

Prague Spring and the Warsaw Pact Invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968

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SUMMARY OF PROCEEDINGS

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Both UNO's CenterAustria and the Eisenhower Center for American Studies, in cooperation with the *Ludwig Boltzmann Institut für Kriegsfolgen-Forschung* in Graz, Austria, organized this international conference with conference speakers from eleven different countries. The occasion was provided by two anniversaries: the fortieth anniversary of the Prague Spring and the Warsaw Pact Intervention in Czechoslovakia and the ten-year anniversary of CenterAustria at the University of New Orleans. The conference papers reflected the best of the new Cold War scholarship. Presentations were equally balanced by American/Western European scholars and Central/Eastern European scholars – with new evidence coming from both sides of the former Cold War divide.

What emerged from the conference is a more nuanced view of Kremlin boss Leonid Brezhnev as a reluctant decision maker in the crisis. He was pushed by hawks like East German communist party chief Walter Ulbricht who called for military action throughout the spring of 1968, while people like Hungary's Janos Kádár tried to mediate between the hawks among his Warsaw Pact "brothers" and the Czech communists. Although first calls for military action came from Kremlin hawks as early as spring 1968, the decision to invade was fixed in July. The Johnson Administration in Washington was passive throughout the crisis and made it clear as early as July that this was a matter for the Communist bloc countries to resolve among themselves. The Americans and the British were more worried about salvaging détente than giving support to the Prague reform communists.

Peter Kolář, the ambassador of the Czech Republic to the United States, opened the meeting, and called the Czechoslovakian events of 1968 "a milestone" in Czech, European, and transatlantic history. As in 1938, the Czechoslovakian people felt again in 1968 that the West was not prepared to fight for a "strange country" and had let them down. The ambassador was six years old at the time and as a young child was excited about the tanks rolling in his country; only later was he enlightened by his parents about what those tanks

meant. With the Warsaw Pact intervention, intellectuals in the East and West came to realize that building "socialism with a human face" – a "third way" between East and West – was not feasible.

Mark Kramer (Harvard University) delivered the keynote address and set the context for the meeting by summarizing the state of the scholarship on the most crucial issues. The 1968 intervention put an abrupt end to pre-invasion hopes in Eastern Europe that Soviet-Eastern European relations could be restructured. Afterwards the threat of Soviet invasion upheld the communist system in Eastern Europe until 1989. Kramer notes that even though an enormous amount of evidence has been building, this material has not significantly changed how these events have been viewed since early after the crisis. By the standards of change in 1989, the Prague Spring was a remarkable effort, considering the external constraints. The reforms of the Prague Spring went far beyond what the reformers anticipated. Still, the intervention came as a surprise.

Kramer then paid "grudging respect" to Brezhnev for his accomplishments as a political leader and his crisis management; he resorted to military force as the very last option available after pursuing many other ways to resolve the crisis through negotiations. Historical analogies with the Hungarian crisis in 1956 played a major role in the Soviet Politburo's assessment of events in Czechoslovakia in East and West (and were frequently returned to in the course of this meeting), but they were often used wrongly. Alexander Dubcek's futile attempts to convince Soviet leaders that 1968 was "no repetition of 1956" came to naught. Dubcek stood up to Soviet pressure throughout the crisis, even though he was aware that Moscow viewed events with utmost hostility (as did Stanislaw Kania in Poland in 1981). Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko was greatly worried about Czechoslovakia leaving the communist bloc and feared that Romania would follow the Czechs and Slovaks. By mid-summer there was a good deal of unanimity in the Kremlin in favor of intervention (unlike in 1956, when Anastas Mikoyan opposed it). Military preparations for the

invasion experienced a major shift on August 17th, when Moscow replaced the commander of the operation. The large-scale, non-violent resistance of the Czechs and Slovaks came as surprise during the otherwise smooth military operation. The initial occupation failed due to lack of planning. Yuri Andropov and Walter Ulbricht wanted a military dictatorship after the slow pace of restoration, but Brezhnev deflected this suggestion. Vladislav Zubok asked Kramer about the significance of Soviet fears of “spillover effects” into Ukraine, the Baltic States, and Poland, and Kramer agreed that this was an extremely important concern for the Soviet leadership. With regard to a “spillover” into Romania, Kramer argued that Nicolae Ceausescu should not be judged by the standards of his tyrannical rule in the 1980s. In the 1960s, Romania’s split with the Soviet Union was a real one, and Moscow feared Romania might try to leave the Warsaw Pact. After 1968, Bucharest never displayed the same amount of defiance it showed before 1968.

In the first session, *Oldrich Tuma* (Institute of Contemporary History in the Czech Academy of Sciences) and *Manfred Wilke* (Institute of Contemporary History Munich-Berlin) analyzed the Prague Spring from the perspectives of Czechoslovakia and East Germany. Tuma analyzed the various factions inside the Prague Spring – the orthodox Communists around Vasil Bilak (the “healthy forces”) and reformers around Dubcek and Sik, as well as a loose faction of artists, journalists, intellectuals, and students. The reformers tried to redirect Czech society to its core values of a “Euro-American civilization” of the pre-1948 period and “drop the deformations” that had occurred after the Communist takeover of 1948. If the intervention had not happened, this reform trajectory would have been continued and Czechoslovakia’s post-1968 history would have been different. But reform Communists lost in August 1968 because the Kremlin would not tolerate these reforms. The intervention came as a result of the Kremlin’s realization that Dubcek’s leadership postponed promises of return to orthodox communism; he appeased the Soviets and from Moscow’s perspective was incapable of getting the escalating reform agenda under control.

Wilke’s analysis concentrated on the GDR’s and Ulbricht’s hardline position in pushing the Kremlin towards intervention. Ever since the Dresden meeting in March 1968, hardliners had argued that the Prague Spring was a “counterrevolution” (Ulbricht was the first to use the dreaded term in analyzing Czechoslovakian events). As a socialist core state, the GDR rejected the Prague Spring’s radical reformist idea that the Czechoslovakian Communist Party should give up its monopoly of power. Dubcek was lured to the Dresden conference, which was billed as a meeting on “economics,” only to be forced (without adequate preparation) to explain the “counterrevolution” in Prague. In the discussion, Vladislav Zubok raised the notion of a “junior generation of the 1950s” which differed from the old Stalinists of the Ulbricht and Florin [GDR ambassador in Prague] type who were socialized in the Soviet Union before and during World War II. Wilke answered Csaba Bekes’ question about whether the Brezhnev-Ulbricht exchanges in Dresden were rehearsed and “staged” by Ulbricht and Brezhnev by noting that the secret transcript of the meeting did not allow such a conclusion. But Moscow was closely briefed before the meeting about Ulbricht’s thinking.

The second session concentrated on the Soviet Union’s response to the Prague Spring leading up to the invasion. *Vladislav Zubok* (Temple University) analyzed the intellectual ferment among the Moscow elites after Stalin’s death when a “Moscow Spring” almost occurred. He stressed that de-Stalinization occurred both from

above (the reform of the secret police; Khrushchev’s secret speech of 1956) and from below or inside. What Zubok calls “the middle generation” sparked the “rebirth of the Russian intelligentsia” and pushed the process of de-Stalinization, yet preserved elites’ profound moral commitment to the revolutionary communist project. After 1956, another brief “thaw” occurred in 1960/1, when some two million well-educated intellectuals and scientists aimed to transform Soviet society and the economy – if you will, a “socialism with a human face” project too. These younger “left idealists” were similar to the Prague reformists (and some knew each other personally, like Mikhail Gorbachev and Mlynář). They rejected ideas of private property and free markets as well as Western-type consumerism and materialism. Before the suppression of the Prague Spring, these intellectual idealists wanted to rescue the failing Communist project and ameliorate socialism (along the lines of Andrei Sakharov’s *Reflections*). When Andropov became KGB chief in 1967, he had to address this intellectual ferment. The Central Committee in Moscow showed great indecision throughout the Prague Spring. When the decision to invade came, it came suddenly. Zubok concluded that Gorbachev was just such a young man from the “middle generation” whose idealism was “preserved in the provinces in Stavropol.” When Gorbachev came to Moscow, he ignited the fire among the former intellectuals who had become sullen party apparatchiks after 1968.

Mikhail Prozumenshchikov (Russian State Archives for Contemporary History) looked at the final month of Moscow’s decision-making process up to the invasion. A meeting of the Warsaw Pact “Five” – the “brothers” – in Warsaw rubberstamped invasion plans, but Brezhnev exhausted all means to “assist” the Czechoslovakian Communist Party and cancel their ambitious reform agenda. The Kremlin perceived Dean Rusk’s commentary in his meeting with Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin on July 22 (namely, that it was a matter for the Czechs and Soviets and the Warsaw Pact to resolve their differences) as a sort of encouragement that the United States would not react to a potential Soviet invasion. The Soviet Politburo did not derive any conclusions from the Cierna meeting with the Czechoslovakian reformers at the beginning of August and did not expect Dubcek to live up to his assurances that he would control the media. Over the next two weeks, the Soviet leadership vacationed in their favorite spots on the Black Sea. After telephone conversations with Dubcek on August 9th and 13th, Brezhnev became convinced that the Czechoslovakian leaders were pulling back from their Cierna promises. On August 17th, the decision to invade was made.

Peter Ruggenthaler (Ludwig Boltzmann Institut für Kriegsfolgen-Forschung, Graz-Austria) presented a close micro-analysis of the intense Moscow negotiations from August 23-26 between the Kremlin and the Czechoslovakian leadership (among them Dubcek, Cernik, and Ludvik Svoboda), which resulted in August 26th agreement that Dubcek carried back to Prague. Dubcek had been kept in total isolation and the political scenario was not going well in Prague for the Soviets, as the reformists were still in control. Brezhnev issued warnings of counterrevolution and “rightist forces” and reminded Dubcek of promises made about withdrawing reforms. He made it clear that there was no alternative path for Czechoslovakia, let alone an option to leave socialism. Podgorny spoke of the threat of civil war. President Svoboda, an old friend of Brezhnev’s since World War II, flew to Moscow on his own volition for a state visit. He told the Kremlin that he was not prepared to form a new government in Prague as that would be a breach of the constitution. Ulbricht was deeply shocked when he heard that Dubcek had been allowed to go back to Prague.

Discussions following these presentations revolved around issues of when exactly the decision to invade was made (some had considered “special measures,” i.e., military invasion as early as spring 1968; and Brezhnev had to contain both the hawks in the Kremlin and among the satellite “brothers” [Ulbricht], as well as among pro-Soviet forces in Prague, again and again); whether Rusk’s message to Dobrynin on July 22nd amounted to a “green light” for the Kremlin (Kramer noted that a “green light” often is in the eye of the beholder); comparisons with the Hungarian events of October/November 1956; “third way” socialism (the Yugoslav model), and intellectual influences on the “middle generation” (Antonio Gramsci’s notion of “organic intellectuals”). Wilke stressed that “the Prague Spring was a European hope” – namely that communism might democratize itself internally – and that its destruction brought both the end of this hope (especially among left intellectuals) and the death of the reborn Russian intelligentsia.

The third session covered the great powers and the Prague Spring. *Mark Carson* (Tulane University) and *Günter Bischof* (University of New Orleans) dealt with the American response to the Warsaw pact invasion. Carson summarized the Vietnam War that hovered over all things Czechoslovakian in 1968, especially from a Southern perspective. The South was heavily invested in the war due to its military installations, war production facilities, and because a disproportionate number of soldiers hailed from Dixie. Some of the most prominent war hawks in Congress were from the South (Senators John Stennis and Strom Thurmond; and Congressmen Mendel Rivers and F. Edward Hébert) – some of them resentful as well, especially of the restraints that Lyndon B. Johnson had put on the conduct of the war. Others criticized the escalating war (Senators James W. Fulbright and Albert Gore). Bischof argued that the Johnson administration’s crisis management began to ease within ten days after the August 20th invasion. Dean Rusk and Clark Clifford made it clear before the invasion that the United States would not be prepared to engage in a military response given its military engagement in Vietnam; the United States could not handle two military engagements simultaneously. The CIA saw the invasion coming, but also engaged in some wishful thinking in hoping that the crisis would be resolved bilaterally between the Czechs and Soviets. Johnson had wanted to crown his foreign policy achievements with a summit meeting in Leningrad in October, announcing détente with the Soviet Union. Johnson only reluctantly accepted the invasion of Czechoslovakia, which killed “his” summit; yet it would only postpone the flowering of détente. Bischof detailed Washington’s fears in late August about a “spillover” of the crisis into Rumania (and/or Yugoslavia and Austria). He analyzed the State Department’s difficulties in containing European charges about prior U.S.-Soviet “complicity” and “spheres of influence agreements” between Washington and Moscow (Charles de Gaulle went all the way back to Yalta with his charges). Bischof also looked at how the United States utilized the Czech crisis to strengthen NATO and call for more spending in Western Europe toward its own defense.

Saki Dockrill (King’s College London) dealt with the British response to the invasion and concluded that it was cautious, but not a “lost opportunity.” The British (like the Americans) were preoccupied with pushing détente. Ever since the Cuban crisis, Whitehall was intent on facilitating détente to make Europe a safer place (but not de Gaulle’s version of détente – an anticipated convergence of Soviet and Western values). They also were worried about NATO’s “midlife crisis,” which was clearly revealed in the alliance’s response to the events in Prague. British policy towards Eastern Europe was “unremarkable,” even under the pragmatic

and acute Harold Wilson (a young and engaging Labour Prime Minister like Tony Blair later). The Foreign Office’s response to the Czechoslovakian crisis was as pragmatic as that of the Americans – the West could not control events, nor could it make the Czechs’ and Slovaks’ life easier by putting pressure on the Kremlin. There was wishful thinking among Foreign Office officials, too, who were hoping that the Kremlin might go along with the Czech situation as part of its détente efforts. Even though troop movements had been noticed along the Czechoslovakian border prior to the intervention (seen as a form of “psychological warfare” against Prague), the actual invasion came as a surprise to Whitehall. Given the concerns over NATO, London (like Washington) was intent on not intervening in the Soviet sphere. Soviet intentions were misjudged because the British leaders wanted to continue détente. There was concern over Soviet action against Romania and Yugoslavia in London too. In the end, the setback to détente was not too serious, but the United Kingdom was hereafter more suspicious of Soviet power than other NATO allies. The crisis thus turned out to be a “blessing in disguise” for the strengthening of NATO.

Alessandro Brogi (University of Arkansas-Fayetteville) analyzed the response of the Italian and French (PCI and PSF) Communist parties to the Czechoslovakian crisis. He stressed that Prague needed to be understood in the context of the student revolt in Paris in May 1968. Both parties were anti-American and considered the United States to be a hollow, materialistic, and conformist society, no longer the Fordist utopia of the 1920s. 1960s America had “lost its essence” and become like Western Europe. The stamping out of Czechoslovakia’s “socialism with a human face” was an admission of failure from the Soviet side. Both parties condemned the invasion (their leaders had personally warned Dubcek in July of the dangers of a “counterrevolution”). Both were afraid of “falling dominoes” in the Eastern bloc. Both saw the opportunities for détente wasted. The PCI was a strong party in a weak state, whereas the PCF was a loyal party in a strong state. In 1968, both tried to compromise with the leading parties and get into a coalition governments. The Czech crisis gave them an opportunity to posture towards potential coalition partners and sparked the growing emancipation from Moscow’s control (a harbinger of “Eurocommunism” of the 1970s, which came to criticize Soviet aggression in the Third World and accepted the “Atlantic umbrella”). The more moderate PCI was rewarded, while the more radical PCF went down in elections. Both parties engaged in a discourse of “superpower domination” from East and West. Both wanted “imperialist forces” in the East and West withdrawn from the continent and Europe united. As a result of 1968, the American “culture of dissent” became increasingly mainstream, with dissident America seen as a new utopia.

In the discussion, the possible Leningrad summit (which Johnson was so reluctant to give up) was discussed, as well as the spillover threats to Romania and Yugoslavia. Kramer noted that the U.S. military attachés in Eastern Europe did not see any Soviet buildup. The CIA had little information, as it never had a high-level source in Moscow’s Politburo. Melanie Davis (a doctoral student at the University of Adelaide in Australia) argued that 1968 was not an intelligence failure on the part of the CIA. The CIA had issued “inconvenient warnings” to Johnson, who chose to ignore them. There may have been analytical bias, but in the end one cannot force policy makers to heed warnings.

The lunch break before the final panel was dedicated to a literary reading. Zdenka Becker (writer in residence at Lafayette College in Pennsylvania) read excerpts in German from her latest novel *Die Töchter der Róza Bukovská* (2006). Her selections focused on

the experience of three young Czech girls, who, upon returning from a family vacation in Rumania, find their hometown occupied by Soviet military forces. As she told the panel after the reading, Becker is interested in how historical events such as the Warsaw Pact invasion affect the lives of ordinary people.

The fourth and final session addressed Czechoslovakia's European neighbors during the crisis. *Csaba Békés* (Institute for the History of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution) analyzed János Kádár's role in the "intervention coalition" of the Warsaw Pact. In contrast to the absolute hardliners among the Warsaw Pact's "brothers" (Ulbricht, Poland's Wladislaw Gomulka, and Bulgaria's Todor Zhivkov), Kádár tried to mediate and calm matters down between the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and these hardline interventionists, as well as between Moscow and Prague. It was Kádár who twelve years earlier had directed the Hungarian Communist Party back on a course faithful to Moscow after the violent suppression of the "counterrevolution" in 1956. This specific experience made him believe that military intervention was the absolutely last option. Unlike the rest of the leaders of the five intervening Warsaw Pact states, he did not believe Czechoslovakia was abandoning communism altogether, even in August. When the chips were down, however, Kádár reluctantly supported the military intervention.

Tvrtko Jakovina (University of Zagreb, Croatia) raised the issue of whether Josip Tito's Yugoslavia – "America's communist ally" – represented a model for the reform communists in Prague. Yugoslavia indeed was very popular in Czechoslovakia during the Prague Spring. Tito garnered a great deal of sympathy when he came to Prague to renew the friendship treaty with Czechoslovakia a few days prior to the invasion. During his conversation with Brezhnev in late April (as well as on numerous other occasions), Tito stubbornly defended Dubcek's policies. Jakovina noted that Yugoslavia did not enjoy sufficient military preparation to resist a possible invasion by the Warsaw Pact after the Czechoslovakian intervention. As a result, Yugoslavia's defense planning was thoroughly revised. In addition, the United States made gestures, reinforced by later signals from NATO that assured Belgrade that NATO did not constitute any threat to Yugoslavia. Today, we know that the Warsaw Pact did not have any plans to invade Yugoslavia in 1968. Gromyko's visit to Belgrade later in 1968 constituted a tortured trip to "Canossa" much like Khrushchev's visit in 1955.

Stefan Karner (Ludwig Boltzmann Institut für Kriegsfolgen-Forschung and University of Graz, Austria) analyzed Austria's

dangerous situation during the crisis. Karner stressed Austria's geostrategic position, in particular its long borders with countries behind the Iron Curtain. In spite of the Iron Curtain, which was breached during the crisis, Austria enjoyed a dense network of contacts with Czechoslovakia. As in the Hungarian insurrection of 1956, thousands of refugees flooded across the border into Austria. As in 1956 Austrian neutrality was severely tested in 1968. Foreign Minister Kurt Waldheim was absolutely convinced that the Soviet Union would respect Austrian neutrality and was not interested in escalating the crisis after the invasion of Czechoslovakia. He shrewdly turned down a "security guarantee" offered by Dean Rusk in the fall of 1968. During a regular NATO meeting in Brussels, Rusk had noted that a Warsaw Pact threat to Romania, Yugoslavia, or Austria would constitute a threat to NATO. Waldheim reminded all the signatory powers of the Austrian State Treaty of 1955 that it was their responsibility to protect Austrian neutrality. Moscow noted this statement approvingly. Moscow cordially apologized for carrying out a week-long operation during which Warsaw Pact airplanes crossed into Austrian air space and systematically gathered intelligence over Austria. The Czech crisis gave Waldheim an opportunity to improve his international profile and gain respect in the Kremlin. In 1972, he was elected to become United Nations Secretary General.

After the intense two-day conference, participants left no doubt that Ambassador Kolář's initial assessment was absolutely correct – the high hopes in the bloc, within Europe, and around the world which were awakened by the reform Communists during the Prague Spring, followed by the surprising shock of the Warsaw Pact invasion made this a watershed event in Cold War history. The courage of the Prague Spring reformers served as an inspiration and model for Solidarity in Poland and also left a mark on Gorbachev and the dramatic reform movements of 1988-91 that led to the final collapse of the Soviet Union and its empire.

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