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1956

The Year the Ice Broke

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Quite a few people who are still politically active will remember 1968, which was marked by key events in the three sectors of the world revolution - the May events in France, the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia and its crushing by Soviet tanks, the Tet offensive in Vietnam. Only a few will remember another year which saw momentous events - the year 1956.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/kruschtalk.jpg>] **Kruschev's sensational secret speech**

Far and away the most important series of events in 1956 concerned the Stalinist states of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and indeed the whole world Communist movement. At the beginning of 1956, the Communist parties of the world, those in power and those in the capitalist world, seemed united under the leadership of the Soviet Union, just as they had been in 1945. Stalin, who had died three years earlier, was still officially revered and placed on a par with Marx, Engels and Lenin. However even during Stalin's lifetime cracks had begun to appear. Tito and the Yugoslav communists, who had made their revolution without Stalin's approval and with very little help from the Soviet Union, were considered a threat to Soviet hegemony in Europe and excommunicated in 1948.

Throughout Eastern Europe, Communist Party leaders who were considered even potentially independent of Moscow were purged and very often executed. It was not yet widely known to what extent the Vietnamese and Chinese parties, while bowing to Moscow, conducted their own independent policies. In the case of China, underlying tensions would several years later explode into open conflict.

Fairly quickly after the death of Stalin, his successors began to make changes that marked a certain break with the past. Political prisoners were freed on a massive scale. The accused in the so-called "doctors' plot", the last of Stalin's projected show trials, were rapidly freed and exonerated. Measures were taken to improve the standard of living of the population. Within the top party leadership there was a secret debate on Stalin period, which was criticised to varying degrees by all its components.

Emphasis was placed on "collective leadership". In foreign policy, there was a move towards what became known as "peaceful coexistence" with the capitalist world. In a spectacular turnaround, there was a rapprochement between the Soviet leadership and the heretical Yugoslavs. In Eastern Europe, the victims of the purge trials were being rehabilitated in piecemeal fashion and old-style Stalinist leaders were removed or under threat.

There had also been in June 1953, two serious movements of revolt in Eastern Europe. In Czechoslovakia the regime quelled a workers' revolt with its own forces. In East Germany Soviet forces intervened and the repression was much more severe. In both cases revolts that started from economic demands soon expressed democratic and national aspirations.

These elements enable us to understand, retrospectively, that the momentous events of 1956 did not fall from the sky. They nevertheless came as a shock to contemporaries;

The first shock came in February 1956. Nikita Khrushchev, Stalin's successor at the head of the Soviet Communist Party, made his famous "secret speech" at the 20th congress of the CPSU denouncing the crimes of Stalin. The contents of this speech were initially intended only for the congress delegates. However they were gradually made known to lower levels of the party and to foreign communist leaders, some of whom then made them known in their own parties. (Though others, like the leadership of the French Communist Party, did nothing of the sort and continued for decades to refer to "the report attributed to comrade Khrushchev"). Following some fairly accurate reports of the contents of the report in the Western and Yugoslav press, it was in June made known in its entirety to the whole world, courtesy of the CIA.

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The report denounced in quite unambiguous terms Stalin's crimes - the mass deportations, including of entire peoples, the extent and methods of repression, the purges and executions of communists. But there were limits. There was no rehabilitation of the Left and Right Oppositions of the 1920s, of Trotsky, Bukharin, Kamenev, Zinoviev, nor of their followers who were liquidated in the 1930s. The communists who were rehabilitated were mostly Stalinists who had opposed Stalin and been arrested and often liquidated, with or without a public trial, from 1934 onwards, in the purges of which the show trials in 1936-38 were only a small part.

The report had the effect of a bombshell. In the capitalist world, the revelations of the extent of the Stalinist terror profoundly shook communists who had for decades defended en bloc Stalin, the CPSU and the Soviet Union against all criticism.

In Eastern Europe, the denunciation of Stalin, coming in the wake of the rapprochement between Moscow and Belgrade, the loosening of highly centralised control and the rehabilitation of some of the victims of the purges of the late 40s and early 50s created a climate of instability. This was a dangerous time for the Stalinist regimes, who were disunited, unsettled by the changes in the Soviet Union and forced to make some concessions to the population. When a dictatorial regime starts to make concessions there is always the danger that it will simply embolden opposition rather than placate it. And that is exactly what happened, in two key countries of Eastern Europe.

In Poland movements developed in both intellectual circles and in the working class and were reflected in an inner-party struggle. In June, in the city of Poznan, a strike and demonstration took on an insurrectionary character and was repressed, with more than 50 dead. But the insurrectionary movement did not spread.

There was a groundswell of opposition to the old Stalinist regime, a ferment of ideas, the creation of workers' councils. But many workers placed their hopes in a peaceful change of leadership at the top of the Communist Party. Wladyslaw Gomulka, a party leader who had been purged in 1948, but unlike many of his peers in other countries not executed, was making a bid for power and was seen as embodying a socialism that was more democratic and more independent of the Soviet Union. Gomulka rode to power on the back of the mass movement, convincing centrist elements in the party and finally, in a tense confrontation in October, the Soviet leadership, that he would not change the fundamental bases of the regime nor the alliance with the Soviet Union. He was true to his word and subsequently managed to demobilise and/or repress the radical anti-Stalinist forces and reassert party control.

In Hungary the same ingredients produced a quite different outcome. Rumbling unrest finally broke out into insurrection on October 23 when a demonstration of solidarity with Poland was harshly repressed. Neither the party nor the army could control the situation. Sections of the army went over to the insurgents, forcing a temporary withdrawal of Soviet troops. But the reformist Communist Imre Nagy, recalled as Prime Minister in extremis, was unable to control the situation as Gomulka had. He finally gave in to popular national and democratic aspirations and announced Hungarian neutrality and the return to a multi-party system. This was too much for the Kremlin. A second Soviet intervention on November 4 drowned the insurrection in blood.

Only three days separated the peaceful resolution of the Polish situation and the beginning of the insurrection in Hungary. Whereas the first seemed at the time to confirm the possibility of a self-reform of the Stalinist system, the second showed what could happen when the Hungarian people went too far. Khrushchev had managed in the space of just a few months to demolish the myth of Stalin by revealing the extent of the terror - and then demonstrate that in spite of attempts to liberalise the system, anything that went as far as real democracy or national independence would be met with tanks. The effect on the communist movement was devastating. It brought the biggest wave of resignations since the Nazi-Soviet pact in 1939; The British party, for example, lost one third of its members in a year. 1956 can really be said to mark the beginning of the long-drawn out decline and fall of Stalinism.

One reason that made it easier for the Soviet Union to intervene in Hungary was the Suez affair, which illustrated

another aspect of the international situation, the decline of the old colonial empires and the rise of national liberation movements. In July the radical nationalist regime of Nasser in Egypt had nationalized the Suez Canal, which had been owned by an Anglo-French consortium. The reaction of Britain and France was to concoct a secret agreement with Israel, which invaded Egypt on October 29. Britain and France then intervened "to protect the Suez Canal", provoking widespread protest both at home and in the Arab world. They were finally obliged to withdraw ignominiously under pressure from the new hegemonic imperialist power, the United States.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/Brittroops.jpg>] **British troops in Port Said**

This was the last occasion on which the two European colonial powers tried to act in any serious way independently of the United States. Britain had already, since the Second World War, begun to settle into its new role as America's number one ally, in the so-called "special relationship". Suez was its last fling.

Both Britain and France were in the process of losing their colonial empires. In spite of some local insurgencies in Malaya, Kenya and South Arabia Britain was to make the painful transition from a colonial to a post-colonial power with a certain degree of aplomb. Suez was a humiliation, but otherwise Britain managed in most cases to hand over power to local elites. The process was much more painful for France, which had already suffered a catastrophic defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, the first time a colonised Asian people had militarily defeated an imperialist army in a pitched battle. France had just accorded independence to Morocco and Tunisia, in order to concentrate on holding onto Algeria. There a further defeat lay some years down the road, though it was not yet obvious. When it became so De Gaulle precipitously granted a usually very formal independence to France's African colonies, which it continued to dominate.

1956 saw the beginnings of a new and non-Stalinist Left in the imperialist countries, of which former CP members were an important part. It was uneven and expressed through a series of often ephemeral political formations and groupings. Nevertheless it constituted a bridge towards the new radicalizing generation which began to appear at the beginning of the 1960s. It was also after 1956 that the most consistently anti-Stalinist and anti-imperialist forces regrouped in the small Trotskyist movement began to grow in a very modest way, something which would accelerate with the youth radicalization of the 60s.

Sometimes events take place which go virtually unnoticed at the time, but have important consequences in the future. In December 1956 a small group of revolutionaries in a leaky old boat landed on the coast of Cuba and began the process that would lead to the first socialist revolution in the Western hemisphere. July 1956 was the date when according to the Geneva Agreement of 1954, free elections should have been held to unify Vietnam, but never were due to the opposition of Washington and its Vietnamese puppets. The unification of Vietnam was to be a longer and more bloody process. And the two revolutions, Cuban and Vietnamese, were to be powerful magnets for the radicalising generation of the 1960s.

[Full text: Report to the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, by Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev](#)