

## Hungary's Cold War: International Relations from the End of World War II to the Fall of the Soviet Union. By Csaba Békés.

New Cold War History. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2022.  
414 pp.

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Csaba Békés's book stands at the forefront of international historical research, as indicated by its publication in the series edited by Odd Arne Westad, *New Cold War History*.

From the very first sentence, the author emphasizes that his work is the fruit of the 'archive revolution' that began following the collapse of the Communist regimes in East Central Europe in 1989. Indeed, the accessibility of archival materials from former Soviet bloc countries has opened up tremendous opportunities for historians, and Békés takes full advantage of this opportunity. His book offers a new interpretation of the Cold War period from 1945 to 1990 (or, according to Békés, until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991), outlining its theoretical frameworks and introducing numerous new concepts based on over thirty years of persistent archival research. His theoretical assertions are primarily grounded in careful analysis of Hungarian, American, and British archival documents, as well as published Soviet sources, rather than being purely theoretical constructs, as the author regularly reminds his readers.

Békés briefly lists his theoretical innovations and new interpretations in the introduction, and then elaborates on them in detail within the main chapters, embedding them within historical contexts. Here are some examples:

- Regarding the Sovietization of Eastern and Central Europe, Békés argues that it was neither the cause nor the consequence of the Cold War confrontation. However, he emphasizes that the process began as early as 1944, with local Communist parties assuming dominant positions in every country in the region by 1945–1946. He interprets the gradual nature of Sovietization as a gesture by Stalin to ensure Western, especially American, cooperation for as long as possible.

- One of the author's most significant claims pertains to the periodization of the Cold War, specifically concerning the nature of *détente*. According to Békés, from 1953 to 1991, despite the escalating arms race, the relationship between the opposing superpowers was characterized by continual mutual interdependence and compelled cooperation, while the inherent antagonism remained evident. He attributes the constant presence of *détente* to the desire of both superpowers to avoid military confrontation at all costs due to the potentially catastrophic consequences of a nuclear war. The author relates the 'watershed' nature of the year 1953 not primarily to the death of Stalin, but to the development of the hydrogen bomb and the American testing in 1952 and the Soviet testing in 1953.
- Békés distinguishes between real crises and 'pseudo-crises' within the Cold War era. He categorizes crises that occurred within blocs (such as the 1953 uprising in East Germany, the 1956 Polish and Hungarian crises, the 1968 intervention in Czechoslovakia, and the 1980–1981 Polish conflict within the Soviet bloc, as well as the Suez Crisis on the other side) as pseudo-crises, which, despite vigorous propaganda efforts, did not surpass the framework of cooperation between the superpowers and did not pose a genuine threat to the other bloc. On the other hand, crises deemed genuine (such as the two Berlin crises, the Korean War, and the Cuban Missile Crisis) carried the risk of military confrontation between the two superpower-led blocs.
- The author also outlines a new interpretative framework when discussing Hungarian foreign policy after 1956, emphasizing its tripartite determinism: the country's dependency not only on the Soviet Union (1) but also on Western countries for maintaining a functioning economy through advanced technology, trade relations, and loans (2). Meanwhile, the country engaged in lobbying efforts within multilateral forums of the Soviet bloc, particularly within the Warsaw Pact and Comecon, to assert its national interests (3). This is closely related to the author's new insight into two groups of Eastern European countries observed in the late 1960s and early 1970s regarding their relationship with the Federal Republic of Germany. The security-concerned sub-bloc (East Germany, Poland, and Czechoslovakia) prioritized security issues stemming from the lack of a German peace treaty, while the economy-oriented sub-bloc (Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria) emphasized economic benefits anticipated from Bonn. An effective relationship with the West was essential for sustaining the Kádár regime's standard of living policy.
- The author introduces the concept of 'constructive loyalty' primarily to describe Hungary's foreign policy towards Moscow, which consistently emphasized adherence to the Soviet direction and close cooperation on the international

stage while striving to assert its own interests differing from those of the Soviet Union during bilateral negotiations (e.g., in the fields of raw materials and energy supply), testing Soviet tolerance in the process.

- An example from the end of the examined period: Csaba Békés introduces the concept of ‘floating’ the Brezhnev doctrine to characterize Gorbachev’s policy towards Eastern and Central Europe from 1988 to 1991. He argues that the Soviet leadership deliberately made contradictory statements regarding the changes in East Central Europe during this time: while implicitly rejecting the possibility of military intervention, it never categorically stated that the Soviet Union would not intervene even if political changes in a particular allied country led to the collapse of the socialist system and the establishment of parliamentary democracy. This presumed strategy may have contributed to the fundamentally peaceful nature of changes in East Central Europe.

The author examines the entire spectrum of East–West relations—as suggested by the subtitle of the book—with a European focus, encompassing all the states of the Soviet bloc. An important contribution to Cold War historiography is his use of numerous Hungarian documents, which are often inaccessible to non-Hungarian-speaking researchers, to shed light on the background of significant international events. For example, an important insight into the origins of the Cold War confrontation comes from a speech by General Secretary Mátyás Rákosi on 17 May 1946, at a meeting of the Central Committee of the Hungarian Communist Party, in which he reported on his negotiations with Stalin and Molotov on 1 April 1946. Stalin’s main message was to accelerate the process of Sovietization and prepare for the complete takeover of power. This speech occurred more than a year before the announcement of the Marshall Plan, indicating that American aid was not the sole trigger for completing Sovietization. Similarly, insights into high-level Hungarian-Soviet meetings can be gleaned from the notes on First Secretary of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party János Kádár’s first negotiations with the new Soviet leadership following Khrushchev’s removal, held in Moscow on 9–10 November 1964. During these meetings, Kádár outlined what Békés calls the Kádár doctrine, which stated that Moscow’s sovereignty was also limited: in their decisions, Soviet leaders had to consider the interests of the entire Soviet bloc.

Békés also draws on Hungarian sources, such as the report prepared for the Political Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party and the Government at the July 1988 meeting of the Political Consultative Committee of the Warsaw Pact in Warsaw, to discuss the proceedings of the meeting, which marked a turning point in the history of the Soviet bloc and the entire international Cold War system. In fact, Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze openly admitted at a closed meeting for foreign ministers that the Soviet Union was ‘facing a critical situation’ and could

no longer afford a permanent arms race with the West, as it surpassed the Eastern Bloc 'in every possible respect.' He emphasized that ending the arms race was an absolute priority. With this statement, the Soviet Foreign Minister acknowledged that the decades-long competition between the two world systems had ended in total defeat for the Soviet bloc. According to Békés, this dramatic admission marked 'the beginning of the end' for the Soviet bloc. Based on a report from a meeting of the Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party on 28 July 1989, the author argues that Gorbachev's vision of a 'common European home' received the most positive reactions from the Soviet Union's two main enemies during World War II, West Germany and Italy. Békés also uses Hungarian sources to reconstruct the internationally significant process of the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact.

Through decades of in-depth research, Békés has been able to examine the events of the Soviet bloc and Hungarian foreign policy in the context of the entire 1945 and 1991 period, comparing earlier and later events and situations. For example, when speculating about the likely scenarios if the Soviet military interventions in Hungary in 1956 and in Czechoslovakia in 1968 had not happened, he uses as a comparative basis the Eastern European transformations of 1989, when there was no Soviet intervention, the collapse of the socialist system and the establishment of parliamentary democracy and a market economy developed in the countries involved. When examining Soviet crisis management within the bloc, the author introduces the concept of the Mikoyan doctrine, which seeks to find a political solution first in the event of anti-system movements unfolding in an allied country, possibly using local forces to suppress them, and only resorting to Soviet military force if these measures fail. He points out that, learning from the failure of the armed intervention in Budapest on 24 October 1956, the Soviet leadership only resorted to a military 'solution' as a last resort during the events in Czechoslovakia and later in Afghanistan. However, in the case of the Polish crisis of 1980–1981, their goals were achieved. To justify the claim that the second Soviet armed intervention in Hungary, which began on 4 November 1956, would have occurred even without the Suez Crisis, Békés recalls that the Western powers responded with similar passivity to the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, although they were not under similar pressure at the time. The author also points out that the framework established by the Soviet government statement of 30 October 1956, announcing possible talks on the withdrawal of Soviet troops, fundamentally shaped the relationship between Moscow and its East Central European allies until the late 1980s. While these frameworks were more flexible than before, they still conditioned the stability of the socialist system and the preservation of alliance relations.

The book provides numerous additional interesting and important insights into the Cold War era. Békés discusses the immense international ambitions of

Hungary's Stalinist dictator, Mátyás Rákosi, and the precursors to the new Soviet foreign policy that emerged following Stalin's death, which is considered the starting point of international détente. He presents the formation of the Warsaw Pact, which became a forum for multilateral consultation within the Soviet bloc by the 1960s, significantly contributing to the international emancipation of countries in East Central Europe. The author analyzes the 'active foreign policy' doctrine proclaimed by Moscow in 1954, aimed at enhancing the international acceptability of the satellite states. The author provides a detailed explanation of why János Kádár rejected Nikita Khrushchev's offer in the spring of 1958 to withdraw Soviet troops from Hungary, considering it one of Kádár's most irresponsible foreign policy decisions during his lengthy rule. The book also discusses Hungary's secret mediation attempt during the Vietnam War and Kádár's role as a mediator during the Prague Spring of 1968. Of significant importance is Békés's observation that the process initiated in the 1960s, at Soviet initiative, which led to the convening of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe and the signing of the Helsinki Final Act in 1975, contributed significantly to strengthening the Western relations of Soviet ally countries, expanding their international negotiation experience, and professionalizing the Hungarian diplomatic corps.

Békés primarily relies on international literature to take a firm stance on the causes of the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the collapse of socialist systems. Contrary to previous interpretations, he considers the role of the human rights campaign initiated by US President Jimmy Carter as marginal. He attributes greater significance to the destabilizing effects of economic relations with the West, particularly with West Germany. However, he views the definitive weakening of the Soviet Union's internal strength as the decisive factor in the collapse. Furthermore, he illustrates with numerous examples that during 1989–1990 the transition period, Western governments made it clear to both the Hungarian government and the opposition that they desired the continuation of the Warsaw Pact and did not support neutrality efforts.

The exposition of the work is proportionate: the author writes appropriately about different periods and topics. The precisely developed endnotes and thoroughly prepared appendices (detailed listing of sources, extensive bibliography, and geographical, personal, and subject indexes) further enhance the professional level of the volume.

We must briefly address some shortcomings as well. When analysing Hungary's Western relations, Békés does not give sufficient attention to France, which had significant leverage in both European integration and NATO. This omission is particularly noteworthy in the context of the 1960s, regarding the reception of de Gaulle's Eastern policy within the Soviet bloc. France was a prominent partner for Hungary's

Western opening in the 1960s, preceding the *Ostpolitik* of West Germany. Selecting Paris to initiate the Western rapprochement was logical for Hungary, since France was also approaching Moscow at that time, thus the Soviets could not accuse Hungary of befriending an enemy, as might have been the case with the United States or the United Kingdom. The logically anticipated natural partner, West Germany, had not yet fully normalized its relations with the Soviet Union and other bloc countries at that time. Austria, on the other hand, was only a regional player and, strictly speaking, was not part of the Western bloc.

The assertion that Western public opinion might have ‘felt somewhat guilty’ about the Polish and especially the Hungarian tragedy is not supported by my extensive international archival research experience.

Regarding the Suez Crisis, it should have been mentioned that one of its triggering factors was the nationalization of the Suez Canal in July 1956, and a brief outline of its main events should have been provided. Békés opines that it is still unclear whether the news of the Hungarian Revolution reached the British, French, and Israeli delegations negotiating the planned Suez Crisis in Sèvres on 22–24 October 1956, since according to the diary of Israeli Prime Minister David Ben Gurion, he learned about the outbreak of the revolt in Budapest only after his return to Israel on 25 October. However, French and Israeli sources indicate that the Budapest events were indeed discussed at the meetings and French Foreign Minister Christian Pineau, most probably mentioned the Budapest events to reassure Ben Gurion, who feared Soviet retaliation. Pineau believed that the Soviet Union’s troubles in Poland and Hungary reduced the likelihood of Soviet intervention in Egypt.

Finally, the two chapters discussing international aspects of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution lack reference to the approximately 200,000 refugees who fled the country after the revolution. Their successful reception and management significantly contributed to the establishment of the international refugee reception system that still operates today.

All in all, Csaba Békés’s book is a significant contribution to Cold War literature, rich in new discoveries, and a world-class achievement that is sure to attract lively international interest. It will undoubtedly become a fundamental international reference and methodological starting point for detailed historical studies of other countries in the Soviet bloc.



