



Comparing and contrasting Hungary 1956 and Czechoslovakia 1968

This is a transcript of the [Comparing and contrasting Hungary 1956 and Czechoslovakia 1968](#) podcast from www.mrallsophistory.com

This podcast looks at the uprisings in Communist Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Although they were 12 years apart, they share some common similarities but also have some marked differences. The podcast is divided into three main sections. Considering Hungary first, then Czechoslovakia, I'll explain the respective causes of the uprisings, the events during them, and finally the consequences. The third part of the podcast compares the two revolutions.

Hungary

The over-arching reason behind the Hungarian revolution was that the Hungarian people hated Communism. The leader at the time, Rakosi, was a tyrant who used all possible means to secure his power. Freedom of speech was limited, and those who did speak out against the government would almost certainly be arrested by the secret police. There was also a significant Soviet presence in the country – thousands of Soviet troops and officials – but it was the Hungarians who had to pay to keep them there! Hungarians, too, were poor. They worked hard under the Communist regime yet were forced to export much of what they produced – both food and industry – to the Soviet Union meaning they were unable to develop their own economy. They looked to the West, and especially to the USA, to help them break free of Communist control. They were convinced that the United Nations or America would help them.

As de-Stalinisation spread to Hungary, the bubbling discontent became public. In response, Rakosi wanted to arrest 400 of the ring-leaders, but the new leader of the USSR – Khrushchev – wouldn't support him. Instead, Moscow ordered Rakosi to retire "for health reasons".

Rakosi's replacement didn't fare much better. He, too, was replaced after a huge student demonstration on 23 October, when the giant statue of Stalin in Budapest was pulled down. Soviet tanks began to move against the rebellion, but were withdrawn four days after the well-respected Imre Nagy was appointed Prime Minister on 24th October. For four days from 29th October to 3rd November the new Hungarian government introduced democracy, freedom of speech, and freedom of religion which symbolically saw the leader of the Catholic Church freed from prison. Nagy also announced that Hungary was going to leave the Warsaw Pact, severing its links to the USSR.

This was a step too far. Nagy was clearly allowing Hungary to become a capitalist and democratic state. Khrushchev simply could not accept Hungary leaving the Warsaw Pact as it would mean the USSR losing part of its "buffer zone" against Capitalism. In response, and



gambling that the West would not intervene, he sent thousands of Soviet troops and tanks back into Budapest. The Hungarians refused to give in. For two weeks ordinary Hungarians – including many children – fought against the might of the Russian army. Hungary called out to the West for help, but as Khrushchev had predicted, didn't get involved. Britain and France were tied up with the Suez Crisis while America was unwilling to risk a full-scale war against the USSR by moving their troops into the USSR's sphere of influence. Within Hungary, thousands on both sides were killed in the fighting, but eventually the Soviet army defeated the Hungarian rebels, captured Imre Nagy and his fellow leaders, and executed them.

The consequences of the rebellion were a crushing defeat for Hungary. Over 200,000 Hungarians had fled across the Austrian border to escape the street fighting, and those who remained were severely dealt with by the new Hungarian leader, Kadar. Over 35,000 people were arrested, of which 300 were executed. Hungary maintained its membership of the Warsaw Pact, but the West became even more determined to “contain” Communism and prevent it spreading any further. The Soviet Union had proved its control over the countries of Eastern Europe by keeping the Iron Curtain well and truly secure. Throughout the next 12 years, nobody tried to oppose Soviet control.

Czechoslovakia

Like the Hungarians in 1956, the Czechoslovakian people were becoming increasingly hostile towards Communist rule. Fundamental problems remained such as shortages of homes and schools, or the distrust between neighbours brought about by the oppressive actions of the secret police. The economy was performing badly, and by 1967 the people of Czechoslovakia were becoming restless.

In January 1968, a change began to sweep across Czechoslovakia. The old Communist leader, Novotny, had appealed to the USSR for help to stop the voices of opposition but his request was ignored. Instead, he was forced by Moscow to resign and was replaced by the reforming Alexander Dubček. In April, Dubček put forward an action plan, in which he proposed a policy of “socialism with a human face”. Although he was a committed Communist, he believed that Communism did not have to be as restrictive as it had been. He reduced censorship, increased freedom of speech, and eased the actions of the secret police. Aware that such changes could cause Brezhnev, the Communist leader in Moscow, to follow the example set by Khrushchev in Hungary he stressed that Czechoslovakia had no plans to pull out of the Warsaw Pact or Comecon.

During a four-month period known as the Prague Spring, intellectuals took advantage of the new policies and began to launch attacks on the Communist leadership. They took part in live television and radio debates, in which they grilled the leaders about how they ran the



country. The Communist leadership even began to consider allowing a rival political party – the Social Democratic Party – to be set up in a bid to allow political freedom.

Pressured by hard-line leaders in other Eastern European states, such as East Germany and Poland who were worried that their own people might demand the same freedoms Dubček had allowed in Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union was forced to respond. They began by meeting Dubček and simply requesting that he slowed down his reforms. When it was clear that this wouldn't make him stop, they joined with Polish and East German troops to carry out training exercises right on the Czech border. It was clear that they were warning Dubček about their strength, made all the more ominous by them leaving their communication lines in place when they left. They even looked to impose economic sanctions, but feared that if they went too far then the Czechs would seek assistance from the West.

At a conference in July, the Soviets and Czechs met to discuss their concerns. Dubček agreed not to allow a new Social Democratic Party, but insisted on keeping most of his reforms. However, despite the apparent easing of tensions following this meeting, on the 20th August 1968 Soviet tanks and other Warsaw Pact troops invaded Czechoslovakia. Dubček urged the Czech people to remain calm, and although there were some isolated incidents of violence the vast majority of people conducted non-violent protests, such as standing in front of tanks or putting flowers in soldiers' hair.

However, Dubček's experiment in "socialism with a human face" had failed: he was arrested and removed from power, to be replaced as leader by a hard-line supporter of the USSR. Dubček's authority was gradually downgraded, but he was never executed. The events in Czechoslovakia in 1968 also led to establishment of the Brezhnev Doctrine, in which the Soviet leader stated that Iron Curtain countries would not be allowed to abandon Communism and would consequently rule as one-party states as members of the Warsaw Pact.

Comparison

Past exam questions on Hungary and Czechoslovakia have generally been of two types. The first may call on you to describe or explain reasons for the rebellions, the events of them, or the consequences. The second type asks you to compare events in the two countries. This kind of question requires you to identify and explain both similarities and differences between the two rebellions in order to reach the highest levels. If the question includes a phrase such as "How similar" then you also need to include a conclusion in which you say how much similarity you think they was between the two.



There's also a few ways to approach an answer to this kind of question – but I always prefer the type of answer that is structured into separate sections for similarity and difference.

There were many similarities between the rebellions in Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Firstly, they shared the same causes – that the people were hostile to Russian control, the repression of their respective governments, and the poverty they lived in as a result of poor economic performance. In both countries, change started when Russia refused to support the old regime. The old leaders, Rakosi and Novotny, were replaced with new ones: Nagy and Dubček. Both Hungary and Czechoslovakia experienced brief periods when their new governments introduced reforms such as freedom of speech. In both cases, Russia invaded with overwhelming force, overthrew the reforming government, and installed hard-line Communist leaders in their place while the West did nothing help either Nagy or Dubček.

There were, however, many differences. The process of change in Hungary began with riots, but in Czechoslovakia it was much more peaceful. Czechoslovakia's new government appeared to be much more planned than Hungary, particularly because Dubček's government had a proper Action Plan. Other differences were more clear – Nagy announced that Hungary was going to leave the Warsaw Pact while Dubček stressed that Czechoslovakia would continue to be a member. The Catholic Church was closely linked to the Hungarian revolution, whereas it didn't play a role in Czechoslovakia. In Czechoslovakia, its citizens enjoyed four months of freedom as opposed to the five days experienced in Hungary before the Soviet tanks rolled in. Once the USSR had invaded, Hungary fought back while Czechoslovakia had passive resistance. As a result, many hundreds – if not thousands – of Hungarians were killed, while in Czechoslovakia 47 people were arrested but not killed. The same went for the leaders of the states: while Nagy was executed, Dubček was simply arrested and removed from power.

Remember that to reach the highest levels, your answer must give both similarities and differences, but that to get top marks you must say how similar or different you think they were. Were they very, mostly, or reasonably similar or different? It doesn't actually matter what you think – you can't be wrong – but you can answer badly. Make sure you explain why you think they were that similar or different. It's that magic word again – because.