in Hungary on 4th November 1956?
2. How did the USA and UN react to the USSR's response to the Hungarian Uprising?
3. What did the USSR's response to the Hungarian Uprising reveal about Nikita Khrushchev?
4. How did the Hungarian Uprising affect the USSR's control of Eastern Europe?
5. Challenge question: Why was the Hungarian Uprising significant for superpower relations and the Cold War?

