

1968 and Beyond: From the Prague Spring to “Normalization”

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Following the Communist Party’s forcible seizure of power in Czechoslovakia in 1948, the country was ruled by a highly repressive regime under the leadership of President Klement Gottwald. As in other Central and East European countries within the Soviet Union’s sphere of influence at that time, the Czechoslovak government patterned itself after the totalitarian regime of Soviet leader Josef Stalin, carrying out fatal purges of perceived political opponents and severely restricting civil liberties. After Stalin’s death in 1953 and subsequent introduction of a degree of liberalization in the USSR under the new leadership of Nikita Khrushchev, a slow process of “de-Stalinization” began taking place in Czechoslovakia in the late 1950s under President Antonín Novotný.

In response to an economic downturn occurring in Czechoslovakia in the early 1960s, Novotný introduced a “New Economic Model” in 1965. This was intended to supplant the Soviet model of industrialization, which had been imposed on Czechoslovakia despite that country’s already high level of industrial development dating from prior to World War II. However, Novotný’s economic reform sparked popular demand for accompanying political reform, which contributed to his losing public support. On January 5, 1968, Novotný was replaced as First Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSC) by Alexander Dubček, First Secretary of the regional Communist Party of Slovakia. Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev, who along with the Central Committee of the KSC did not anticipate the scope of the ambitious reform program that would be proposed by Dubček, supported this shift in power. Novotný also resigned from the presidency of Czechoslovakia on March 22, 1968 and was replaced by Ludvík Svoboda, who ended up supporting Dubček’s reforms.

Soon after coming to power, Dubček declared that the new mission of the KSC would be “to build an advanced socialist society on sound economic foundations [...] that corresponds to the historical democratic traditions of Czechoslovakia.”¹ Indeed, Czechoslovakia had been the only East European country to successfully maintain a parliamentary democracy throughout the period between the two world wars, until the occupation of its territory by Nazi Germany. In April 1968, Dubček announced an “Action Plan” to increase freedom of speech and of the press, limit the power of the feared secret police, promote the production of consumer goods in place of Soviet-style emphasis on heavy industry, and initiate a ten-year process of transition to a form of democratic socialism that would allow for multiparty elections. In the realm of foreign policy, Dubček proposed transcending Cold War divisions by maintaining good relations both with

¹ Navrátil, Jaromír, ed. The Prague Spring 1968: A National Security Archive Documents Reader. Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 1998. p. 54.

Western countries and with the Soviet bloc. At the Presidium of the KSČ that spring, Dubček famously referred to his proposed political program as “socialism with a human face.” He formally abolished state censorship of the press on June 26, 1968.

Although Dubček intended for these reforms to be implemented under the direction of the KSČ, new political movements proliferated during the easing of official repression of Czechoslovakia’s political and cultural life which became known as the “Prague Spring.” On June 27, the prominent writer Ludvík Vaculík published a manifesto entitled “The Two Thousand Words,” which called on the people of Czechoslovakia to take the lead in implementing the proposed reforms. A revival of the center-left Social Democratic Party, which had been highly influential in Czechoslovak politics during the interwar period, appeared on the scene, along with a range of political clubs of widely varying persuasions. The arts (including literature, music, film and theatre) also flourished in 1968, as diverse forms of creative expression were freed from state censorship. Elements of Western pop culture, particularly jazz and rock music, and countercultural movements exerted significant influence on artistic development and youth culture in Czechoslovakia at this time.

The Soviet government viewed such democratic developments in Czechoslovakia with increasing concern, since the unity of the bloc of Central and East European countries under Soviet control appeared to be threatened by Czechoslovakia’s attempt to strike its own path. In July the Soviet leadership held a meeting with the leaders of the KSČ, at which Dubček defended his reform program, while also pledging to continue Czechoslovakia’s commitment to the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact military alliance and Comecon (the economic organization of Communist countries). This was followed on August 3 by a meeting at which the USSR, Czechoslovakia, and three other Warsaw Pact countries signed the Bratislava Declaration, a document announcing the Soviet Union’s intention to intervene in any Warsaw Pact state that established a “bourgeois” system allowing multiple political parties to challenge the guaranteed “leading role” of the Communist Party.

During the night of August 20–21, 1968, Warsaw Pact troops from the USSR, Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland and East Germany launched a surprise invasion of Czechoslovakia. Romania was the only Warsaw Pact country that refused to participate in the invasion. Although the Soviets were clearly dissatisfied with what they viewed as the KSČ’s overall failure to control the Prague Spring reforms, there was no obvious immediate provocation from Czechoslovakia to trigger the invasion at that time. The Czechoslovak government denied any prior knowledge of the invasion, although the Soviet press published an unsigned request for Warsaw Pact military assistance that was allegedly sent to Moscow by several KSČ leaders. (After the fall of communism in Czechoslovakia and across Eastern Europe in 1989, the USSR did in fact reveal to the new Czechoslovak President, Václav Havel, a letter to this effect that was signed by members of the conservative wing of the KSČ in 1968.)

The invasion force, consisting of 200,000 troops and 2,000 tanks, encountered only sporadic, mainly nonviolent resistance from the local population as it occupied the country. Dubček himself urged the people of Czechoslovakia not to resist so as to minimize casualties. (When Soviet troops had invaded Hungary in 1956 over that country’s attempt to break away from Soviet domination and leave the Warsaw Pact, the Hungarians attempted to resist and over

2,500 were killed.) A total of 72 Czechs and Slovaks were killed in the August 1968 invasion, hundreds were wounded, and tens of thousands emigrated from the country in its immediate aftermath. Dubček and several other Czechoslovak leaders were arrested during the invasion and taken to Moscow, where they signed an agreement under heavy pressure to accept the Soviet occupation and were subsequently returned to Prague.

In April 1969, Gustáv Husák replaced Dubček as First Secretary of the KSC. Dubček was expelled from the Communist Party and assigned to a post as a forestry official (after 1989, however, he would be elected Speaker of the Federal Assembly of the newly democratic Czechoslovakia). The Husák regime reversed virtually all of the Prague Spring reforms under the guise of “normalization” of political and economic life. Censorship of the press and creative arts was re-imposed, and a bleak period of Czechoslovak history began. Widespread political apathy set in among the population, as most Czechs and Slovaks accepted the modestly improved living standard and availability of consumer goods provided by the regime in exchange for their passive acceptance of the Soviet-dominated rule of the KSC, which had expelled the members of its former liberal wing. The small number of dissidents, such as Václav Havel, who refused to accept this cynical social contract with the regime were subjected to secret police harassment, expulsion from their professions, assignment to menial jobs, and sometimes arrest and imprisonment. The normalization period lasted throughout the 1970s and 1980s, until the Velvet Revolution of 1989 finally restored a democratic political system in Czechoslovakia.

Sources of Further Information

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