

The Telegraph
January 17, 2016

Book Review

1956: The World in Revolt

by Simon Hall, Faber, 20 pounds, ebook: 8.96 pounds

by Nicholas Blincoe

On October 24 1956, the Soviet Union chose to negotiate with the new leaders of Poland rather than send in the tanks and crush the independence movement they represented. A week later, the Soviet Chairman Nikita Khrushchev seemed ready to show as much indulgence to the new government in Hungary. The Hungarian leader Imre Nagy declared independence on October 31, swiftly followed by his formal withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact and a request through the UN that the “great powers” respect his country’s neutrality, an implicit appeal to the Security Council’s three Western members to back Hungary against the Soviet Union.

Unfortunately, at the same moment, two of those nations – France and Britain – were engaged in a secret conspiracy to attack Egypt and remove its elected president, to the consternation of the third, the United States. Russia responded to Nagy’s speech with tanks, and the Hungarian uprising was crushed. Would the story have been different if the US had not been distracted by the havoc Britain and France were unleashing in the Middle East?

Simon Hall’s account of an explosive year is a CinemaScope epic, every frame packed with detail. Though it does not fundamentally revise our understanding of events, the scale of the project succeeds in revealing the outline of our age. Today, even those who remember that Hungary and Suez happened in the same week may not recall that the next month saw Nelson Mandela arrested in South Africa, or that the American Supreme Court declared racial segregation on buses unconstitutional, a victory for the Montgomery Improvement Association led by the 27-year-old pastor Martin Luther King. Who now remembers where they were on the night of November 25 when Fidel and Raul Castro, Che Guevara and 80 Marxist guerrillas beached a small yacht on the edge of a Cuban mangrove swamp?

1956 was a very different world. A good speech rarely lasted less than three hours, and the best had an extraordinary impact. Castro's speeches were distributed as samizdats throughout Cuba to build popular support. The plea for non-violence that King gave from his porch following a dynamite attack on his wife and child helped to build white support for the Civil Rights movement. Hall argues that Khrushchev's four-hour speech attacking Stalin was the year's decisive turning point. The Hungarian leader Mátyás Rákosi recognised the dangers of ditching Stalin: Rákosi had built a cult of personality by styling himself the dictator's favourite pupil.

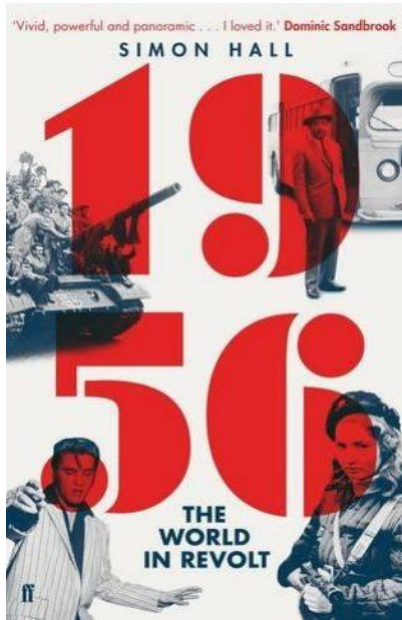
Khrushchev emerges in a largely positive light: Hall believes he acted out of genuine revulsion to Stalinism, showed he was open to negotiating Poland's future, and might even have kept his tanks off Hungary's streets if the rebels' violence and the threat to the Warsaw Pact had not forced him into a U-turn. But the Hungarian uprising made Soviet Russia look as brutal and as bleak as it ever had under Stalin. Khrushchev's attempt to chart a new path failed, and Russia could never hope to reclaim its position as the leader of a global alternative to capitalism.

Yet the US was unable to benefit from Russia's failures. President Eisenhower was allied to Britain and France, two resolutely dirty operators. That spring, Britain had opted to kidnap and exile the Cypriot leader Archbishop Makarios rather than risk losing its grip on the island, while France was hoping that torture and terror would help keep hold of Algeria. Yet even by their low standards, Suez was a sordid business. France and Britain hired Israel to invade Egypt, so that they could step in on the pretext of restoring order and dump President Nasser.

Eisenhower was appalled at the deceit and when he demanded that Britain pull back, the plot unravelled. Eisenhower was the last US conservative capable of dominating the political centre ground and of appealing to an idea of international law and order. He believed in the right of communities and peoples to self-government and was opposed to colonial power, but while he was ready to talk tough to the UK, he would not risk a real war by confronting Russia over Hungary. Appealing to law and reason as the Soviet tanks rolled through Budapest made him look like a windbag and hypocrite, which is perhaps why conservatives like Eisenhower no longer exist.

The French were livid that Britain had flip-flopped under American pressure, leaving them with a deep distrust of Les Anglo-Saxons. With Algeria in danger of slipping into chaos, France could not afford to look foolish over Egypt. The big stories of 1956 were the end of the French and British Empires and the heightening of the Cold War but, as Hall shows, events at the margins were already shaping a new world that could not be contained by the post-war East-West axis. A far messier, multilateral world emerged from dusty Algerian towns, Cuban mangrove swamps and South African court rooms. Yet for all the mess, the world was not without shape or order. US Civil Rights leaders were speaking to South Africa's ANC, who in turn were communicating with Castro and welcoming the backing of Nasser.

To the old world leaders of 1956, this all looked like a giant conspiracy of Marxist terrorists, Soviet-backed "willing fools" and Liberal stooges. But as Simon Hall's engrossing book shows, in reality it was the beginning of new kinds of communication networks binding together an ever more off-centre, yet interconnected world.



1956: The World in Revolt by Simon Hall

@2016 The Telegraph