

Observation no: 200 – Soviet Invasion of Hungary

Country-year: Hungary 1955

1. Did the current regime come to power in a military coup?

Yes.

The current regime in Hungary was the communist regime installed by the Soviet union after World War II. Between 1945 and 1947, Hungary held elections where the communists did not win a large enough vote to come to power democratically. As a result, the Hungarian communists, with the support of the Soviet Union coerced leaders from other parties into resigning, and were often either arrested or exiled. By 1947, both the popular media as well as US intelligence argues that a coup had brought a Stalinist communist regime to power.¹

2. Has the country ever experienced a military coup?

Yes.

Hungary experienced a coup in November 1918 and in October 1944.² The coup in 1918 ended the monarchy in Hungary following World War I, and the coup in October 1944 was organized by Nazi Germany in order to prevent Hungary from signed an armistice with the Soviet Union.

3. Is the country's top leader a former military officer?

No.

The country's top leadership just prior to the Soviet invasion of Hungary was in flux. The country's de facto leader was the Communist Party's general secretary. From 1947-1953, that man was Matyas Rakosi (although he bears mentioning because he stayed extremely powerful until after the invasion). Between 1953 and July 1956 (roughly 3 months before the revolution), Imre Nagy was the top leader, and the leader around the time of the invasion was Erno Gero.³

There is no evidence that any of the top leaders, who were all members of the Politburo, ever served in the military.

¹ Andrews, Marshall. "Truman Calls Hungary Coup Outrage." *The Washington Post* 6 June 1947; "Hungary: Resistance Activities and Potentials." *The 1956 Hungarian Revolution: A History in Documents*. 2002. Bekes, Csaba and Malcolm Byrne and Jason Rainer, eds. New York: CEU, p 98.

² Kontler, Laszlo. 2002. *A History of Hungary*. New York: Palgrave, p 328.

³ Borhi, Laszlo. 2004. *Hungary in the Cold War 1945-1956: Between the United States and the Soviet Union*. Budapest: CEU, p 231-238.

4. Are ethnic, sectarian, or racial criteria used to exclude segments of the population from the officer corps?

Yes.

There is no smoking gun evidence to suggest that any particular ethnic, sectarian or racial criteria were used to exclude segments of the population from the officer corps. However, the communist rule in Hungary from the late 1940s onwards was characterized by bouts of anti-Semitism, which resulted in purges, arrests, show trials and even disappearances. Critics and rivals of the regime were labeled as Zionist, which was used as a justification to arrest them or remove them from power.⁴

5. Are there strict ideological requirements for entry into the senior officer corps?

Yes.

The civilian leadership of the country were staunch Soviet allies. In fact, Borhi (2004) argues that the “unquestioning ideological obedience and deference to the Soviets” by the Hungarian leadership was the key to Soviet control in Hungary.⁵ This deference to Soviet military strategy, Marxism-Leninism and the Soviet worldview of an oncoming war between the people’s republics and the west was also shared by the military leadership.⁶

6. Is party membership required for entry into the senior officer corps?

Yes.

Kontler (2002) reports that the communist regime was in charge of all major appointments within the military hierarchy (as well as the civilian bureaucracy), and the appointments were made top down and “on the basis of strict political reliability.”⁷ In fact, Borhi (2004) reports that by 1951, 81% of the officer corps consisted of new cadres that was selected by the communist regime. The Hungarian military also relied heavily on Soviet military advisors. In fact, even the Chief of Staff of the Hungarian army was appointed, after consultation with Soviet advisor comrades and Stalin.⁸

7. Does military training involve extensive political education or ideological indoctrination?

Yes.

⁴ Borhi 2004, p 210.

⁵ Borhi 2004, p 200.

⁶ Borhi 2004, p 225.

⁷ Kontler 2002, p 411.

⁸ Borhi 2004, p 203.

Political indoctrination towards Marxism-Leninism was a key feature of Hungarian society writ large from the late 1940s onwards. This included education at all levels of education, youth groups, churches and many other forms of organizations.⁹ There is also evidence that military training and training exercises were also undertaken only after consultation with Soviet military advisors. Borhi (2002) provides a particularly interesting example of training exercises in the Urals, where Hungarian forces practiced how to fight in conflicts involving nuclear explosions in support of the Soviet Union, even while recognizing that such wars might simply annihilate armed forces.¹⁰

8. Has the military been used to repress internal dissent in the last five years?

No.

This is an example of organizational quirks within Hungary. The Hungarian state's weapon of choice for repression and surveillance was the State Security Authority (AVH), which was under the direct control of the very top of the Communist party's leadership (for many years, this meant Rakosi).¹¹ They were responsible for a variety of human rights violations including domestic spying, arrests, torture, execution and disappearances. However, the AVH was not under the control of the military. In fact, they were responsible for purging the military as well.

9. Has the military been used to govern the country in the last five years?

No.

I found no evidence that the military was used to govern any part of the country in the past five years. According to US army intelligence reports, most forms of dissent and resistance against the Hungarian state were passive, and did not result in any major actions by the military.¹²

10. Is there a paramilitary organization separate from the regular military, used to provide regime or leader security?

Yes.

The various arms of state security forces employed by the Hungarian state numbered nearly as large as the army itself, and were independent of the military.¹³ In fact, state security police forces, and not the regular military, were the forces used to repress

⁹ Kontler 2002, p 415.

¹⁰ Borhi 2004, p 228.

¹¹ Kontler 2002, p 412.

¹² "Hungary: Resistance Activities and Potentials." *The 1956 Hungarian Revolution: A History in Documents*. 2002. Bekes, Csaba and Malcolm Byrne and Jason Rainer, eds. New York: CEU

¹³ Borhi 2004, p 211.

domestic dissent in the beginning stages of student protests that resulted in the Soviet invasion of Hungary in October 1956.¹⁴ They were the ones to start firing into the crowd of civilians when the crowd tried to take over the local radio station in Budapest.¹⁵

In addition to the either of these organizations, the Soviet military also had a significant presence in Hungary. The Hungarian government was responsible for provision of food, supplies, training facilities and even airports for the Soviet military.¹⁶ This included the Soviet Special Corps, which was based in Budapest during the student demonstrations.¹⁷ In fact, Borhi (2004) explicitly states that the Hungarian communists wanted to keep the Soviet military around in order to prop up the regime.¹⁸

11. Is there an internal intelligence apparatus dedicated to watching the regular military?

Yes.

As mentioned, the State Security Authority (AVH) was the secret police in Hungary in charge of domestic surveillance and repression. Their primary mandate was to root out dissidents and protect the communist revolution. This gave them an extremely broad mandate that covered everyone outside as well as within the communist party. This included the military, and they were in fact responsible for heavy purges within the military.¹⁹

12. Has a purge of the officer corps occurred in the last five years?

Yes.

Evidence suggests that there was a heavy purge of the military over the past 5 years. Borhi (2004) reports that the show trials in 1948 began with political rivals and dissidents and then moved on to other members of society. This included army generals, among others. There were also purges in the air force, included reported disappearances of air force officers. In 1951, many air force officers were arrested and accused of systematically disabling aircraft.²⁰ By 1951, some reports indicate that about 1100 officers had been removed, and 81% of the officer corps was new.²¹

¹⁴ Borhi 2004, p 244.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Borhi 2004, p 225-228.

¹⁷ Borhi 2004, p 244.

¹⁸ Borhi 2004, p 228.

¹⁹ Kontler 2002, p 412; Borhi 2004, p 209.

²⁰ Borhi 2004, p 209.

²¹ Borhi 2004, p 226.

13. Is there an institutionalized forum through which civilian leaders and military officers regularly exchange information?

No.

I did not find sufficient evidence of an institutionalized forum in which civilian leaders and military officers regularly exchanged information. Most reports suggested that the military leadership implemented Soviet military strategy conveyed to them through Soviet military advisors.²² I did find a brief mention of a Defense Council, but the evidence suggests that like most sections of the state hierarchy within the communist state, they were more of a rubber-stamp for top-down policy than a true forum for policymaking or exchange of information.²³

²² Borhi 2004, p 226-228.

²³ Borhi 2004, p 228.