

INTRODUCTION

The prospects for peace and security in Europe seemed more hopeful in January 1956 than they had for more than a decade. Stalin's death in 1953, the Geneva Conference of May 1954, and the July 1955 summit in Geneva, where Soviet and Western leaders gathered for the first time since 1945, seemed to herald a period of reduced global tension. Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent's cabinet, however, was uncertain, and in the fall of 1955, it despatched Canada's secretary of state for external affairs, Lester B. Pearson, to Moscow to survey the situation. The foreign minister enjoyed his spirited encounter with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, whom he later described as being "as blunt and volatile as only a Ukrainian peasant, turned one of the most powerful men in the world, can be."¹ A liberal realist in outlook, Pearson returned to Ottawa in November 1955 cautiously optimistic about Soviet offers of "competitive co-existence."

Canadian confidence in Moscow's intentions was reinforced in early 1956, when Khrushchev denounced Stalin during the 20th Communist Party Congress in February 1956. "There can be little doubt that the myth of Stalin is being completely demolished," exulted Pearson, adding that "the body of Stalin – like that of Oliver Cromwell, is, post-mortem, likely to be hanged, drawn and quartered."² The relaxation of Soviet policy and the gentle winds of liberalization that rippled through Eastern Europe encouraged officials in the Department of External Affairs to revise their attitude toward the satellite states of Eastern Europe. Robert Ford, head of the European Division and Canada's foremost Soviet expert, urged the government to engage these states more actively in economic, scientific, and cultural exchanges. "The regimes are not going to be overthrown, so we had better concentrate our efforts on trying to make them more acceptable to us," he wrote in June 1956. "Our policy should be directed toward encouraging independence from Moscow while making it clear that we have no aggressive intentions and no intentions of radically altering their present social and political systems."³

East Europeans, however, wanted change, and they wanted it quickly. This surprised Canadian officials, who watched in amazement as popular unrest threw up "nationalist" Communist governments in Poland and Hungary by the fall of 1956. Canada's diplomats were equally astounded in late October, when rioting Hungarian intellectuals and students forced Soviet troops to retreat from Budapest. Initially, as the opening documents in this collection demonstrate, they hoped that a speedy intervention by the United Nations would end the violence and allow Premier Imre Nagy's government to work out a peaceful and liberal accommodation with Moscow.

This hope was dashed when Soviet troops and tanks re-entered the Hungarian capital a few days later, brutally crushing the poorly armed rebels and installing a puppet government. With only sketchy reports from Hungary, Pearson and his officials tried to make sense of what had happened. "The mistake of the rebels, and of Nagy for trying to keep pace with their demands," explained the under-secretary of

¹ Bonn (From Pearson) to Ottawa, Telegram 237, 15 October 1955, reprinted in Greg Donaghy (editor), *Documents on Canadian External Relations, Volume 21: 1955* (Ottawa: Canada Communication Group, 1999), p. 1167.

² L.B. Pearson, "Memorandum for the Prime Minister," 27 March 1956, reprinted in Greg Donaghy (editor), *Documents on Canadian External Relations, Volume 23: 1956-57 Part II* (Ottawa: Canadian Government Publishing, 2002), p. 911.

³ Robert Ford, "Memorandum by Head, European Division," 12 June 1956, reprinted in *ibid.*, p. 877.