Summary:
A Symposium on the Hungary-Suez Crisis: Fifty Years On
October 24, 2006

The Suez Crisis and Hungarian Revolt of 1956 had a profound impact on the Cold War and provide important lessons for U.S. foreign policy fifty years later. In both cases, direct U.S. intervention was avoided and a larger conflict averted. Yet both crises demonstrated the difficulties of crafting foreign policy without fully understanding the intentions of one’s allies or enemies. In an effort “to inject more history into what we do here,” said Council on Foreign Relations President Richard N. Haass, the Council hosted a recent two-part symposium, “Hungary-Suez Crisis: Fifty Years On.”

The first session addressed the events that triggered the Suez Crisis of October 1956. The crisis, sparked by Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser’s decision to nationalize the Suez Canal, was a “very grubby and short-lived affair,” said E. Roger Owen, A.J. Meyer professor of Middle East history at Harvard University. “There was no real occupation, no invasion—nothing that can compare with Iraq at the moment,” he added. “But it is difficult to think of any part of the world not involved in what essentially began as a feud between [British Prime Minister] Sir Anthony Eden and Nasser.”

England, France, and Israel hatched a plot behind the Americans’ back to retake the Suez Canal. But the plot, which entailed an invasion of Sinai by Israeli forces in order to justify intervention by France and Britain, began to unravel after President Dwight D. Eisenhower threatened to sink the British pound by withholding emergency loans.

The panelists agreed the crisis resulted in the emergence of greater U.S. and Soviet influence in the Middle East as well as the scaling back of British and French dominance in the region. “It persuaded many in Great Britain that colonialism was dead,” said David Fromkin, professor of international relations and history at Boston University. “There certainly was always some element in Great Britain that said, ‘Yank, you stole my empire from me.’”

The events in Egypt also influenced the future behavior of the Americans and Soviets in Hungary. Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev took a more belligerent response to the uprising in Budapest as a result of the Suez Crisis. “The lesson he learned was that nuclear bluff works,” said Timothy Naftali, author of Khrushchev’s Cold War: The Inside Story of an American Adversary, pointing to future Soviet aggression in Berlin and Cuba.

The aborted Hungarian revolt was the subject of the symposium’s second panel, presided over by Robert Legvold, Marshall D. Shulman professor of political science at Columbia University. Emboldened by a workers’ uprising in Poland and encouraged by the United States, Hungarians launched a revolt in October 1956 that lasted two weeks before being put down with force by Soviet tanks. Charles Gati, senior adjunct professor of European studies at Johns Hopkins University, said the Soviet leadership was primarily to blame
for the slaughter of 2,000 Hungarians but Washington, including its propaganda agencies like Radio Free Europe, also bore some responsibility.

“This David and Goliath story that we have known for fifty years just doesn’t quite add up,” said Gati, referring to the Hungarian protesters versus the Soviets. He criticized the United States for fanning the flames of revolution despite having no intention of intervening. “The U.S. policy of liberation and rollback [of Communism] were only meant for domestic consumption,” he said, adding that the Hungarian uprising stood a chance to succeed, but the revolutionaries overreached and the leadership of reformist Imre Nagy was weak.

Other findings by the symposium included:

- **The United States grossly misunderstood the Soviets.** Khrushchev, who in February of 1956 made his famous speech denouncing Stalin, wavered on the decision to crush the Hungarian rebellion with force. “The man was torn,” said William Taubman, Bertrand Snell professor of political science at Amherst College. On one hand, the Soviet leader thought military intervention “would admit the bankruptcy of de-Stalinization,” Taubman said. On the other, “the Hungarians wanted to go faster [and] farther than he wanted.”

  It’s unclear why Khrushchev finally made the decision to put down the revolt, said the panelists. But the lynching of police by Hungarian insurgents, the growing perception of Soviet weakness, and the need to appease Stalinist hardliners in the Politburo played important roles. Another factor was the Suez Crisis. “Khrushchev was afraid he might lose both Hungary and Egypt,” said Taubman.

- **The United States could not have intervened in Hungary.** Richard H. Immerman, professor and Edward J. Buthusiem family distinguished faculty Fellow in history at Temple University, stressed that the United States was caught off-guard by the revolution in Hungary but wielded little influence over the course of events there. “The Eastern Europe people were not a particularly high priority for the [Eisenhower] administration,” he said. “Eastern Europe was not considered particularly strategically valuable. There weren’t any resources. It was really all about nuclear weapons, and Eastern Europe didn’t play into that.”

  Douglas Brinkley, a professor of history at Tulane University, stressed that Eisenhower was neither a pacifist nor soft on Communism. But the president felt “direct American intervention could have triggered an international crisis,” he said, including a nuclear confrontation.

- **The Suez Crisis fueled pan-Arabism.** The crisis led to a rollback of British influence in the Middle East while emboldening the Egyptian leader. Nasser needed a “real victory against imperialism,” said Owen. “It gave Nasser eleven years of Arab nationalism, state socialism, leadership of the Arab world.”
Israel was concerned by this pan-Arabism and destabilization in the region caused by the British pullout. The crisis also had a negative impact on U.S.-Arab relations. “Imagine if Nasser would have applauded Eisenhower, not gone with the Russians, and led to a new generation of American-Arab diplomacy,” said Brinkley. “Nasser’s move toward Russia maybe changed history, but I think in the long run it’s hurt the Arab states.”

- **The Suez Crisis altered the trans-Atlantic alliance.** Important lessons were learned in Europe. “For the British, the lesson was: We must never get out of step with the United States,” said Owen. “The French said, ‘We must never do anything with the United States.’” Fromkin added that the crisis prompted France—humbled by its perceived decline in global influence—to form the European Union and later, along with England, to pursue nuclear weapons.

  The panelists agreed it was unwise for the Europeans and Israelis to keep the Americans in the dark. “The U.S. should have been informed about Suez,” said Brinkley. “The end result was that Britain and France started looking smaller and looked like they couldn’t operate without the United States.”

- **Personalities played an important role.** The personality of Eden, who likened Nasser to Mussolini, shaped the final outcome of the Suez Crisis. “You were not dealing with a rational policymaker in London,” said Fromkin. The crisis eventually cost the British prime minister his job. Likewise, in Washington Eisenhower was offended by French and British collusion behind his back.

  “I’m surprised by how personally Eisenhower took this,” said Brinkley. “His feeling was, ‘Nobody double-crosses the United States.’” Another factor was the personality of Khrushchev. He had neither the military resources nor the political will to defend Egypt. “Khrushchev was in a corner,” said Naftali, “so he bluffed.” This would later influence his behavior in the Cuban Missile Crisis.

- **Poor information bred “diplomatic incompetence.”** “If you autopsy the event, the Suez Crisis shows what happens when you don’t understand your allies or your enemies,” said Naftali. “Nobody understood anybody in the Suez Crisis.” Washington and Moscow shared similar short-term goals in Egypt, he added, but neither understood this at the time. “We thought Nasser was a client of the Soviets,” said Naftali, when in fact he was a staunch anti-Communist. Similarly, the British grossly overestimated the military might of Egypt by estimating that 80,000 troops were needed to invade Egypt, according to Owen.

- **U.S. restraint avoided both crises from escalating further.** At the time, Eisenhower came under heavy criticism for his decision not to back the French, English, and Israelis or intervene directly in Egypt and later in Hungary. Yet Brinkley defended the action, or rather inaction, of the president. “It showed a period in the United States in the Cold War when restraint was the high order of
the day,” he said. “Eisenhower probably handled the two situations about as well as he could.” Although Brinkley criticized Radio Free Europe’s encouragement of the revolt, he said Eisenhower “did not have the troops to liberate Eastern Europe, and we had no way to kick the Red Army out of Hungary if we wanted to.”