

First the XX Congress and the end of Stalinism. Then the threat of armed intervention in Poland. Finally, the Nagy rebellion in Hungary. With the Americans caught unaware and the Chinese demanding equal

# The communist movement and the watershed year of '56

HISTORY

by Fernando Orlandi

standing with the USSR. Crucial to the history of the Cold War and the international communist movement. There's every reason to call 1956 an unforgettable year

There can be no question that 1956 was a critical year in the history of the Twentieth Century, of the Cold War, and of the international communist movement. A leading representative of the Italian Communist Party, Pietro Ingrao, called it "the unforgettable year 1956", an expression that has since become extremely popular. Ingrao recalls: "It had to do with a film... I had recalled the title of a film from the early days of Soviet cinema, *The Unforgettable Year 1919*, which dealt with [Stalin's] civil war against the White Army... The occasion that gave rise to my literary affectation was an extremely bitter one. We were arguing openly in the Camera dei Deputati [the Italian House of Representatives] about the hanging of Imre Nagy, the leader of the 1956 Hungarian uprising, who had fallen into the hands of the Soviets after the suppression of the popular revolt at the end of October". But this was no movie. That unforgettable 1956 was a truly critical moment in the history of the past century and of Communism. Fifty years later, thanks to the opening of the archives of communist regimes in Central and Western Europe, as well as to materials (less easily accessible) from Russian archives, to documents declassified by the

United States, and to the memories and testimony of those who played a role in these historical events, we can reconstruct in detail much of what took place.

## A "secret speech" explodes onto the world

The "political year" began on February 14, 1956 with the opening of the XX Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), the first session of the Soviet party following the death of Stalin three years earlier. The XX Congress, though it was itself a "turning point" with respect to the Stalinist politics of previous decades, has become famous for the so-called "secret speech," otherwise known as the report *On the Cult of Personality and its Consequences*, which Party Secretary Nikita Khrushchev delivered on February 25, in a special, closed-doors session after the congress had officially concluded. In that speech, Khrushchev denounced a series of crimes committed by his predecessor, Josef Stalin. But Khrushchev's speech was hardly the result of some perceived need to make a clean breast of Stalinism; it was not, as Adam Westoby has observed, "one of those rare cases in history in which a political leader risks his personal power and even his life for the sake of the greater public good". It was, instead, "a

~~Secret~~

~~CIA Internal Use Only  
Access Controlled by DDP~~



CIA HISTORICAL STAFF

APPROVED FOR RELEASE  
DATE: MAR 2005

## The Clandestine Service Historical Series

HUNGARY  
VOLUME I

EO 12958 3.3(b)(1)>25Yrs  
(S)



~~Secret~~

~~CS HP 323  
Controlled by: SB  
May 1972  
Copy 2 of 2~~

spectacular episode in the power struggle taking place within ruling circles of the Soviet party ... part of a political strategy", that was deployed, moreover, with the full consensus of the entire leadership of the CPSU. The reading of the "secret speech", in fact, was not a personal decision on Khrushchev's part, as some in the past have dreamily claimed, nor were other members of the Prezidium of the CPSU openly hostile to it, not even Vyacheslav Molotov, though he continued to maintain that Stalin had committed "excesses" more than "errors".

For the delegates who listened, rooted to their seats, the document represented a slap in the face. A few days later, on March 5, the Soviet leadership, which had already released the text to a few western communist leaders, including Palmiro Togliatti, decided to allow it to be read in all party meetings and to inform even the "party-less" of its contents in workplace assemblies.

In Poland, where the communist leadership was heavily fractured and the problem of the successor to Boleslaw Bierut remained unresolved (he had died in Moscow on March 12), the decision was made to translate the document and then to publish it in a secret edition, with numbered copies, but in a significant print run.

Officially, the Polish edition was printed in an edition of three thousand numbered copies. In fact, as Stefan Staszewski, then the First Secretary of the Party Committee in Warsaw, later revealed, "we ordered the printing of fifteen thousand copies, repeating the numbering of the copies several times, and the printers added a few additional copies on top of those". The secret was out. Staszewski himself delivered a copy of the speech to three foreign journalists: Philippe Ben of "Le Monde", Sydney Gruson of the "Herald Tribune", and Flora Lewis of the "New York Times". The text that the three journalists received in Warsaw quickly arrived in the hands of Israeli and United States intelligence agencies.

Despite elaborate stories of spy operations to the contrary, it was in this ordinary way that Khrushchev's speech reached the West.

In Poland, the pamphlet literally flew out of the hands of its purveyors: Jacek Kuron recalls that it was sold under the table for the not inconsiderable sum of five hundred zloty. Popular reaction was more complex in the Soviet Union, where the dismantling of the

myth of Stalin – an article of faith for some thirty years – was less easily digested. Stalin was the living incarnation of the strongman who promised success and the building of the nation's power (a sentiment still shared today among some segments of the Russian population). Endless propaganda had done the rest.

In Stalin's native Republic of Georgia, the myth and the cult of Stalin seemed unshakeable. At the beginning of March, shortly after the dissemination of the "secret speech," impressive demonstrations in support of the late dictator took place in the capital city of Tbilisi. The protests, which flared up first among students, quickly assumed a mass character and, on March 9, they erupted into a kind of insurrection which was bloodily crushed by the army and the militia: at least twenty were killed and sixty wounded. Soviet authorities declared a state of emergency in Tbilisi.

What happened there was unexpected: a certain segment of Soviet society was struggling to accept the dismantling of the myth of Stalin; decades of history, of habits, and of the "truths" that had shaped the popular mind could not be cancelled, in a single blow, simply by removing Stalin's portraits. In the meetings in which the "secret speech" was read, even openly critical responses began to be heard, and the phenomenon became widespread enough to be noted in the official press.

In Washington, meanwhile, animated discussions were taking place regarding how to use the valuable document. After its authenticity had been confirmed, disagreements at top levels of the CIA broke out openly. Some favoured making the document immediately available to the public so that the entire world, as Ray S. Cline wrote, could benefit from the "spectacle of a totalitarian nation incriminated by its own leadership". Others, such as Frank Wisner and James Angleton, were opposed, and wanted to consider the best way to "exploit" the document, prisoners perhaps of the sometimes-Byzantine thinking of those involved in secret operations. Cline gained the upper hand on June 2, when he received the support of CIA Director, Allen Dulles. Two days later, on Monday, June 4, the document was published in its entirety by the "New York Times". From that moment on,

the text was disseminated widely. In the Soviet Union it was not officially published until 1989.

### A hundred flowers

The beginning of 1956 marked a year of great hopes in the People's Republic of China. On January 1, daily newspapers appeared in a new format, with Chinese characters no longer written in the traditional manner – vertically, from top to bottom – but in western style, from left to right. Once the war effort of the early 1950s had come to an end, during which China's commitments in the Korean War had sapped significant resources from the processes of economic reform and the construction of a new State, expectations were high throughout the country. On January 25, a major plan for agricultural development was unveiled. Like all other world communist leaders, Mao Zedong was caught unprepared by the events in Moscow. Not only could the condemnation of the "cult of personality" allude in an embarrassing way to the cult that surrounded Mao himself, but he did not share others' sense of the significance of the "secret speech." Above all, he was irritated that the Soviets had not kept him informed. Shock followed surprise. Beginning on March

17 and continuing to the first days of April, meetings of the Chinese leadership were held in continuation. For Beijing, criticism of Stalin ruptured the assumption that the Soviet Union was always "correct". Stalin's errors and the "mistaken tendency of the international communist movement to treat other parties as inferiors", thus, could be corrected. No longer infallible, Moscow's historical role as "mother ship," as "older brother", as *primus inter pares* could be opened for debate. Moscow followed the Chinese discussions and discontent with great interest. On March 31, Mao met at length with Pavel Yudin, the Soviet ambassador to Beijing. The meeting was more a monologue than a conversation, a long series of complaints and recriminations on Mao's part, some of them surely groundless, regarding the events of the past. In short, Stalin had committed various wrongs against the Chinese and had even been suspicious of Mao himself. Moscow was alarmed by these revelations and, at the beginning of April, Anastas Mikoyan, one of the most influential Soviet leaders, was sent to Beijing to explain the situation to Mao and to attempt to persuade him. As far as internal matters were concerned, Beijing responded to the new situation in May with a series of small liberalizations and with Mao's "a hundred flowers" movement, a new attitude toward intellectuals that signaled an unmistakable departure from the persecutions of previous years. In June, at the Third Session of the National People's Congress (the so-called

\_Below left: Imre Nagy, the leader of the 1956 Hungarian revolution. Events in Poland and the subsequent intervention of the Red Army in Budapest (below, right) sparked the Hungarian crisis



Corbis (2)

Chinese parliament), genuinely new words were heard: how in Moscow, the “excesses” and the “violations of socialist law” committed in the struggle against “counter-revolutionaries” were denounced; how in the Soviet Union, innocent people had been arrested and condemned and other victims had been tortured to extract confessions. Though it did not last long, this was the wind that was blowing “from the west” – that is, from Moscow.

Beyond the recriminations at which Mao excelled, his relationship with Khrushchev’s speech remained complicated. On the one hand, he disapproved of it heartily; on the other, he appreciated the fact that the speech opened the possibility for Beijing to stand on equal terms with Moscow, finally able to express openly (albeit not publicly – in other words, not in party meetings) what it had more-or-less been constrained to keep silent up until that point. In September 1956, Mao told a delegation of the Yugoslavian Communist League, “Before the criticism of Stalin, we were not in a position to be as explicit as we now are with regard to certain problems”. The Chinese, subordinate to Moscow just as were all other communist parties, now found themselves in a position of equality. As an additional matter, after repudiating a chapter of its own past, Moscow would no longer be allowed to monopolize the theoretical and ideological leadership of the international communist movement. Mao thus naturally began to think of himself as the obvious candidate to head the world communist movement. In Beijing, the “secret speech” sowed the seeds that bore fruit in the 1960s with a schism between the two capitals of socialism.

### **The invasion that wasn't**

Although there was turmoil in Beijing, what had taken place in Polish society at the time was even more serious. In April, political detainees were released from jail while Roman Romkowski, former Minister of State Security, was placed under arrest. Shortly afterward, Jakub Berman, the regime’s second in command, resigned. In September, the leadership began to examine the numerous questions left unresolved with Moscow and, at the beginning of the following month, Wladyslaw Gomulka reassumed, albeit informally, leadership of the party. With the intention of finding solutions to these various

problems, the Poles convened a party plenum for October 19, but Moscow sought to prevent it from taking place. On October 18, Pantaleimon Ponomarenko, the Soviet ambassador to Warsaw, informed Polish Party Secretary, Edward Ochab, that a delegation headed by none other than Khrushchev himself would arrive the following day. The announcement was, in effect, a request to postpone the plenum, but the Poles instead asked the Soviets to reschedule their visit.

Nonetheless, bright and early the following day, the unwelcome guests arrived: two Soviet delegations, the first composed of a number of generals and led by Field Marshal Ivan Konev, Commander-in-Chief of the Warsaw Pact forces; and the second made up of CPSU members, including Khrushchev, Mikoyan, Molotov, and a plethora of functionaries. Khrushchev’s attitude was decidedly hostile, and the discussions, as Krzysztof Persak has written, took place “with guns on the table”. Indeed, the arrival of the delegations from Moscow was accompanied by the movement of Soviet troops stationed in Poland toward the Polish capital, while warships appeared outside the port of Gdansk. In the end, the discussions came to a close with no clear resolution, the Soviets indicating a willingness to wait and see how the situation evolved. The choice must have been the “correct” one because Gomulka, whose return to power the Soviets had not initially supported, proved himself to be a faithful ally in the years that followed.

When Yudin informed Mao of the possibility of military intervention in Poland, however, the unexpected happened in Beijing. Wu Lengxi, at the time the director of the Xinhua News Agency, describes the incident in his memoirs, and an account by Stanislaw Kiryluk, then the Polish ambassador to Beijing, provides additional confirmation of his December 3 conversation with Mao. In the dispatch that Kiryluk sent to Warsaw, in which he recorded the Chinese leader’s words, he wrote that “the Soviet comrades have requested ... approval of the use of armed forces”. Mao, however, was immovably opposed and, for that reason, sent a delegation to Moscow; led by Liu Shaoqi, the party’s second in command, the delegation also included Deng Xiaoping.

Wu Lengxi’s account is more vivid. The meeting among members of the party leadership took place in Mao’s bedroom, with the head of the Chinese party in his pyjamas.

For Mao and his comrades, military intervention constituted a “chauvinistic error on the part of a great nation”. At the conclusion of the meeting, Yudin was urgently summoned and informed that “the Chinese government and party will publicly condemn the intervention”. Mao asked him to advise Khrushchev immediately by telephone and not through the customary channels. Yudin (sweating heavily, according to Wu’s account) said only “Da! Da!” and rushed from the bedroom.

The documentation currently in our possession doesn’t allow us to determine how far Mao’s position might have gone in preventing a military invasion of Poland. The precise extent of the much-discussed military intervention remains an open question, moreover, in part because relevant Soviet documents are still classified. Did the Soviets actually intend to



—Mao had a complex relationship with Khrushchev (below: the two leaders at a meeting). On the one hand he complained about Khrushchev and on the other hand he admired him because Beijing now found itself on equal terms with Moscow

invade Poland, or were the troop movements merely a display of strength meant to put pressure on Warsaw? The line that separates these two positions is faint: pressure could rapidly have been transformed into intervention, and intervention might have been halted at the last moment. The scale of the mobilization of Soviet military forces nevertheless allows us to hypothesize that the option of intervention had been seriously considered.

### The invasion accomplished

The intervention – or, more accurately, the two interventions – by the Red Army took place in Budapest a few days later. The events in Poland having acted as a detonator, the Hungarian crisis erupted spontaneously. By now virtually every detail is known regarding what took place in Hungary. A large number of documents from the United States has been made available (including an account of matters internal to the CIA, published in only two copies), which reveal a surprising page of history.

From these documents, we learn that there was very little substance behind the thundering rhetoric of the “rollback” and “liberation” policy advocated by the administration of President Dwight D. Eisenhower. As Charles Gati put it in his 2006 *Failed Illusions: Moscow, Washington, Budapest, and the 1956 Hungarian Revolt*: “The most obvious

objective was to satisfy the extreme right wing of the Republican Party, led by Senator Joseph McCarthy, and to rollback the Democrats from Capitol Hill – rather than to liberate Central and Western Europe from Soviet power”.

New U.S. documents reveal that the Hungarian revolution caught Washington completely by surprise. The same was true for the CIA: no one in its Vienna post spoke Hungarian, and a single man, Geza Katona, who was occupied with routine duties in the embassy, was the CIA’s only operative in Budapest. More generally, Hungary had been assigned a low priority among Communist Bloc countries.

President Eisenhower’s attention, meanwhile, was entirely focused on the upcoming elections, and he did not view Hungary as a major problem. A revolution had been smashed because nothing could be done about it; instead, the question was presented to the UN in order to maintain pressure on the USSR and, consequently, to make best use of the incident for propaganda purposes.

Beijing was no less convinced of having successfully reinforced its position in the Communist Bloc. At the beginning of January 1957, Zhou Enlai travelled to Moscow, Budapest, and Warsaw. Upon his return, he prepared a report for Mao in which he wrote, “The Soviet Union and China can now sit together and hold discussions on equal footing. Although [the Soviets] have divergent ideas regarding certain problems, they must nonetheless seek our advice”.