

Volume 26, Number 3, February 2024

## Revision

# Threats to the Soviet Union

*Nicholas Fellows*

Consider the following question, then take a look at the sample student response and the examiner's commentary (in red).

## Question

*How serious a threat to the Soviet Union's control of Eastern Europe was unrest in the satellite states in the period from 1953 to 1981?*

### Student answer with commentary

There was unrest in a number of the Soviet Union's satellite states in Eastern Europe. While the unrest in the period to 1968 was crushed, it often required Soviet military force. The unrest in Poland in 1980–81 might be seen as a sign of the difficulties that would ultimately lead to the collapse of Soviet power in the region. The extent of the force used to crush the 1956 Hungarian uprising and the 1968 Czech Prague Spring suggests that even these earlier challenges were quite serious – although it might be argued that the Soviets were taking firm action as a warning to other would-be challengers that they would be crushed.

This opening paragraph ranges across the whole period and indicates the range of the unrest, something that many answers to this question will fail to do. The response offers a nuanced view, arguing that the later unrest was more serious and an indication that the Soviet Union was losing control.

Ultimately, the unrest in East Germany in 1953 was not a serious threat to Soviet control. However, it came when – with Stalin's death – there was a power struggle in the Soviet Union, which might have weakened its ability to act. Although the unrest began over economic issues, it spread rapidly, with some 400,000 people taking to the streets to demand the government's resignation and free elections. Initially it did appear serious, as Ulbricht feared the police were sympathetic to the strikers, but despite the problems in Moscow, the rising was quickly crushed by Russian troops and tanks, suggesting the threat was not serious.

The response deals with each rising separately rather than taking a thematic approach, but this will not impact the level awarded. It also avoids simply narrating what happened, but attempts to address the focus of 'how serious'. The argument that the rising in East Germany was not serious is well supported and balanced with the contrast between the number of demonstrators and the military response made, allowing a brief interim judgement to be reached at the end of the paragraph.

Events in Poland in 1956 appeared to be a more serious challenge to Russia's control. Khrushchev, the new Soviet leader, denounced Stalin in his 'secret speech' and argued there were different paths

to socialism. This encouraged a more liberal outlook in some states, with strikers demanding greater freedoms. With the unrest in Poland largely confined to Poznań it was not a serious threat, but unlike in East Germany, the Polish government was aware that repression alone would not resolve the problems and it urged Moscow to allow them to follow their own path to socialism, which might have challenged Soviet dominance. The Soviets recognised the threat, allowed the more liberal and popular Gomułka to come to power, did not send in troops and allowed the Poles to follow their own path. While Gomułka did bring in economic reforms, he also kept Poland in the Warsaw Pact and followed a pro-Russia policy, keeping the Communists firmly in control. This suggests the threat was limited in practice. However, it did suggest that under Khrushchev, control had been loosened, even if ultimately Poland remained loyal and under Soviet control.

In discussing the unrest in Poland, the response again adopts a balanced approach, considering why the unrest might be seen as serious, but explaining fully why it was less of a problem. There is good supporting detail, with reference to the 'secret speech', Gomułka and the question of the Warsaw Pact. Once again, an interim judgement is reached at the end of the paragraph.

In contrast, events in Hungary were a more serious threat to Soviet supremacy as it wanted to break from Moscow's control. Hungary sought to follow the example of its neighbour, Austria, and sever ties with Moscow and become neutral. Russia feared this could spread to other satellite states. At first, Russia followed a similar policy to its approach in Poland, allowing the more liberal communist Nagy to take over. However, once he announced that Hungary would withdraw from the Warsaw Pact and allow multi-party elections, the rising became a very serious threat. The Soviets changed their position, tanks and troops were sent in and with the capital surrounded, Nagy appealed to the West for help, which had the potential to make the threat even more serious. However, the West did not respond, lessening the threat, but it had still raised the stakes, reflected in the killing of some 3,000 Hungarians and the flight of over 200,000. The crushing of the revolt was a clear indication that while the Soviet regime would allow some reform, it would not allow the satellite states to depart from Communism.

The response explains why events in Hungary could be seen as more serious, but balances this by considering the reluctance of the West to become involved. The argument is well supported, but the response would benefit from an interim judgement as to the seriousness in the final sentence.

The threat from events in Czechoslovakia in 1968 were similar to Hungary. The reforms of the Czech leader Dubček – despite promising to stay in the Warsaw Pact and ensure the Communist Party retained its leading role – were seen as a threat by Moscow, as the reforms promised free speech and a move towards a multi-party democracy. The fears of this spreading to other Communist states were reflected in the Warsaw Letter of July 1968. With Dubček continuing with reforms, Warsaw Pact troops invaded, and the following year Dubček was replaced by a more hard-line communist, Husák. The removal of Dubček once again showed that Moscow was not prepared to see its supremacy threatened, and the unrest was even more of a challenge to its dominance as Romania refused to send troops to suppress the trouble, while Albania withdrew from the Warsaw Pact. It was clearly evident that Moscow saw the unrest as a serious challenge to its dominance, as it issued the Brezhnev Doctrine, stating it had the right to intervene in the domestic affairs of eastern Europe, with force, if necessary, if its interests were threatened.

As with previous paragraphs, the argument is well supported and there is a balanced discussion as to whether the threat was serious. On this occasion, the argument as to how serious is well developed and there is a clear judgement reached.

Ultimately, the most serious challenge was in Poland in 1980. The economic crisis led to the formation of an independent trade union, Solidarity, which gained a membership of some 8 million and the support of the new Polish Pope, John Paul II. This was a serious problem, as Russia feared that its intervention would increase the threat and therefore called on the Polish government to act. The seriousness was reflected in the imposition of martial law and the arrest of union leaders. Although it did appear as if the government had been able to restore order, the union went underground and survived. As the union leader, Lech Wałęsa, became president in 1990 when Communism collapsed, it was a clear indication that even if the government appeared to have restored control, it was only surface deep, suggesting the threat had become very serious.

The argument in this paragraph follows clearly from the view outlined in the opening paragraph. It is well supported and a clear judgement as to the seriousness is reached.

Although the Soviet Union had been able to maintain control over its satellite states through force and defeat the challenges in East Germany, Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia, it had not been able to win the hearts and minds of the peoples of these states. Communism remained in control because the protestors – despite their numbers – lacked the force to challenge the military might of Moscow and the support of the West. While Moscow was willing and able to send in troops to crush resistance the unrest was less serious, but once they were either unwilling or unable, as in Poland in 1980–81, then the challenge became more serious.

An overall judgement is reached, which follows from the view offered in the opening paragraph. The reasons for the judgement are clearly explained and there is some support to ensure it is a judgement and not simply an assertion.

This resource is part of MODERN HISTORY REVIEW, a magazine written for A-level students by subject experts. To subscribe to the full magazine go to: <http://www.hoddereducation.com/historyreview>