

**MAO'S CHINA AND  
THE COLD WAR**



The University of North Carolina Press  
Chapel Hill & London



## CHAPTER 6 BEIJING AND THE POLISH AND HUNGARIAN CRISES OF 1956

*There is fire in Poland, and there is fire in Hungary. Since the fire is there, it will blaze up sooner or later. Which is better, to let the fire blaze, or not to let it? Fire cannot be wrapped up in paper. Now the fires have blazed up; that's just fine, as many reactionaries in Hungary have been exposed. The Hungarian incident has educated the Hungarian people and at the same time some Soviet comrades as well as us Chinese comrades.*

—Mao Zedong

In retrospect, the Polish and Hungarian crises of 1956 stand together as a landmark in the development of the Cold War history. These two important events not only revealed the long-existing tensions within the Soviet bloc, especially between the Soviet Union and Poland and the Soviet Union and Hungary; they also triggered a series of more general confrontations within the Communist world, eventually leading to the decline of international communism as a twentieth-century phenomenon.

The international nature of the Polish and Hungarian crises is clearly indicated in their connections with Beijing. The crises erupted at a time when serious disagreements had begun to surface between the Chinese and Soviet leadership in the wake of Stalin's death and the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's de-Stalinization effort.<sup>1</sup> Beijing's response to the crises epitomized Mao Zedong's perception of Beijing's and Moscow's changing positions in the world proletarian revolution, revealing his intention to adopt a more aggressive agenda on promoting China's "socialist revolution and reconstruction." Consequently, while both the peaceful settlement of the Polish crisis and the tragic result of the Hungarian revolution reflected the CCP's increasing influence in the international Communist movement, Beijing's experience during these two events enhanced Mao's determination to bring China's continuous revolution to a more radical phase. As a result, disastrous events such

as the Anti-Rightist movement and the Great Leap Forward in 1957–58 took place, which created conditions for deeper splits to develop between Beijing and Moscow. This chapter uses Chinese source materials made available in recent years, reinforced by Russian, Polish, and Hungarian documents, to discuss Beijing's involvement in the Polish and Hungarian crises of 1956.

### **The Polish Crisis**

In October 1956, months of accumulated tensions and a workers' uprising in Poznan resulted in the election of a new politburo of the Polish United Workers' Party (PUWP) excluding pro-Soviet, Stalinist leaders. The new PUWP leadership headed by Wladyslaw Gomulka also planned to remove Marshal Konstantin Rokossovskii, a Russian who had held the position as Poland's defense minister since 1949. In order to put pressure on the Polish leadership and to control the situation in Warsaw, a high-ranking Soviet delegation headed by Khrushchev rushed to Warsaw on 19 October.<sup>2</sup>

From the beginning, Mao and his fellow CCP leaders watched the crisis emerging in Poland alertly. In accordance with their understanding of the function of the "people's democratic dictatorship," they did not regard mass revolt as a legitimate way to solve the problems existing between the Communist state and a Communist-controlled society.<sup>3</sup> But, comparing the situation in Poland to their own past experience of having to behave as Moscow's junior partner, Mao and his comrades believed that the origins of Poland's crisis lay in Moscow's "big-power chauvinist" policy toward Eastern European countries.<sup>4</sup>

On 19 October, Pavel Yudin, Soviet ambassador to China, made an urgent appointment with Liu Shaoqi to deliver to the CCP Central Committee an important message from the CPSU Central Committee. Yudin told Liu that some PUWP leaders were planning to transform the party's politburo, which meant that there existed the danger that Poland might leave the socialist camp and join the Western bloc. Because of the serious situation in Poland, the Soviet leadership had decided to send a high-ranking delegation composed of Khrushchev, Vyacheslav Molotov, Anastas Mikoyan, and Lazar Kaganovich to visit Warsaw.<sup>5</sup> In the meantime, through other channels, including foreign news reports and reports from the Chinese embassy in Warsaw, CCP leaders learned that Moscow was planning to use military means to solve the Polish problem.<sup>6</sup>

On the afternoon of 20 October, Mao called an urgent enlarged meeting of the CCP Politburo Standing Committee<sup>7</sup> at his residence at Zhongnanhai (the location of the CCP central headquarters) to discuss the Polish crisis. According to the recollections of Wu Lengxi, director of the Xinhua News Agency

and one of Mao's secretaries, Mao did not even wait to get dressed and chaired the meeting in his pajamas. He first told the CCP leaders that he had called the meeting because the CPSU Central Committee had dispatched an urgent telegram to the CCP Central Committee, in which the Soviets emphasized that anti-Soviet elements in Poland had been rampant and had demanded the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Poland. The Soviets believed that, in accordance with the Warsaw Pact, they had the right to station troops in Poland. Mao observed that although Moscow had not made the final decision to intervene militarily, it seemed that the Soviet leaders intended to do so. Wu Lengxi quoted foreign news reports to brief participants of the meeting that Polish troops and security forces had begun to mobilize, that workers in Warsaw had been armed, and that the Soviets had anchored their warships outside the Polish port Gdansk, and had even mobilized their troops on the western borders of the Soviet Union and in East Germany. At this moment, Mao commented: "When the son fails to obey, the rude father picks up a stick to beat him. When a socialist power uses military forces to intervene in the internal affairs of a neighboring socialist country, this is not only a violation of the basic principles of international relations; this is also a violation of the principles governing the relations between socialist countries. This is serious big-power chauvinism, which should not be allowed in any circumstances."<sup>8</sup>

Top CCP leaders quickly reached a consensus that the CCP must firmly oppose Moscow's military intervention in Poland, and must do everything possible to stop it. Mao proposed that a warning should be sent to the Soviets immediately, making it clear that if they were to use force in Poland, the CCP would be the first to protest it. Participants at the meeting unanimously approved the chairman's proposal.<sup>9</sup>

After the meeting, Mao summoned Yudin to his quarters. He asked the Soviet ambassador to inform Moscow that the CCP politburo had just met to discuss the Polish crisis, and that it was the CCP leadership's unanimous conclusion that the Soviet Union's intervention in Poland's internal affairs would be a serious violation of the principles of proletarian internationalism. Mao told Yudin that if the Soviets intervened militarily, the Chinese party and government would be vehement in its protest against it. Mao asked Yudin to convey this message "word for word" to Khrushchev. The Soviet ambassador, according to Wu Lengxi, who was present at the meeting, was sweating while listening to Mao and left Mao's quarters saying nothing but "yes, yes!" According to Chinese sources, he reported Mao's message to Moscow by telephone immediately after the meeting.<sup>10</sup>

Top CCP leaders' discussions at the 20 October meeting reveal two basic

tendencies that would consistently dominate Beijing's handling of the Polish crisis and, later, the Hungarian crisis. First, in exploring the origins of the crises, Beijing's leaders placed great emphasis upon the impact of Moscow's "big-power chauvinism," believing that things would not have gone so wrong if the Soviets had not treated their junior partners in Eastern Europe with a mistaken "father-son" mentality. Thus, in Beijing's view, Moscow's behavior bore considerable responsibility for causing the crises. Second, in contemplating strategies to deal with the crises, Beijing's leaders did not restrict their vision to the situation at hand. Indeed, they believed that in order to solve the crises, and to prevent similar crises from occurring in other parts of the Communist world, the international Communist movement had to be restructured to allow equality to prevail in relations between fraternal parties. But since the concept "equality" would be defined in Beijing's terms, the logical consequence of this restructuring was self-evident: Moscow would be removed from the center of the world proletarian revolution, and Beijing, by virtue of its moral superiority, would climb to that central position.

As the Polish crisis worsened, the CPSU Central Committee sent another urgent telegram to the CCP Committee on 21 October. The Soviet leaders informed the Chinese that a top Soviet delegation had met with PUPP leaders, but the situation in Warsaw deteriorated continuously. Moscow regarded this as a matter of utmost importance, since the unrest, among other things, could trigger great chaos in other Eastern European countries. Soviet leaders thus hoped that the CCP could send a high-ranking delegation, best headed by either Liu Shaoqi or Zhou Enlai, to Moscow to discuss how to deal with the crisis. The telegram also mentioned that leaders from other socialist countries in Eastern Europe would join the discussion.<sup>11</sup>

After receiving the second telegram from Moscow, Mao summoned another enlarged Politburo Standing Committee meeting on the evening of 22 October.<sup>12</sup> The chairman told his colleagues that Beijing's opposition to Soviet intervention in Poland had caused repercussions in Moscow, and the Soviet leaders now invited two top CCP leaders to visit Moscow to "exchange opinions" with them. He asked the participants he had gathered to discuss and decide how Beijing should respond to Moscow's invitation. After analyzing the reports Beijing had received "through various sources" about the situation in Poland,<sup>13</sup> CCP leaders attending the meeting all agreed that although the situation in Warsaw was complicated, it looked "unlikely that Poland [would] immediately leave the socialist camp or join the Western bloc." Therefore, they believed, it was still possible, even necessary, to recognize the current Polish leadership and to cooperate with it "on the basis of equality." Liu Shaoqi

and Zhou Enlai also mentioned that the Soviets had not already used force in Poland for two reasons: first, they had encountered firm resistance from the Polish leaders, and, second, Khrushchev should have learned of the CCP's opposition to Soviet intervention in Poland after he returned to Moscow from Warsaw, making him and other Soviet leaders feel that they had no other choice but to consult with the CCP. Both Liu and Zhou believed that Beijing should send a top delegation to Moscow, to which Mao and other CCP leaders agreed. Touching upon the delegation's tasks in Moscow, Mao emphasized that the Chinese should not be directly involved in discussions between the Soviets and the Poles but should talk to each party separately, playing the role as a mediator between them. The meeting lasted until the early morning hours of 23 October.<sup>14</sup>

Twenty minutes after the meeting ended, Mao, accompanied by Liu Shaoqi, Zhou Enlai, Chen Yun, and Deng Xiaoping, met with Yudin at Zhongnanhai. The chairman now was ready to present to the Soviets Beijing's comprehensive evaluation of the Polish crisis and the Chinese plan to deal with it. He told the Soviet ambassador that Beijing had its own sources of information about what had been happening in Poland. Although it was true that reactionary elements were among the participants of the Polish incident, the overwhelming majority were ordinary workers and other common people. It seemed to him, said Mao, that the Polish comrades did not plan to leave the socialist camp but only wanted to reorganize the party's politburo. Then Mao commented that the Soviets had two options: they could either adopt a "soft" attitude or take a "hard" policy toward the Polish incident. Whereas taking a hard policy would mean dispatching troops to Poland to suppress the people there, the adoption of a soft attitude would involve providing advice to the Polish comrades. But if the Poles refused to follow the advice, the Soviets might need to make further concessions to them, such as acknowledging the new Polish leadership headed by Gomulka. In economic affairs, Mao continued, the Soviet Union should continue to provide assistance to Poland and cooperate with the Polish comrades on the basis of equality. By doing so, Mao claimed, Poland could be convinced to stay in the socialist camp.<sup>15</sup>

The chairman then turned to the Stalin issue. He stressed that although it was necessary to criticize Stalin's mistakes, the CCP disagreed with the Soviet leaders on how it should be done. The correct way, according to the chairman, was to criticize Stalin's mistakes only after his overall reputation had been properly protected. Following the tone he had established months before, Mao again stated that in evaluating Stalin's historical position, a "seventy to thirty ratio," or even an "eighty to twenty ratio," methodology should be used, ac-

knowledging that Stalin's merits far surpassed his offenses. "Stalin is a sword," concluded the chairman. "It can be used to fight the imperialists and various other enemies. . . . If this sword is put aside completely, if it is damaged, or if it is abandoned, the enemies will use this sword to try to kill us. Consequently, we would be lifting a rock only to drop it on our own feet."<sup>16</sup>

After the Soviet ambassador had left, at about 3:00 in the morning of 23 October, Mao Zedong, Liu Shaoqi, Zhou Enlai, and Deng Xiaoping met to finalize the composition of the CCP delegation and the agenda it was to follow in its meeting with Khrushchev and other Soviet leaders in Moscow. They decided that the delegation would be headed by Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, and it would include Wang Jiaxiang, a member of the Central Committee and Central Secretariat and former Chinese ambassador to the Soviet Union, Hu Qiaomu, Mao Zedong's political secretary and a member of the CCP Central Committee in charge of the party's propaganda affairs, and Shi Zhe, the long-time (since 1941) Russian-language interpreter for CCP leaders.<sup>17</sup> They also decided that Liu and Deng would not attend the meetings between Soviet and Polish leaders, but would meet the leaders of the two parties separately. The delegation's main task was defined as mediating the problems between the Soviet and Polish comrades by, on the one hand, criticizing the Soviet party's "big-power chauvinism" and, on the other hand, advising the Polish comrades to consider the overall interests of the socialist camp.<sup>18</sup> A few hours later, the Chinese delegation left Beijing for Moscow by air.<sup>19</sup>

#### **Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping in Moscow**

The CCP delegation arrived in Moscow late on the afternoon of 23 October (Moscow time).<sup>20</sup> According to Shi Zhe, Khrushchev personally welcomed the delegation at the Moscow airport. On their way to the guest house, Khrushchev talked to Liu Shaoqi nonstop, and his conversation, in Shi Zhe's words, "was full of complaints and had no order at all." While interpreting for Khrushchev, Shi Zhe felt that the Soviet leader was "extremely nervous." He also noticed that Liu Shaoqi sensed Khrushchev's extreme uneasiness but recalled that Liu did not make any substantial comments.<sup>21</sup>

When the Chinese arrived at the guest house, a meeting with Khrushchev began immediately.<sup>22</sup> The Soviet leader again dominated the conversation and touched upon a number of issues. In addition to explaining to the Chinese that the new Soviet leadership had made great efforts to deal with various complications left over by Stalin (such as the ongoing ethnicity problem in the Soviet Union and the problem of how to treat the cadres who had been purged during Stalin's times), Khrushchev particularly emphasized that Moscow had

reformed its policies toward the socialist countries in Eastern Europe after Stalin's death, especially after the party's Twentieth Congress. Regarding the developments in Poland, Khrushchev provided a detailed description of the CPSU delegation's visit to Warsaw. He mentioned that initially the Soviets did have strong suspicion about the motives of the new PZWP leadership headed by Gomulka, fearing that the Polish meant to abandon the socialist camp. But, the Soviet leader confessed, after meeting Gomulka and his comrades in Warsaw, he found that despite all kinds of differences in opinion between Moscow and the new Polish leadership, his suspicion was groundless. Therefore, Khrushchev emphasized, Moscow was ready to acknowledge the new Polish leadership, and was willing to establish a cooperative relationship with it. Furthermore, since distrust and tension remained between Moscow and Warsaw, he hoped that the Chinese comrades, who had had a better image among the Poles, would provide "friendly advice" to Warsaw to persuade the Polish comrades to maintain solidarity with the Soviets. "This will be beneficial to the Soviet Union," Khrushchev stressed, "as well as beneficial to the whole socialist camp." Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, who felt that Khrushchev's statement was generally compatible with the principles set up by the CCP leadership in managing the Polish issue, promised to the Soviet leader that he had Beijing's full support.<sup>23</sup>

While the meeting was under way, Khrushchev received a phone call from Erno Gero, the first secretary of the Hungarian Workers' Party. Gero told Khrushchev that since he had been preoccupied with domestic affairs, he was unable to come to Moscow to attend the meeting of leaders of socialist countries. Then Khrushchev received two phone calls from Marshal Georgy Zhukov, in which the Soviet defense minister reported that a mass riot, targeting mainly party and government offices, had broken out in Budapest, and that the Hungarian military had requested the Soviet Red Army stationed outside of Budapest to intervene. Both Khrushchev and Liu, according to Shi Zhe, were surprised by Zhukov's reports, since Gero mentioned nothing about the mass riot in his earlier phone call. Khrushchev commented that if the Hungarian government indeed wanted the Soviet Red Army to intervene, the decision must be made by the CPSU presidium.<sup>24</sup>

As the end of the meeting approached, Liu Shaoqi followed the CCP delegation's prepared agenda to turn the conversation to the Stalin issue, stressing that Stalin, together with Lenin, was a "sword" highly valuable to international communism and thus should be appreciated and carefully protected. Khrushchev, however, carelessly responded that if Stalin had been a sword, it was now completely useless and, therefore, should be abandoned. Before the dis-



cussion could go any further, Khrushchev left in a hurry, saying that he needed to contact other presidium members to discuss the situation in Hungary.<sup>25</sup>

The next day, 24 October, the CPSU presidium held a plenary session at the Kremlin, to which Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping were invited.<sup>26</sup> After a brief discussion of the situation in Poland, the main part of the meeting focused on the emerging crisis in Hungary. Khrushchev, who chaired the meeting, said that the Soviet Red Army had already entered Budapest and that social order there had gradually returned to normal. Emphasizing that the Red Army's intervention had been welcomed by the workers in Budapest, he hoped the Chinese comrades would understand that the situation in Hungary was different from that in Poland: the latter reflected problems existing within the Communist Party, while the former demonstrated an anti-Communist and counterrevolutionary tendency. Several other presidium members, including Molotov, Bulganin, and Malenkov, rose to support Khrushchev's view.<sup>27</sup>

Liu delivered a long speech at the meeting, which, together with the time spent on interpretation provided by Shi Zhe, lasted more than two hours. In accordance with Mao Zedong's opinions, Liu pointed out that the new PZWP leadership headed by Gomulka was still a Communist leadership, and that Poland should continue to be regarded as a socialist country. He emphasized that the divergence between Warsaw and Moscow was a matter of right and wrong, not a conflict between revolution and counterrevolution. Therefore, the problems with Poland should be solved through comrade-style criticism and self-criticism by both the Soviet and the Polish sides. Moscow would have been absolutely mistaken, Liu stressed, if it had decided to use military means to settle the crisis. He expressed Beijing's support of the Soviet leadership's decision to solve the Polish crisis through direct discussion with the new Polish leaders.<sup>28</sup>

Liu then analyzed the origins of the tensions emerging between the Soviet Union and Poland, Hungary, and other Eastern European countries. He argued that the tensions originated in Moscow's "big-power chauvinism," particularly emphasizing that during Stalin's later years, the CPSU often imposed its will on other fraternal parties, forcing them to obey Moscow's command. If they failed to obey, Moscow would suppress them. On several occasions, the Soviet Union intervened in other countries without cause, which made them feel that their sovereignty was violated.<sup>29</sup> Liu believed that the emerging nationalist mood in Poland and Hungary was closely connected to the negative impact of Stalin's "big-power chauvinism," which had yet to be eliminated. Consequently, the relations between socialist countries were far from

normal, a situation that turned out to be one of the most important causes of the Polish and Hungarian crises. Liu, however, also made it clear that, in any circumstance, Beijing would continue to regard Moscow as the center of the international Communist movement. “Comrade Togliatti<sup>30</sup> introduced a ‘multi-centrality’ thesis,” stated Liu, “but we told him that we must oppose that thesis. The center can only be the Soviet Union.”<sup>31</sup>

Liu’s carefully prepared speech expressed Beijing’s concerns over some of the “big issues” facing the international Communist movement. Most important of all, Liu made it very clear that unless Moscow was to abandon completely its “big-power chauvinism” in dealing with other fraternal parties and states, crises similar to the ones taking place in Poland and Hungary would develop elsewhere. Although Liu stated that Moscow would remain the sole center of the socialist camp, the subtext was that Moscow’s centrality was now being defined in Beijing’s terms. Therefore, Liu’s long speech must be read as a Chinese declaration of Beijing’s virtual centrality in international communism.<sup>32</sup>

On 26 October, the CPSU presidium held another meeting, and members of the Chinese delegation were again invited to attend. Liu and his comrades had hoped that this meeting would be devoted to correcting Moscow’s “big-power chauvinism,” and, consequently, they had spent the whole day of 25 October preparing for the discussion.<sup>33</sup> However, when the meeting began, it again focused on specific “small” problems related to Poland and Hungary; the “big-power chauvinism” issue did not come up. At one point, when Khrushchev mentioned that it seemed Gomulka was determined to remove Rokossovskii, Liu commented that it would be better for Gomulka to retain Rokossovskii and take no revenge on those who had purged him. Khrushchev, believing that Gomulka should hear this directly from the Chinese, proposed that Liu and the Chinese delegation visit Warsaw after completing their activities in Moscow. Liu, emphasizing that he needed to get Beijing’s authorization as well as Warsaw’s invitation, did not give an affirmative response to Khrushchev’s proposal.<sup>34</sup>

Substantial discussion on the “big issues,” especially the ones concerning the general principles governing the international Communist movement, did not begin until the evening of 29 October, when Khrushchev, Molotov, and Bulganin met with Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping at the guest house. The Soviet leaders mentioned that both the Polish and Hungarian leaders had requested the Soviet Red Army to withdraw from their countries. Khrushchev emphasized that if the Red Army completely withdrew from these two coun-

tries, and if other Eastern European countries also requested that the Red Army leave, the Warsaw Pact would collapse, which would only benefit the imperialist countries.<sup>35</sup>

In response, Liu Shaoqi conveyed to the Soviet leaders “a fundamental suggestion” from Mao Zedong: The Soviet Union should adopt a thoroughly new policy toward Eastern European countries. Moscow should let them handle their own political and economic affairs and not interfere with their internal matters. In addition, Moscow should respect not only Poland’s and Hungary’s but also Bulgaria’s and Romania’s desires for independence and should follow the principles of “pancha shila” in handling state-to-state relations with them.<sup>36</sup> In military affairs, Liu continued, Moscow should take the initiative to consult with Eastern European countries about how the Warsaw Pact should function, or about whether the Warsaw Pact should even exist. According to Liu, the Soviets had three options: they could maintain the Warsaw Pact completely, maintain the Warsaw Pact but withdraw Soviet troops from Eastern European countries and send them back when a war with the imperialist countries broke out, or maintain the Warsaw Pact but withdraw Soviet troops permanently. Liu explained to the Soviet leaders that Mao wanted these ideas introduced to the Soviet leaders, so that a better way would be found to consolidate the socialist camp, to strengthen the relations between the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries, to enhance the Warsaw Pact, and to help the Soviet comrades achieve the support of the masses in Eastern European countries. It was, Liu emphasized, an indication of the Chinese goodwill toward, as well as solidarity with, the comrades in Moscow.<sup>37</sup>

Khrushchev seemed willing to follow the Chinese advice. Although he explained that the Soviet Union had never interfered with other countries’ internal affairs, and that “big-power chauvinism” was a phenomenon that might have existed during Stalin’s period but had been eliminated completely after Stalin’s death, he expressed his “sincere thanks” to and general acceptance of Mao’s suggestions. He agreed that Eastern European countries should have the right to make their own political, economic, and military decisions.<sup>38</sup> When the meeting adjourned at 2:00 A.M. on 30 October, the two sides reached an agreement that a general statement concerning the basic principles governing relationships between socialist countries should be prepared and issued immediately.<sup>39</sup>

Although several top Soviet leaders had reservations about whether or not the language of *pancha shila* should be used in directing relations between socialist countries, the CPSU presidium approved the document at a meeting on 30 October.<sup>40</sup> The same day, the Soviet government formally issued the

“Declaration on Developing and Enhancing the Friendship and Cooperation between the Soviet Union and other Socialist Countries,” in which Moscow promised to follow a pattern of more equal exchanges with other Communist states and parties. Two days later, the Chinese government issued a statement to support the Soviet declaration, praising it as a document with “great significance” that will “enhance the solidarity between socialist countries.”<sup>41</sup>

### **The Decision to Suppress the “Reactionary Riots” in Hungary**

When the Chinese delegation was in Moscow, the situation in Hungary changed dramatically. The uprisings in Budapest, which began on 23 October, gradually paralyzed the Communist regime there, pushing it to the verge of collapse. This development alarmed both the Chinese delegation in Moscow and Mao and the other CCP leaders in Beijing.

As discussed earlier, when the Hungarian crisis erupted, Beijing’s leaders regarded it as another problem caused by Moscow’s failure to treat the Hungarians as equals. Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, in meetings with top Soviet leaders in Moscow, argued that it was time for Moscow to adopt a more equal approach toward the comrades in Budapest, which, they believed, would contribute to the settlement of the Hungarian crisis. They originally had strong reservations about Moscow sending tanks into Budapest to suppress the uprising there.<sup>42</sup>

But the situation in Hungary deteriorated rapidly, quickly exceeding the expectations of the Chinese leaders. Around 29 and 30 October, Mao Zedong in Beijing received a series of reports, the most important of which were from Hu Jibang, *Renmin ribao*’s chief correspondent in Budapest, which stated that “reactionary forces, with the support of international imperialists, were doing everything possible to overthrow the Hungarian [Communist] government.”<sup>43</sup> These reports led Mao and his fellow CCP leaders to reconsider the nature of the Hungarian crisis. They now speculated that behind the Hungarian crisis lay a well-coordinated plot directed by the international imperialists and that, if the turmoil was not stopped, a “reactionary restoration” would occur in Hungary. Consequently, they began to believe that indeed “the Hungarian crisis was different from the Polish crisis in nature—while the latter is anti-Soviet, the former is anti-Communist.”<sup>44</sup>

The view that the events in Hungary were “counterrevolutionary” in nature was further reinforced by reports from the Chinese delegation in Moscow. With the situation in Hungary worsening on a daily basis, the Soviet leaders had been under great pressure to determine whether or not to keep the Red Army there, especially after the new Hungarian prime minister, Imre Nagy,

formally requested that the Red Army leave. Between 27 and 31 October their attitude fluctuated.<sup>45</sup> At the meeting with the Chinese delegation on the evening of 29 October, Khrushchev told Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping that Moscow planned to withdraw Soviet troops from Hungary. Liu and Deng immediately reported this new development to Beijing.<sup>46</sup> The next morning, the Chinese delegation received a copy of a report on the situation in Hungary by Anastas Mikoyan, who, together with Mikhail Suslov, had been in Hungary since the crisis broke out. The report pointed out that after Nagy assumed the position as prime minister, the situation in Budapest deteriorated continuously. When Soviet troops, following the request of Nagy's government, withdrew from Budapest on 29 October, the Hungarian party was quickly paralyzed. Indeed, the reactionary forces were taking control of Budapest and other parts of Hungary, and many party members and members of the security forces were being persecuted, or even brutally murdered. Mikoyan proposed in the report that Moscow carefully reconsider its policy toward the Hungarian crisis.<sup>47</sup>

Members of the Chinese delegation spent the whole day of 30 October discussing Mikoyan's report. They carefully weighed the pros and cons of two basic options. The first option was to advise Moscow to continue withdrawing the Red Army from Hungary. But if the Red Army were to withdraw, the Chinese predicted that Hungary would be taken over by pro-imperialist reactionary forces. The second option was to encourage Moscow not only to retain the Red Army in Hungary but also to use it by joining forces with the remaining revolutionary elements there and suppressing the reactionary riots. While the second option seemed to be the right one to choose, Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping also saw its obvious contradiction with what the Chinese delegation had just pushed Moscow to do: refrain from using military forces to intervene in the internal affairs of a fraternal country. Liu Shaoqi decided to ask for Beijing's instruction.<sup>48</sup>

In Beijing, the CCP leadership held a series of politburo enlarged meetings from 29 to 31 October to discuss the worsening situation in Hungary.<sup>49</sup> Basing their judgment on the reports from Budapest and Moscow, top CCP leaders finally reached the conclusion that the Hungarian crisis had changed from being anti-Soviet in nature to anti-Communist as the result of the escalating riots in Budapest, that there existed the danger of a "reactionary restoration" in Hungary, and that behind the deteriorating crisis was a huge "international imperialist plot." The CCP leadership thus decided to send an urgent telegram to the Chinese delegation in Moscow, instructing Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping to meet the Soviet leaders immediately and, in the name of the CCP Cen-

tral Committee, express firm opposition to Soviet troops' withdrawal from Hungary.<sup>50</sup> But Mao also emphasized that although the Soviet Red Army certainly should intervene, it was better to wait to take decisive action until after the reactionary elements had further exposed themselves.<sup>51</sup>

Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, following Beijing's instruction, brought the Chinese opinions to the CPSU presidium's plenary session on the evening of 30 October. At the meeting, Liu Shaoqi made it clear that Beijing believed it a mistake for the Soviets to withdraw their troops from Hungary. He pointed out that this would be a betrayal of the Hungarian people and that the Soviet leaders would be looked back upon as "historical criminals."<sup>52</sup> Deng Xiaoping made three proposals: First, the Soviet army should remain in Hungary and should not "abandon the revolutionary ground and allow the enemy to occupy it." Second, "everything should be done to support the loyal members of the Hungarian party, help them to control the political power, so that they will unite party members, revolutionary elements, and activists around them, forming a stronghold to support the party." Third, the Soviet and Hungarian parties should "control the military and the police, using them to hold the ground, protect the government, and maintain order, making sure that the party organs and the government will not be sabotaged." Deng stressed that it was important for the Soviet troops to "play a model role, demonstrating true internationalism."<sup>53</sup> However, according to Liu's later report, the Soviet leaders did not accept Deng's suggestion because they believed that they had to withdraw Soviet troops from Hungary.<sup>54</sup>

The situation took a complete turn the next day as the Chinese delegation was preparing to leave Moscow. Late that afternoon, the delegation received a phone call from the Kremlin that asked the Chinese to arrive at the airport one hour earlier than originally scheduled.<sup>55</sup> When the Chinese arrived at the airport, they found that all the members of the Soviet presidium were there to say farewell to them. Khrushchev immediately informed Liu that the Soviet presidium, after meeting for the whole day, had reached the decision to use military force to suppress the "reactionary revolt" in Budapest and to "help the Hungarian party and people to defend socialism in Hungary."<sup>56</sup> Before the Chinese boarded the airplane, according to Liu's later report, the Soviet leaders expressed their "sincere thanks" for the assistance from the Chinese party, first on the Polish issue, and then on the Hungarian issue.<sup>57</sup> Three days later, on 4 November, the Soviet Red Army's offensive against the "reactionary forces" in Budapest began. These latest developments made CCP leaders in Beijing firmly believe that they had played a central role in Moscow's decision to "suppress the reactionary elements in Hungary."<sup>58</sup>

### **Lessons Beijing Learned from the Polish and Hungarian Crises**

Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping returned to Beijing late on the evening of 1 November. They immediately gave a brief report to Mao and several other top CCP leaders (Zhou Enlai, Chen Yun, and Peng Zhen) about the meetings they held with Soviet leaders in Moscow.<sup>59</sup> The Chinese delegation's experience in Moscow, which indicated the CCP's increasing influence within the international Communist movement, excited Mao and other CCP leaders. Indeed, according to Wu Lengxi, CCP leaders were "elated and in buoyant spirits."<sup>60</sup> Liu, in analyzing the causes of the Polish and Hungarian crises, again emphasized that it was the Soviet leaders' deep-rooted "big-power chauvinism" that had resulted in serious discontent from other parties, especially those in Eastern Europe, where nationalism had deep historical roots.<sup>61</sup> Deng Xiaoping used vivid language to describe how the Polish comrades complained emotionally to the Chinese about their suffering at the hands of the Soviets, just like "[China's] poor peasants and farm laborers denounced the landlords during the land reforms." Deng also pointed out that although the Soviet leaders had begun to realize that big-power politics was no longer working in dealing with other socialist countries, they had yet "to change their old course of action and make a new start." Deng believed it necessary for the Chinese party to play an important role in mediating relations between the Soviet and Eastern European parties.<sup>62</sup>

From 2 November to mid-December, the CCP leadership held a series of meetings, including the Central Committee's Second Plenary Session (held from 10 to 15 November), to discuss important domestic and international issues. How to summarize and learn from the lessons of "Hungary's reactionary riots" became a central theme of these meetings.<sup>63</sup>

The CCP leaders again confirmed the understanding that what happened in Hungary late in October was a "reactionary incident," which bore serious danger of "capitalist restoration" in a socialist country. They believed that the incident certainly had a profound international background, "representing the most serious attack of the international imperialist forces against the socialist camp since the Korean War."<sup>64</sup> On one occasion, Zhou Enlai mentioned that the Western countries had been using the Hungarian crisis to stir up anti-Soviet and anti-Communist sentiment, causing Communist Party members in many countries to vacillate in their loyalty to, or even to betray, the party. He emphasized that the CCP should be a vanguard in repulsing this tide of international reactionaryism.<sup>65</sup>

Mao Zedong pointed to "the existence of class struggle as an unavoidable reality" in socialist countries, regarding it as a deep-rooted cause underlying

the crisis. In the chairman's view, "The fundamental problem with some Eastern European countries is that they have not done a good job of waging class struggle and have left so many reactionaries at large; nor have they trained their proletarians in class struggle to help them learn how to draw a clear distinction between the people and the enemy, between right and wrong, and between materialism and idealism. And now they have to reap what they have sown; they have brought the fire upon their own heads."<sup>66</sup>

Both Mao Zedong and Liu Shaoqi argued that the discontent that had long existed among Hungary's people, and workers and students in particular, was the foundation for the Hungarian crisis and that domestic and international reactionary forces took advantage of it. In the chairman's view, if the Hungarian party leadership had been more resolute and experienced, the mass riots might not have occurred in the first place. But because the Hungarian party and its leadership were weak, reactionary forces at home and abroad were able to manipulate the situation in Hungary, sending the mass riots out of control.<sup>67</sup> These perceptions would play an important role in the continuous radicalization of Chinese politics and social life in the late 1950s and 1960s.

The CCP leaders also believed that a vulnerable, confusing, and inconsistent attitude on the part of the Soviet leaders (and Khrushchev in particular) contributed to the Hungarian crisis' escalation. Their general criticism of the Soviet leadership focused on three areas. First, Moscow's "big-power chauvinism," especially during the Stalin era, created tension between the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries. Second, Khrushchev's de-Stalinization caused widespread confusion among Communist Party members throughout Eastern Europe. Third, the Soviet leaders were not sophisticated enough to have a correct understanding of the crises when they erupted in Poland and Hungary. As a result, while they planned, mistakenly, to intervene in Poland, they considered, equally mistakenly, withdrawing from Hungary. Consequently, the situation in Hungary went out of control.<sup>68</sup>

On the basis of these discussions, the CCP leadership decided to publish on 29 December 1956 a lengthy article, titled "Another Discussion of the Historical Lessons of the Proletarian Dictatorship," in *Renmin ribao*, expressing the party leadership's general views on the Hungarian crisis and its relation to Khrushchev's de-Stalinization.<sup>69</sup> When the article was being drafted, Mao had specific instructions regarding its contents: First, the article should define the Hungarian crisis as a reactionary incident but should not touch upon small details. Second, the article should confirm that, in general, the CPSU's Twentieth Congress had its positive side (including its criticism of Stalin's mistakes) but should make it clear that it was incorrect to negate Stalin completely. Third,





*Zhou Enlai (second from left) talking to Hungarian Communist leader János Kádár (far right), January 1957. Xinhua News Agency.*

the article should point out the importance of making distinctions between two kinds of contradictions existing within socialist countries—those between the enemy and the people, and those among the people. Fourth, the article should regard the direction of the Soviet Union's socialist revolution and reconstruction as positive and correct in general but should also point out that the Soviet leaders had committed many mistakes. Fifth, the article should use explicit language to confirm that Stalin, regardless of all the mistakes he had committed, remained a great Marxist-Leninist revolutionary leader. "Khrushchev abandoned Stalin," Mao emphasized, "and the others [the imperialists and the revisionists] used it [the abandonment] to attack him, causing him to be besieged from all directions." Thus, Mao concluded, Stalin's banner should never be forsaken.<sup>70</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The Polish and Hungarian crises had a profound impact on the orientation of China's domestic and international policies, as well as on the future development of the international Communist movement. As far as China's do-

mestic situation was concerned, Beijing's attitude toward the Hungarian crisis reflected Mao's persistent belief that "class struggle continued to exist in a socialist country." The crisis, in turn, further strengthened Mao's determination to promote China's continuous revolution, especially in the fields of politics and ideology.<sup>71</sup> In early 1957, in the wake of the Polish and Hungarian crises, Mao initiated the Hundred Flowers Campaign to encourage China's intellectuals to help the CCP to "correct its mistakes." But when some intellectuals did voice their criticism of the party, an Anti-Rightist movement began to sweep across China, branding over 300,000 intellectuals (the overwhelming majority of whom never said anything against the party) as "rightists," a label that would effectively silence them and ruin their careers.<sup>72</sup> When opposition to and/or suspicion of Mao's "revolutionary offensives" emerged, either within or without the CCP, Mao and his close followers would invoke the "lessons of the Hungarian reactionary incident" to justify Mao's policies, claiming that if the Chinese did not heed these lessons, China would face the "danger of a Hungarian incident." Mao made it clear that one purpose of the CCP's Hundred Flowers Campaign was to "induce" the bad elements to come out into the open so that they would be "divided and isolated" in many "small Hungaries," and could then be eliminated.<sup>73</sup> In retrospect, the outcome of the Polish and Hungarian crises complicated Chinese politics and social life while pushing Mao's continuous revolution to ever more radical stages.

The crises in Poland and Hungary also enhanced Mao's and the CCP leadership's consciousness of China's centrality in the world proletarian revolution. The Beijing leadership's perception of China's great contributions to the settlement of the Polish and Hungarian crises strengthened the belief that the CCP should occupy a more prominent position in the international Communist movement, as well as justified its critical attitude toward the seemingly less sophisticated Soviet leadership. In Liu Shaoqi's summary of Beijing's management of the Polish and Hungarian crises, which he delivered to the party Central Committee's Second Plenary Session on 10 November 1956, he spent much time exposing Moscow's inability to handle complicated international issues.<sup>74</sup> After Zhou Enlai returned from a trip to the Soviet Union, Poland, and Hungary in January 1957, he presented a comprehensive report summarizing the visit. In it he made extensive comments on the Soviet leadership's lack of sophistication in managing the complex and potentially explosive situations both within the Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe. He particularly emphasized that the CCP leadership's understanding of important international issues had been more farsighted than that of the Soviet leaders.<sup>75</sup> In several internal speeches, Mao Zedong discussed the CCP's disagreements with

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the Soviet leaders, emphasizing that Khrushchev and his comrades had abandoned not only “the banner of Stalin” but also, to a large extent, “the banner of Lenin.” Thus it became the duty of the CCP to play a central role in “holding high the banner” of true Marxism-Leninism.<sup>76</sup>

All of these developments, as an indication of a deep rift between Beijing and Moscow, produced a profound and long-lasting effect on the development of the international Communist movement and, at the same time, the orientation of the Cold War. For decades, especially after the end of the Second World War, Communists all over the world had shared a strong sense that “history is on our side.” This belief allowed the international Communist movement constantly to gain strength and momentum while creating a consciousness of unity among Communist parties and states. The Polish and Hungarian crises of 1956, and the ways in which Beijing and Moscow dealt with them, exposed the profound contradictions between communism as a set of utopian ideals and as a practical human experience. For the first time in twentieth-century history, Communists throughout the world began to lose confidence in the ideals in which they once had believed. As a result, Communist states increasingly felt the need to use state power to control the minds and behavior of both party members and ordinary citizens. The Cold War was from the beginning a battle over which system—communism or liberal capitalism—was superior and which would prevail. International communism was now losing this battle.