

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jaromir Navratil, ed. *The Prague Spring 1968: A National Security Archive Documents Reader*. New York: Central European University Press, 1998. xxxix + 596 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-963-9116-15-3.

Reviewed by Bradley Abrams (Department of History, Columbia University)
Published on HABSURG (June, 1999)



One year after the troops of five Warsaw Pact states invaded Czechoslovakia and put an end to the era of liberalization known as the Prague Spring, Robin Remington published a collection of documents on those events.[2] Since then no English-language resource has brought together such a large collection of documents on the second major crisis of East Central European communism for use by professionals and students. With the publication of this volume, the time has passed when we had to rely on Remington or translate documents ourselves for use in courses. Furthermore, the documents furnish evidence for evaluating claims made in the memoirs of the leading figures of the time and the assessments by scholars of the Soviets' decision to intervene militarily. There is a growing post-1989 literature on the topic.[3]

The Prague Spring 1968 presents 140 documents, largely culled from archives in seven countries: the Czech Republic (88 documents), Russia (38), the USA (5), Hungary (3), France (2), Poland (1) and Germany (1).[4] The remainder are taken either from contemporary publications or memoirs published after the fall of communism. Very few have ever been printed in whole or part in English, although many are drawn from an exhaustive Czech collection.[5] The majority of the archival sources are reprinted in full, and draw upon everything from the minutes of high-level Communist Party and Warsaw Pact meetings to transcripts of telephone conversations and diplomatic cables. Moreover, the translations are of a very high quality, rendering convoluted communist rhetoric readable and reproducing it consistently, enabling the reader to see common formulations. Everyone connected to the technical side of this publication deserves the highest praise.

The volume is divided into seven sections, each of them thoroughly and even-handedly introduced. The introductions provide solid background, elaborating on the international context, the changes taking place in Czech and Slovak society, the plans and activities of members of the Czechoslovak government, the Communist Parties of Czechoslovakia (CPCz) and Slovakia, and reactions to these developments in both the East and the West. Thus, the reader learns the direction events are taking and the documents seem to proceed naturally from one to the next. This sense of flow is aided by Mark Kramer's headnotes to each document, which set the document in precise context and alert the reader to the most important passages. Finally, the copious footnotes are crucial, referring the reader to related documents in the volume and offering critical assessments of fact and interpretation, based primarily on those documents.

The first, short section is devoted to the prehistory of the crisis. It begins, as does Remington's volume, with excerpts from speeches delivered at the Fourth Czechoslovak Writers' Congress in June of 1967, but centers on the maneuvers leading to the ouster of CPCz First Secretary Antonin Novotny.[6] In thirteen documents, Part Two takes the story from Novotny's replacement by Dubcek on 5 January 1968 to the immediate aftermath of the March meeting in Dresden of the communist leaders of Czechoslovakia and the "five": the USSR, the German Democratic Republic, Hungary, Poland and Bulgaria. Here three main topics are addressed: the accession of Dubcek to leadership of the CPCz, its immediate aftermath and the initial responses of Bloc leaders to events in Czechoslovakia, and the Dresden meeting and its aftermath.

Part Three is composed of some twenty-six documents and is entitled "Revision, Reform, Revolution?" It takes the reader from the publication of the CPCz "Action Program" (short excerpts of which are provided, and which Kadar refers to as "a big zero" (p. 138)) to the publication of Ludvik Vaculik's "Two Thousand Words" of 27 June (reprinted in its entirety). The focal points are the reaction to the Action Program, the Czechoslovak-Soviet meeting of 4-5 May and the subsequent secret meeting of the "five," and the preparations for the Extraordinary Fourteenth Congress of the CPCz and the Warsaw Pact's "Sumava" maneuvers on Czechoslovak soil. Part Four examines the events of the tense July of 1968 through the mirror of twenty-three documents. They are grouped around the topics of the evaluations of the "Sumava" maneuvers and the preparations for military intervention, the Warsaw meeting of Czechoslovak leaders with those of the "five" (14-15 July), and the negotiations at Cierna and Tisou at the end of the month.

The longest section is Part Five, which deals with the three weeks leading up to the invasion. Forty-two documents cover the run-up to the invasion, revealing the inner workings of the Bratislava Conference and the Soviet decision to invade (taken by the Soviet Politburo on 17 August, and transmitted to the rest of the "five" at a hastily convened meeting in Moscow the next day). Further, it presents information on the final "Letter of Warning" from the Soviet Central Committee, and statements on the activities of leading lights—such as Czechoslovak Defense Minister Martin Dzur, President Ludvik Svoboda and CPCz head Dubcek—on the fateful night of 20/21 August, 1968.

Part Six, "The Aftermath," presents thirty-one documents, over half of them devoted to the immediate aftermath of the invasion. These center on the occupation and the meetings leading up to the infamous "Moscow Protocol," which is reprinted in full. The remainder are devoted to presenting the road to the "temporary" stationing of Soviet forces on Czechoslovak soil and the continuing difficulties the Soviets had in turning their uncontested military victory into a political victory. Part Seven serves as an epilogue, concluding with the December 1989 Soviet and Warsaw Pact apologies to Czechoslovakia.

Beyond the expected important information from communist party and other official political bodies' meetings, other documents stand out. Among these is the set of six letters and the transcriptions of the telephone conversations between Brezhnev and Dubcek. As Kieran Williams points out, these starkly portray Brezhnev's

growing impatience and exasperation, and Dubcek's evasion and despair.[7] Also of interest are the less commonly utilized sources, such as a Czechoslovak Television reporter's February assessment of the reaction of the Soviet peoples to the events in Czechoslovakia (pp. 55-7), the reports of the Czechoslovak escort-guides on the views of Warsaw Pact delegations attending the celebration of the twentieth anniversary of the CPCz takeover (pp. 58-62), the CPCz's discussions with the West German Social Democrat Egon Bahr (pp. 108-11), General Prchlik's press conference and the Soviet response (pp. 239-42, 259-60, 265-7), the accounts of the preparations for the invasion sprinkled throughout Part Five, and the document reporting an anonymous call made on August twentieth by a top-ranking Hungarian official tipping off the Czechoslovak embassy in Budapest that the invasion was to commence at midnight (p. 410).

Finally, also valuable are Kadar's reports back to the Hungarian Communist Party. The documents, and the editors' readings of them, correctly portray Kadar as relatively sympathetic to the CPCz's plight, and certainly as more moderate than Ulbricht, Gomulka, or even Zhivkov, who are unrelenting in their criticisms. Still, the dating of Kadar's "dramatic change in perspective" (p. 212) to the Warsaw meeting, in light of newly discovered information, seems incorrect. Kadar had been shaken by two articles published nearly simultaneously in Prague: the *Two Thousand Words* and, particularly, an article commending Imre Nagy, which Kadar took "as a personal affront, virtually as a slap in the face." The notes of a meeting Kadar had with Brezhnev shortly thereafter record him as saying to Brezhnev that "The way the situation now looks, Czechoslovakia will probably have to be occupied." [8] His seeming reversal between sessions in Warsaw can be attributed to the fact that he showed up late and did not have time to sound out Brezhnev before speaking. During the usual harangues against him from Ulbricht, Gomulka and Zhivkov, he remained silent. Only after Brezhnev implicitly rejected Kadar's moderate reading of the situation, tipping Kadar off that the balance had shifted, did he quickly rise and say that, after having "listened with great interest to the speech by C[omrade] Brezhnev," Hungary was "completely prepared to take part in all joint actions" (p. 229).

Although I am quite pleased with the volume, I would like to raise two related criticisms, which can be summed up in wondering whether the volume is both too much and too little. As Gordon Skilling points out in his foreword, the collection "concentrates its attention on the elite level of communist politics" (p. xix). This is certainly

true, and the vast preponderance of the documents are focused on the question of Czechoslovakia's relationship with the Warsaw pact and particularly the decision to invade. In this sense the book may be too much. Six hundred small-type, tightly spaced pages is a lot of words is far too large to assign as a whole to undergraduates, particularly given repetitions of criticisms made by members of the Warsaw Pact.

The more important criticism is whether the volume might provide too little. Given the concentration on elite communist politics, Skilling correctly notes that the volume "does not throw new light on the rise of an embryonic civil society or the spontaneous wave of resistance after the occupation" (p. xix). The section introductions and headnotes attempt to relate the documents to events transpiring on the ground, but they are not a substitute for documents that could be used to understand the domestic aspects of the crisis. A related concern is the time period covered. There are only five documents relating to the period after the signing on October 16 of the treaty on the stationing of Soviet troops. Given the focus on Bloc politics and the question of intervention, this is understandable, but the ready availability of documents on what Williams calls "Dubcek's normalization" in the third volume of the collection edited by Vondrova and Navratil's fine collection [see note 5] it would not have been difficult to have documents spanning from Dubcek's rise to power to his removal.

Perhaps a more varied, and hence more useful, volume could have been fit into these six hundred dense pages, touching in some detail on the developments inside Czechoslovak society and on the events that transpired in early 1969. Still, even if much of the material included in this volume has appeared before—at least in Czech—this is a valuable and much needed contribution. It will also be of tremendous value in creating document reading packets for students and for use in research. The CEU Press has done us a tremendous service, and if the intention is to address such on other aspects of the crisis in further volumes, I can only express confidence that they will attain the same high level of quality as has this one.

Notes

[1]. The title page of the volume acknowledges the contributions of many others: Antonin Bencik, Vaclav Kural, Marie Michalkova and Jitka Vondrova, members and associates of the former Czechoslovak Government Commission for the Analysis of the Events of 1967-1970 for editing; Mark Kramer, Joy Moss and Ruth Tosek for

translation; Mark Kramer for headnotes and the providing of additional documents; and Malcolm Byrne and Peter Kornbluh for editorial coordination.

[2]. Robin Alison Remington, ed., *Winter in Prague. Documents on Czechoslovak Communism in Crisis* (Cambridge, Mass: M.I.T. Press, 1969). The other major resource from the period, dealing only with the week of the invasion, is Robert Littell, ed., *The Czech Black Book* (New York: Praeger, 1969). This volume was prepared by the Institute of History of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, and an expanded version of it was made available after the "velvet revolution." See *Sedm prazskych dnu, 21.-27. srpen 1968: Dokumentace* (Praha: Academia, 1990).

[3]. Of English-language materials, the most important memoirs include Zdenek Mlynar's *Night Frost in Prague*, translated by Paul Wilson (London: C. Hurst, 1980); Alexander Dubcek with Andras Sugar, *Dubcek Speaks* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1990); and Alexander Dubcek, *Hope Dies Last*, edited and translated by Jiri Hochman (New York: Kodansha International, 1993). Among the most influential scholarly interpretations are H. Gordon Skilling's monumental tome *Czechoslovakia's Interrupted Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976); Karen Dawisha, *The Kremlin and the Prague Spring* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); and Jiri Valenta, *Soviet Intervention in Czechoslovakia, 1968* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1979). In 1991 Valenta published a revised version of his work, incorporating evidence made available after 1989 and revising his earlier conclusions in two new chapters. The most recent work on the topic is Kieran Williams' fine *The Prague Spring and its Aftermath* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

[4]. It should be noted that twenty of the documents currently in the collection of the Institute for Contemporary History in Prague are gifts from the Hungarian (4) and Russian (16) governments.

[5]. Roughly forty-five appear in Jitka Vondrova and Jaromir Navratil, eds., *Mezinarodni souvislosti ceskoslovenske krise 1967-1970. Prameny k dejinam ceskoslovenske krise 1967-1970. Dil 4, sv. 1-3* (Brno: Ustav pro soudobu dejiny AV CR v nakladelstvi Doplněk, 1995-7). The series contains document collections on topics as wide-ranging as the security services, the parliament, civil society, the military, and several others.

[6]. It is widely believed that when Leonid Brezhnev, on a visit to Prague in December at the invitation of Novotny, was asked to intervene in the leadership dis-

pute, he replied with the famous words “Eto vashe delo” (It is your affair). These words cannot be found in the documents, although Brezhnev did say “I did not come to take part in the solution of your problems” (p. 18). I must agree with the editors that Brezhnev “did use his visit to offer support for Novotny, despite serious misgivings. But he did so in such a half-hearted way that it ended up having the opposite effect” (p. 21). The support offered was indirect and largely procedural in form, and could not shore up the position of a man both critically weakened and who, as Hungarian Communist Party Janos Kadar reported Brezhnev as saying, was “himself to blame for all these problems” (p. 22).

[7]. For example, Dubcek says in the conversation of August 13: “I’d just as soon go where it would be pleasant to work. I don’t set great store by this post. Let whoever

wants to occupy it, take it. Let whoever wants to be CPCz [Central Committee] first secretary, take up the post” (p. 353). Interestingly, the phrase “Eto vashe delo” (see note 7) appears twice in this conversation, once from Brezhnev’s mouth (p. 351), but later from Dubcek’s (“If you believe that we’re deceiving you, then take the measures you regard as appropriate. That’s your affair.”) (p. 353)

[8]. The information on Kadar’s reversal can be found in Miklos Kun. *Prague Spring - Prague Fall: Blank Spots of 1968* (Budapest: Akademiai Kiado, 1999), pp. 229-31. The citation is from page 230.

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the reviewer and to HABSBURG. For other permission, please contact <reviews@h-net.msu.edu>.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/habsburg>

Citation: Bradley Abrams. Review of Navratil, Jaromir, ed., *The Prague Spring 1968: A National Security Archive Documents Reader*. HABSBURG, H-Net Reviews. June, 1999.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3128>

Copyright © 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.