

Was 1968 a Strategic Watershed of the Cold War?

A quip attributed to Lyndon B. Johnson, among others, calls the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia “an accident on the road to détente.” Besides imputing cynicism to Western leaders, the quip implies that the international crisis provoked by the invasion did not really make a difference in the course of East-West relations. The analysis that follows attempts to show that this was not the case, and that 1968 was in fact an important strategic watershed in the Cold War. In highlighting the interplay between military strategy and the high politics of détente, the essay introduces for the first time multiarchival evidence from both the NATO and the Warsaw Pact sides.

The internal upheaval in Czechoslovakia occurred against the background of parallel crises of both NATO and the Warsaw Pact, during which the two alliances had come closer than ever before to becoming paralyzed. There was a difference in timing, however. The NATO crisis had been building up over a longer period of time, having been accelerated by the Kennedy administration’s endorsement in 1961 of the U.S. strategy of “flexible response,” developed to replace that of “massive retaliation.” Efforts to apply the new strategy to NATO proved divisive, serving as a catalyst of France’s determination to challenge American domination of the alliance. The crisis had been contained at the cost of France’s departure from NATO’s integrated command—an outcome that may retrospectively be judged as ultimately beneficial for both France and NATO. In any case, by December 1967 the crisis was over. The alliance reinvented itself by adopting not only the flexible response strategy but also the Harmel Report, which redefined its dual purpose as defense *cum* détente.¹

Archival locations and abbreviations: AMSZ Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Warsaw; ANIC National Archives of Romania, Bucharest; AÚV KSC Archives of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia; BA-MA Federal Archives of Germany, Military Branch, Freiburg i. Br.; IMS International Military Staff, NATO; MFAA Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the former German Democratic Republic, Political Archives of the Foreign Office, Berlin; NARA National Archives and Records Service, College Park, Maryland; NATO-A NATO Archives, Brussels; SÚA Central State Archives, Prague; ÚSD Institute for Contemporary History, Prague; VÚA Central Military Archives, Prague.

FRUS Foreign Relations of the United States.

PHP Parallel History Project on NATO and the Warsaw Pact and its website, www.isn.ethz.ch/php.

1. Helga Haftendorn, *NATO and the Nuclear Revolution: A Crisis of Credibility, 1966–1967* (Oxford, 1996). Cf. Frédéric Bozo, “Détente versus Alliance: France, the United States and the Politics of the Harmel Report (1964–1968),” *Contemporary European History* 7, no. 3 (1998):

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The Warsaw Pact crisis had been of more recent vintage, and in 1967 was still unresolved. It had been precipitated four years before by Moscow's plan to transform an alliance originally conceived for largely political purposes into an effective military tool. The project soon ground to a halt amid efforts by several of the allies to steer the Soviet reform proposals in directions more congenial to their own interests and priorities. Much like the French with regard to Washington, the Romanians sought to thwart Moscow's supremacy whereas others, notably the Poles and East Germans, accepted it but tried to persuade the Kremlin to better adapt its proposals to their particular needs. The Kremlin had been treating the resulting disarray with remarkable forbearance, hedging rather than forcing issues, when the Czechoslovak crisis intruded for reasons extraneous to the dispute. It had grown out of the local Communist Party's attempt to mend its ways, which quickly earned its new leaders an unusual popularity because of their commitment to a "socialism with a human face." This made their undertaking suspect in Soviet eyes and especially in the eyes of neighboring Communist leaders worried about a spillover effect.²

THE CHALLENGE

NATO's new strategic concept was embodied in the document known as MC 14/3, formally adopted on 16 January 1968. In trying to achieve a "seamless web of deterrence," which its authors believed was indispensable for dealing effectively with the Soviet military threat, the concept called for a full range of military options, from conventional to nuclear. Since the goal was confronting the "enemy with a credible threat of escalation in response to any type of aggression below the level of a major nuclear attack," the strategy was in fact that of "flexible escalation."³

Hammered out after years of controversy, NATO's new doctrine was in the military sense a compromise between full-scale conventional defense and nuclear trip-wire strategy. Politically, it was a compromise between the American striving for NATO conventional forces large enough to be able to hold out

343–60, and his *Two Strategies for Europe: De Gaulle, the United States, and the Atlantic Alliance* (Lanham, MD, 2001).

2. Vojtech Mastny, "The Soviet Union and the Origins of the Warsaw Pact in 1955," in *Mechanisms of Power in the Soviet Union*, eds. Niels Erik Rosenfeldt, Bent Jensen, and Erik Kulavig (New York, 2000), 241–66. An adequate study of the Warsaw Pact crisis has yet to be written. Some of its aspects are analyzed from new evidence in Douglas Selva, "Poland, the German Democratic Republic and the German Question, 1955–1967," unpublished Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1998, and his *The Warsaw Pact and Nuclear Nonproliferation, 1963–65*, Cold War International History Project working paper no. 32 (Washington, DC, 2001).

3. MC 14/3 is in *NATO Strategy Documents, 1949–1969*, ed. Gregory W. Pedlow (Brussels, 1997), 371–99. The goal is stated in "Guidance to the NATO Military Authorities," Annex II to DPC/D(67)23, 11 May 1967, *ibid.*, 339–44, at 342. The term "flexible escalation" is Beatrice Heuser's; see her *NATO, Britain, France, and the FRG: Nuclear Strategies and Forces for Europe, 1949–2000* (New York, 1998), 53.

against a Warsaw Pact attack without having to resort to nuclear weapons, and Europeans' preference for smaller forces—a preference based on the belief that mere possession of the doomsday weapons was sufficient to keep the enemy at bay. Either way, flexible response heralded reductions of both U.S. forces in Europe and European defense spending.

Ambiguity characterized the alliance's new posture. In trying to explain the concept of flexible response to journalists after its endorsement by the North Atlantic Council in December 1967, NATO's assistant secretary general for defense planning and policy, Arthur Hockaday, likened it to a card game with incalculable risk: The enemy would know the cards that the West was holding, but would be left guessing which ones would be played. Less charitably, political scientist Jane Stromseth has described the new approach as one that "allowed decision-makers to avoid hard choices regarding the role and adequacy of NATO's conventional forces."⁴

No sooner was the top-secret strategy document approved than Moscow got a hold of a copy through its proficient East German spies—one of the many instances of unintended transparency that may have been more beneficial than harmful in its consequences. There is no indication that Moscow became alarmed, started reviewing its own strategy, or altered its force deployments as a result. The flexible response had been public talk for so long and its eventual adoption was so predictable that Soviet strategists had enough time to make any changes they wanted to make before, all the more so since their own thinking had been evolving in the same direction as NATO's, albeit for different reasons. Ever since the 1961 Berlin crisis, they had been committed to an offensive strategy providing for a swift, massive thrust deep into Western Europe—a strategy whose credibility required shifting reliance from the incalculably destructive nuclear power onto the more predictable conventional power. In a seminal article in late 1967, defense minister Marshal Andrei A. Grechko pronounced combat-ready conventional forces equipped with up-to-date technology as being more critical for victory than strategic missiles.⁵

The trends in the superpowers' strategic thinking were more worrisome to their clients than to the superpowers themselves. On the Warsaw Pact side, Czechoslovakia was particularly vulnerable because its geographical location made its annihilation in a nuclear war all but certain. There was another reason, however, why its chief of staff, Gen. Otakar Rytíř, looked with misgivings at

4. Hockaday cited in Haftendorn, *NATO and the Nuclear Revolution*, 25. Jane Stromseth, *The Origins of Flexible Response: NATO's Debate over Strategy in the 1960s* (New York, 1988), 194.

5. Heinz Busch, "Militärspionage der DDR," unpublished manuscript, Berlin 2001, 68. Michael McGwire, *Military Objectives in Soviet Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC, 1987), 381–405. On the origins of the Soviet offensive strategy, see Vojtech Mastny, "Imagining War: Soviet Strategy and Europe, 1949–1979," paper presented at the conference "NATO, the Warsaw Pact, and the European Non-Aligned 1949–1979: Threat Assessments, Doctrines and War Plans," Longyearbyen, 12–16 June 2003, publication forthcoming.

what he called the theory of “local” war—in fact the U.S. theory of limited war that the flexible response strategy was designed to make feasible. Referring to devious Western strategists in a rambling pep talk to his staff, he contended that

[w]ith that theory, to put it bluntly, they sort of tricked and fooled our Soviet comrades, who took the bait. Maybe the theory suits the Soviet Union but . . . it does not suit us. Because . . . it means moving toward classical warfare. And classical warfare . . . means saturating the forces with high technology and manpower. In today’s situation . . . this is something the capitalist system can afford. Because its economy, whether we like it or not, is superior. . . . By accepting the theory of local war, we accepted arming our forces in competition with the West. Well, this competition, comrades, we cannot win.⁶

The general believed that under Khrushchev there had been a Soviet doctrine sufficient to prevent war: threatening West Germany and the United States with nuclear devastation. He still thought that war was improbable, but that following the same doctrinal innovations as NATO threatened to upset stability—not so much military as political. As Rytíř explained in a letter to deputy premier Oldřich Černík, the West could afford to wait. With uncanny premonition of what would in fact happen twenty years later, he reasoned that “the enemy’s calculation is like this: Their economy is going from bad to worse, it is enough to push them a little bit, prod the people—and they will collapse by themselves, without us firing a shot.”⁷

Rytíř saw a way out in the elaboration of the Warsaw Pact’s own military doctrine that would take the national interests of its member states into account. He believed that Czechoslovakia must remain a loyal member of the alliance but “struggle to achieve a position of equality” in it. A vocal minority within the country’s military establishment, however, wanted to go farther. In a memorandum intended for party secretary Alexandr Dubček, thirty faculty members of the nation’s two top military academies demanded that the whole concept of deterrence, as practiced by the superpowers, be discarded as possibly beneficial to them but harmful to anyone else. Deriding a strategy “based solely on simple logic, empiricism, and historical analogy,” the critics expressed doubts about a Western military threat and called for a truly “European security policy” that

6. Remarks by Rytíř, 13 March 1968, in Vojtech Mastny, “‘We Are in a Bind’: Polish and Czechoslovak Attempts at Reforming the Warsaw Pact, 1956–1969,” *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 11 (1998): 230–50, at 243–44. Retranslated from the original in *Vojenské otázky československé reformy, 1967–1970: Vojenská varianta řešení č. krize (1967–1968)* [Military Problems of the Czechoslovak Reform, 1967–1970: The Military Option in the Solution of the Czechoslovak Crisis], eds. Antonín Benčík, Jaromír Navrátil, and Jan Paulík (Brno, 1996), 79.

7. Rytíř to Černík, 14 March 1968, *ibid.*, 91–94, at 92.

would allay suspicions. Yet not even the authors of this daring statement favored abandoning or abolishing the Warsaw Pact, but merely reforming it.⁸

As the Czechoslovak crisis unfolded in early 1968, its possible military repercussions did not rank high among Soviet concerns. In particular, there is no evidence supporting the hypothesis that the desire to deploy nuclear warheads in the country, as provided for by an agreement already signed but not yet implemented, decisively influenced Moscow's calculations.⁹ Neither did the need to counter any changes in NATO's military dispositions. The Kremlin's worry at this time was rather the persisting disarray within the Warsaw Pact, made worse by Romania's obstruction of the nuclear nonproliferation treaty (NPT) that was being negotiated between Moscow and Washington.¹⁰ The seemingly unreasonable obstruction of the treaty by the Romanian chieftain Nicolae Ceaușescu was consistent with his striving to enhance his regime's international status and leverage by asserting independence from Moscow.

At the Eighteen-Nation Disarmament Committee (ENDC) in Geneva, Romania not only denounced the Soviet draft of the treaty as giving license to the superpowers at the expense of all other countries, but also allied itself with NATO member Italy, as well as with Brazil and other nonaligned states, in attempting to sidetrack the nearly finished document by procedural maneuvers. "It leads to the perpetuation of the atomic monopoly in both the military and the political field," Ceaușescu explained to the Romanian politburo. "It allows the countries in possession of nuclear weapons and American imperialism to intrude upon the domestic affairs of other states." On a visit to Prague in February 1968, he denounced the proposed treaty as "even worse and more dangerous" than the 1939 Stalin-Hitler pact that had ushered in World War II.¹¹

The Romanian antics were all the more galling to the Kremlin since China, then in the grip of its chaotic "cultural revolution," was emerging in Soviet eyes

8. "Memorandum by Thirty Scholarly Associates of the Military Political Academy and Military Technical Academy for the Czechoslovak Party Central Committee," 4 June 1968, in Mastny, "We Are in a Bind," 244-49.

9. As argued in Jiří Fidler, *21.8.1968: Okupace Československa: Bratrská agrese* [28 August 1968: The Occupation of Czechoslovakia: A Fraternal Aggression] (Prague, 2003), 106-10.

10. Haftendorn, *NATO and the Nuclear Revolution*, 293. In February, the Czechoslovak intelligence received unsubstantiated reports that the Soviet army's Carpathian military district, as well as the US 7th Army in West Germany, had been put on alert. Interview by Gen. Milan Zdímal with Vojtěch Mencl, 26 February 1991, ÚSD.

11. East German memorandum on conversation with Grinevskii about the ENDC, 26 February 1968, G-A 552, MfAA. Statement by Ceaușescu at the party plenum, 1 March 1968, quoted in Mihai Retegan, *In the Shadow of the Prague Spring: Romanian Foreign Policy and the Crisis in Czechoslovakia, 1968* (Iași: Center for Romanian Studies, 2000), 73. Ceaușescu's remark according to information by the International Department of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, February 1968, *Mezinárodní souvislosti československé krize 1967-1970: Prosinec 1967-červenec 1968* [The International Ramifications of the Czechoslovak Crisis, 1957-1970: December 1967-July 1968], eds. Jitka Vondrová, Jaromír Navrátil, et al. (Brno, 1995), 54-61, at 59-60.



Figure 1: Romanian leader Nicolae Ceaușescu, taken by surprise by the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, acted to deter similar Soviet action against his own country.

as a more imminent and less predictable threat than NATO. Moscow therefore tried to rally its faithful, not only behind its project for revitalization of the Warsaw Pact, but also behind its call for a conference of the world's Communist parties, intended to blackball the Chinese. At the preparatory meeting for the conference held in Budapest, Moscow staged a denunciation of the Romanian policy that prompted Ceaușescu to walk out in anger and vow to never again attend "any meeting where there are no conditions for a free and democratic exchange of opinion."¹²

Taking him at his word, the Warsaw Pact's Soviet operators proceeded to isolate Romania. They persuaded the East European chiefs of staff to support, against Bucharest's unrelenting opposition, the establishment of new Warsaw Pact institutions that would ensure subordination of its national armies to Soviet command. The Political Consultative Committee's meeting in Sofia approved

12. Minutes of Romanian politburo meeting, 29 February 1968, CC CPR, Chancellery, 30/1868, ANIC.

a common position on the nonproliferation treaty at a separate session to which the Romanians had not been invited. Grechko was right in assuring the Soviet politburo that the alliance could function perfectly well without them.¹³

On 13 March the ENDC reported out the finished text of the NPT, prepared jointly by Washington and Moscow, and made it ready to be signed. Only now did the Kremlin turn its attention to the accelerating developments in Czechoslovakia. There anti-Soviet sentiment had been rising after the replacement of the Moscow stalwart Antonín Novotný by the unfamiliar and untested Dubček as the party chief. At the meeting of the Warsaw Pact heads of state, minus Ceaușescu, in Dresden, gathered there to warn Prague against letting developments get out of hand, the supreme Soviet leader Leonid I. Brezhnev invoked alleged turmoil in the Czechoslovak army, deterioration of its combat readiness, and public criticism in the country of its Soviet alliance.¹⁴

Brezhnev's spurious allegations were intended to push Dubček on the defensive and prompt him to put his house in order rather than convey any justified Soviet concern about Czechoslovakia slipping out of the Warsaw Pact. At its confrontational Sofia meeting, Dubček firmly supported Soviet positions against the Romanians and distanced himself from any ideas about the reform of the alliance other than Moscow's own. He declared that, "as far as we are concerned, our security has already been effectively guaranteed by the nuclear power of the USSR."¹⁵

Despite Brezhnev's proclaimed misgivings about the alarming condition of the Czechoslovak military, he abstained conspicuously from making an issue of the recent embarrassing defection to the West of Gen. Jan Šejna, a Novotný protégé who had been the head of the party organization at the Prague defense ministry. Although the general would boast to anyone who would listen about his familiarity with the Kremlin's most secret war plans, he had in fact not been privy to any information that could diminish Soviet security. On the contrary, his escapade had the opposite effect, by giving the conservative majority of the Czechoslovak officer corps a powerful incentive to display their loyalty to Moscow.¹⁶

13. "Notatka o wynikach narady szefów sztabów generalnych armii państw-cz onków Układu Warszawskiego" [Note on the Results of the Conference of the Chiefs of Staff of the Member States of the Warsaw Treaty], 29 February-1 March 1968, KC PZPR 2663, 366-80, AAN. Information by Dubček at Czechoslovak party presidium meeting, 8 March 1968, in Vondrová, *Mezinárodní souvislosti, prosinec 1967-červenec 1968*, 66-65, at 65. Rudolf G. Pikhovia, "Чехословакия, 1968 год: Взгляд из Москвы: По документам ЦК КПСС" [Czechoslovakia, 1968: The View from Moscow in CC CPSU Documents], *Novaia i noveisbaia istoriia*, 1994, no. 6: 3-20, at 8.

14. Stenographic record of the Dresden meeting, 23 March 1968, Vondrová, *Mezinárodní souvislosti, prosinec 1967-červenec 1968*, 73-117, at 86-87.

15. "Varšavská smlouva a ČSSR" [The Warsaw Treaty and Czechoslovakia], MNO-1969, sekr. min. 2/1-9, VÚA. Speech by Dubček, 6 March 1968, AÚV KSČ, 02/, 4011/26, SÚA.

16. Report by Gen. Smoldas to the Military Council of the Ministry of National Defense on the Šejna case, 11 June 1968, Benčík, *Vojenské otázky*, 146-60.

When the Soviet party central committee reviewed the situation on 9–10 April, Brezhnev still had harsher words to say about Romania and China than about Czechoslovakia. Nevertheless, as a precaution against the increasingly probable further deterioration in the country, already on 4 April the Moscow politburo had authorized Grechko to start preparations for intervening there by military force should this become necessary. The defense minister issued the first secret orders to that effect on 8 April. The internal evidence of Soviet decision-making shows, however, that there was no straight road to their implementation.¹⁷

THE INVASION

The preparations went ahead after the nonproliferation treaty had been set on course toward its signing while Marshal Ivan I. Iakubovskii, the supreme commander of the Warsaw Pact, embarked upon intensive lobbying in support of its reform as desired by Moscow. During April, he rushed from one Eastern European capital to another, Bucharest excluded, talking to the local leaders and soliciting their cooperation. The Czechoslovak situation and its military repercussions intruded inevitably into their conversations as well.

On his first stop, Warsaw, Iakubovskii found the Polish party secretary Władysław Gomułka extremely agitated about what had been happening next door. An obsessive Germanophobe, Gomułka fretted about supposed chaos within the Czechoslovak army that, he claimed, left the country's borders with West Germany "practically open." "Hence it is appropriate," he told the Soviet visitor point blank, "to consider, within the framework of the Warsaw Treaty, the occupation of Czechoslovakia by Soviet forces"—the first such statement on record, yet not one coming out of a Soviet mouth. At the same time, feeling about Germans the way he did, Gomułka advised against using any East German troops in such an operation.¹⁸

Iakubovskii went to East Berlin next. There Walter Ulbricht, the party head, was no less upset than Gomułka about the developments close by. He was delighted to hear from the guest that the Soviet Union intended to press Czechoslovakia for permission to stage big Warsaw Pact maneuvers on its territory. The plan was to use massive presence of foreign troops in the country to intimidate the Dubček regime and make it abandon its reformist course. As an improvement on the plan, Ulbricht offered to doctor for publication some of the documents obtained by his spies about NATO's forthcoming exercise,

17. Mark Kramer, "Soviet-Romanian Relations and the Warsaw Pact: Repercussions from the Czechoslovak Crisis," paper presented at the conference "NATO, the Warsaw Pact, and the Rise of Détente, 1965–1972," Dobbiaco, 26–28 September 2002, 27. Mark Kramer, "The Czechoslovak Crisis and the Brezhnev Doctrine," in *1968: The World Transformed*, eds. Carole Fink, Philipp Gassert, and Detlev Junker (Cambridge, 1998), 111–71, at p 133. Benčík, *Vojenské otázky*, 239.

18. Minutes of the Iakubovskii-Gomułka meeting, 19 April 1968, KC PZPR, 2663, 412–17, AAN.

“Fallex-68,” to make them appear as if the enemy had been plotting a surprise attack, and thus make a better case for moving in if intimidation failed. Iakubovskii promised to examine the bright idea, but did not endorse it. He had to take into account the coincidence of the NATO exercise with huge Warsaw Pact maneuvers scheduled to be held in the Baltic at the same time that might make the case less convincing.¹⁹

In Hungary, Iakubovskii found its crafty leader János Kádár evasive about the reform proposals, particularly those that could be interpreted as allowing the Warsaw Pact’s Soviet supreme commander to dispatch troops into the territories of its member states without their permission. Pleading that he had not had enough time to look at the papers, Kádár procrastinated. He tried to convince Iakubovskii that preventing a break with Romania, which could mean the end of the alliance, was more urgent than the situation in Czechoslovakia. Afterward the marshal departed for Prague.²⁰

Iakubovskii had little difficulty in getting Czechoslovak endorsement of the proposed reorganization of the Warsaw Pact. But defense minister Gen. Martin Dzúr balked at having its troops exercise in the country any time soon. An accomplished opportunist, he did not object out of any sympathy with the ideas of his reform-minded colleagues but, on the contrary, because the exercise, by being too provocative, was likely to make them more attractive. Not too much of Brezhnev’s arm-twisting was subsequently required to obtain Dubček’s consent to the maneuvers during his visit to Moscow on 4–5 May. There was an ominously patronizing message in Brezhnev’s reminding his interlocutor that, “when your army is being weakened, this is not and cannot be a purely internal matter. We count on your [army’s] strength, just as you rely on the might of the Soviet Union.”²¹

Moscow had thus far not chosen to pretend that NATO was positioning itself to take advantage of the Czechoslovak situation, as Ulbricht had envisaged pretending in his proposal. Doing so would have been less credible after the United States had just announced the reduction of its forces in Germany by thirty-five thousand and the withdrawal of 96 of its 216 tactical aircraft. At the joint meeting on 6 May of the Soviet politburo and the defense ministry’s Military Council, which gave a go-ahead to the Czechoslovak maneuvers, the discussion was not about NATO but about the future of “socialism” in the country. Foreign Minister Andrei A. Gromyko expressed concern that if Czechoslovakia did not

19. Minutes of the Iakubovskii-Ulbricht meeting, 21 April 1968, AZN 32921, 164–75, BA-MA.

20. Record of the meeting at the Czechoslovak General Staff with Hungarian colonel Fazekás, 25 June 1968, GŠ-OŠ 1968, 0036049/3, VÚA.

21. Report by Dzúr to the Czechoslovak party presidium, 30 April 1968, Benčík, *Vojenské otázky*, 11–12. Antonín Benčík, *Rekviem za Pražské jaro* [Requiem for the Prague Spring] (Třebíč, 1998), 38. Stenographic account of the Soviet-Czechoslovak summit meeting, 4–5 May 1968, in *The Prague Spring 1968: A National Security Archive Documents Reader*, eds. Jaromír Navrátil et al. (Budapest, 1998), 114–25, at 118.

reverse its course it might end up as another Romania, causing the Warsaw Pact to break apart, as Kádár thought might happen because of Romania.²² In any case, the danger of the breakup was from within.

The maneuvers, codenamed “Šumava” (*Böhmerwald*), were staged to demonstrate that the Czechoslovak army was not up to its task—perhaps the only military exercise in history meant to show that forces taking part in it were *not* ready to fight. Not surprisingly, since the Soviet organizers “shrouded in secrecy the actual plan of action,” chaos ensued. The movement of Polish troops, for example, interfered with that of a Czechoslovak reconnaissance battalion. Reports by Polish and Hungarian generals who were present concur in their descriptions of a “very unpleasant, strained, nervous, and confrontational atmosphere.” A “grotesque” situation was created by Iakubovskii’s failure to discuss with the allied commanders either their assignments or the results of the exercise. The marshal kept grimly aloof, except when posing with others for pictures or eating meals in the officers’ mess.²³

“Šumava’s” scenario, which can be reconstructed from records in Polish, Czech, Hungarian, and former East German archives, was suitably absurd. It presumed a surprise attack by twenty Western divisions, including an Italian and an Austrian army corps, in the directions of Olomouc, Prague, and Dresden, with as many as 483 nuclear bombs blasting around. No more than eight Czechoslovak divisions, expected to hold the line pending the arrival of reinforcements, would initially oppose the assault. Despite the defenders’ certain failure—which was to be demonstrated—the exercise would still build up into the same reassuring finale as other Warsaw Pact exercises. A lightning Soviet-Polish counter-offensive, launched on the third or fourth day of hostilities and reaching the Lunéville-Basel-Singen line by the sixth day, would smite the enemy in short order and crown the advancing armies with victory.

On the more practical side, the war game anticipated the true target of the possible future operation against Czechoslovakia by specifying the assignments of the units that were earmarked to take part in it. Besides Soviet and Polish units, these were East Germany’s 7th armored division and 11th motorized rifle division. The former was to be prepared to move into northern Bohemia, the latter toward Pilsen in the west of the country.²⁴

22. Final Report on Trilateral Talks, undated [April-May 1968], *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. 13, 562–70, at 566–67. Pikhovia, “Чехословакия, 1968 год,” *Novia i noveisbaia istoriia* 1994, No. 6: 3–20, at 14–15.

23. “Notatka służbowa dotycząca ćwiczenia operacyjno-strategicznego ‘SZUMAWA’” [Service Memorandum Concerning the Operational and Strategic Exercise “Šumava”], by Gen. Tadeusz Tuczapski, July 1968, KC PZPR 2663, 419–24, AAN. Report by generals István Oláh and Ferenc Szücs to the Hungarian politburo, 5 July 1968, Benčík, *Vojenské otázky*, 200–207, at 205.

24. Final report by Gen. Keßler on the “Šumava” exercise, July 1968, and report to the National Defense Council by Gen. Hoffmann, 29 July 1968, AZN 32921, 2–18 and 32–52, BA-MA.

Although Grechko, in his briefing of the Soviet politburo, pronounced the Czechoslovak army “no longer capable of defending the border” with West Germany, “Šumava” offered no conclusive proof of whether it was any more capable or incapable than it had always been. What the maneuvers did prove, however, was how uncertain the capability of the Warsaw Pact as a whole was to perform effectively if worst come to worst. Hungarian generals István Oláh and Ferenc Szücs reported to Budapest that their experience from the exercise had confirmed in their minds how untenable the “shortcomings, ambiguities, and unfinished parts” of the compact that bound the alliance together were. “The experience has shown convincingly,” the officers concluded, “that trying to keep them as they are would lead, sooner or later, to a decline in the credibility of the Soviet Union and the weakening of the Treaty.”²⁵

Afterward, while still envisaging the intervention in Czechoslovakia as a pro forma Warsaw Pact operation, Moscow thought it wise to rely in its execution overwhelmingly on its own troops and mainly symbolic Polish, East German, Hungarian, and Bulgarian contingents. It entrusted the command to Gen. Ivan G. Pavlovskii, an outsider to the alliance, rather than to Iakubovskii, a man remembered by some of his former Polish subordinates as “often rude [and] . . . quite simple, to put it delicately.”²⁶

Apart from “Šumava’s” failure to reverse the Czechoslovak developments, nothing had happened inside or outside the country that would have given the Kremlin a cause for concern about NATO’s conduct. On the contrary, responding to public pressure for cuts in defense spending, its June ministerial meeting sent Moscow the “Reykjavik signal,” indicating Western readiness to negotiate about mutual and balanced reductions of conventional forces. Although this was no time for the Soviet Union to talk about any reduction of its forces, which were being amassed to be ready for action against one of its own allies, at least the signal was reassuring about the West’s desire to seek Soviet cooperation on arms control. Similarly reassuring was the signing on 1 July of the nonproliferation treaty by sixty-one nations, including Romania.²⁷

President Johnson justly regarded the NPT as a towering achievement of his administration. He was now ready to move beyond the U.S.-Soviet agreement on limited nuclear testing toward a comprehensive test ban treaty, and wanted to send a proposal to that effect to the ENDC. But he decided not to send it after the Joint Chiefs of Staff objected, on the dubious grounds that continued

25. Pikhoina, “Чехословакия, 1968 год,” *Novia i noveisbaia istoriia* 1994, No. 6: 3–20, at 16. Report by generals István Oláh and Ferenc Szücs to the Hungarian politburo, 5 July 1968, Benčík, *Vojenské otázky*, 200–207, at 205 and 207.

26. Interviews with generals Florian Siwicki, 7 March 2000, and Wojciech Jaruzelski, 15 December 1999, PHP website, http://www.isn.ethz.ch/php/documents/collection_9/texts/Personalities.htm.

27. Declaration on Mutual and Balanced Force Reductions, 25 June 1968, *Texts of Final Communiqués, 1949–1974* (Brussels: NATO Information Service, n.d.), 209–10. Dimitris Bourantonis, “The Negotiation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, 1965–1968,” *International History Review* 19 (1997): 347–57.

nuclear testing was indispensable for the nation's security. They argued that it would be embarrassing if Washington found itself confronted by "Soviet acceptance of such a proposal at a most disadvantageous time for the U.S." The Atomic Energy Commission concurred, citing the even more dubious reason that its commitment to the production of both offensive and defensive nuclear weapons, which required the testing, just needed to be kept.²⁸

The episode was significant in showing how much Washington's policy, beholden to the dynamics of nuclear weapons development, became disconnected from the political dynamics of East-West rivalry during the mounting Czechoslovak crisis. Interpreting the rivalry in terms of the potential to wage an imaginary nuclear war prevented 1968 from becoming a turning point in the arms race that it might otherwise have been. The NPT, as well as the Limited Test Ban Treaty, henceforth influenced but marginally the superpowers' strategic relationship. Ironically, though, they turned out to be the only major arms control agreements of the Cold War era that survived it, retaining their relevance despite the radical change of the international environment.

Moscow's strategic thinking in 1968, preoccupied intensely with the real rather than imaginary balance, was closer to the ground than Washington's, yet still far from focused. On 2–3 July, the Kremlin leaders pondered the question of whether or not they should send troops into Czechoslovakia, but could not make up their minds. Ambassador to Prague Stepan V. Chervonenko favored using political means, but Gromyko did not believe a solution without force was possible anymore. Brezhnev, characteristically, hesitated.²⁹

Turning the political screws first, Moscow on 14–15 July gathered its faithful allies in Warsaw—excluding Romania and Czechoslovakia, which, having declined the invitation, subsequently received from them a stern warning to mobilize its "healthy forces" against the supposed onslaught of "counter-revolution." During the preceding discussion, Gomułka summed up the consensus of the "Five" that at issue was the future of "socialism" in the country, not the defense of its borders against Western aggressors. He noted that "the Soviet Union and the power of its nuclear weapons is what keeps the imperialist world on reins." If there was nevertheless a threat to the Warsaw Pact, this was because "the Czechoslovak comrades . . . stopped consulting with us on important matters." That alone was enough reason to justify the use of force. At the meeting, Bulgaria's Todor Zhivkov was the next to advocate that option after Gomułka had first recommended it to Iakubovskii in April.³⁰ The Soviet clients were more frightened, as well as less inhibited, than the patron.

28. Lyndon B. Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963–1969* (New York, 1971), 462. "Background Paper: Comprehensive Test Ban," 17 February 1969, NSSM 20, 4–5, RG-273, NARA.

29. Pikhovia, "Чехословакия, 1968 год," 19–20.

30. Minutes of the meeting of the Five, 14–15 July 1968, Vondrová, *Mezinárodní souvislosti, prosinec 1967–červenec 1968*, 269–96, quotes at 275–76.

The “Warsaw letter” had the opposite effect than intended. No sooner did it reach Prague than Gen. Václav Prchlík, whose responsibility was—of all things—the security department of the Czechoslovak party central committee, gave vent to his indignation during his loose talk with journalists that promptly leaked out. Lashing at the Warsaw Pact as an unequal treaty, he cited as examples some of its documents officially classified as secret. An infuriated Iakubovskii fired off a protest to Dubček, and the conservative majority of the Czechoslovak officer corps meekly agreed that the general had overstepped the boundaries of propriety. The Military Council of the ministry of defense condemned Prchlík’s statement as unhelpful to strengthening the alliance and friendship with its members. Džúr, the minister, chimed in that “the Soviet Union rightly calls attention to the anti-Soviet attacks in our country and cannot tolerate there a development that would take it on an anti-socialist road.”³¹

When the Soviet politburo reconvened on 19 July, the nervous Brezhnev still preferred a political solution, fearing that an invasion might provoke a military conflict with the West. But Gromyko reassured the group that “there is no danger of a large-scale war now. The situation is favorable in this respect. However, if we let Czechoslovakia go, others might be tempted, too. Keeping it will make us stronger. The international situation has no surprises in store for us right now.” Gromyko was in a position to know. In the preceding year alone, the Soviet intelligence had been able to read secret communications in seventy-two countries around the world, in 152 cipher systems, and decode 188,400 telegrams. Only now did this become topical, supplementing the pressure on Prague with fabricated evidence about NATO taking advantage of the turmoil in the country—as Ulbricht had recommended in April.³²

Documents from NATO archives leave no doubt that the Western alliance was well aware of the military buildup that had been going on all this time in its vicinity. On 25 July, the chairman of its Military Committee determined that Soviet forces are “well placed to intervene militarily and . . . their state of preparedness is such that it is unlikely that we would obtain any advanced warning of a Soviet military intervention in Czechoslovakia.” But the alliance’s Political Committee saw no reason for concern, since there was “no evidence that the Soviet Union and her allies either planned recent events as a cover for a buildup or that they have any intention of using their improved position to launch

31. Benčík, *Vojenské otázky*, 233–37, 241–43. Antonín Benčík, *Operace “Dunaj”: Vojáci a Pražské jaro 1968: Studie a dokumenty* [Operation “Danube”: The Military and the 1968 Prague Spring: Studies and Documents] (Prague: Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR, 1994), 64–65.

32. Pikhoiá, “Чехословакия, 1968 год,” *Novia i noveishaia istoriia* (1995) no. 1: 34–47, at 35. Annual KGB report by Andropov to Brezhnev, 6 May 1968, *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 10: 211–17, at 214.

an attack in the Central Region.” If the target had been NATO, its experts reasoned, the intelligence coming in would have been different. In this, they were right.³³

What was not right was the prevailing Western estimate of Moscow’s intentions toward Czechoslovakia—the reason for NATO’s failure to anticipate the possibility that the Soviet Union might decide to move against its ally after all. Most experts remained convinced that it would not do so but rather “draw back in the last resort from the use of force to bring the Czechoslovaks into line.” As the perceptive U.S. ambassador to Prague Jacob Beam put it, “Because we were acting on a strategy based on the concept that the Czechs discouraged Western intervention, and because the Western countries considered such a policy the least likely to provoke Soviet resort to force, there were no plans at hand to deal with the Soviet attack.” The plans assumed that intervention would only become topical if Czechoslovakia were to leave the Warsaw Pact—of which there were no signs—or if the future of its “socialist” system were in doubt, which was a matter of interpretation and the reason why the men in the Kremlin had in fact not yet decided to move. The crucial flaw in the West’s reasoning was the belief that the Soviet decision about whether or not to move depended on the West’s own behavior.³⁴

Crude Soviet allegations that caches of arms of American manufacture destined for “counterrevolutionaries” had been found in a drainage pipe under a road in western Czechoslovakia incensed the U.S. government. On 22 July, Secretary of State Dean Rusk summoned Soviet ambassador Anatolii F. Dobrynin to dress him down. He reminded the envoy that, much though the American people sympathized with the Czechoslovak reformers, the American government had been restrained in reacting to the developments in the country. About what else the secretary may have told the ambassador, the U.S. and Soviet accounts of their conversation differ.

According to the American note taker, Rusk stated that “the U.S. Government had not sought to involve itself in this situation,” and cited Thomas Jefferson affirming “the right of peoples to order their own affairs themselves.” According to the Soviet transcript, however, the secretary qualified his statement by saying that “this is a matter for the Czechs first and foremost. Apart from that, it is a matter for the Czechs and the other nations of the Warsaw Pact.” Whatever details each side may have deemed suitable to include or exclude to embellish its own record, the American document can be relied upon

33. “Preliminary Staff Evaluation of AC/237-Warsaw Pact/34 (Revised),” IMSWM-259-68, 23 September 1968, IMS, NATO-A. 20 September 1968, MCM-70-68 rev., IMSWM-258-68, IMS.

34. G. Bennett and K.A. Hamilton, eds., *Documents on British Foreign Policy Overseas*, series III, vol. 1: *Britain and the Soviet Union, 1968–1972* (London, 1997), 65. Jacob Beam, *Multiple Exposure: An American Ambassador’s Unique Perspective on East-West Issues* (New York, 1978), 197. Robert Ranger, “NATO’s Reaction to Czechoslovakia: The Strategy of Ambiguous Response,” *The World Today* 25, no. 1 (January 1969): 19–26, at 22.

in describing Dobrynin as being “considerably worried . . . most likely by the general state of affairs in regard to Czechoslovakia . . . [and] distinctly not his usual genial self.”³⁵

Worried certainly were the politburo members who gathered in Moscow on that same day, and again on 26 and 27 July. In the end, they decided to provisionally set the date of the invasion for mid-August, but still pursue the political option along with the military one. During the bizarre tête-à-tête of the top Soviet and Czechoslovak leaders, from 29 July to 1 August, inside a railroad car on a siding at the border station of Čierna nad Tisou, Premier Aleksei Kosygin did his best to manipulate the NATO bugaboo. He asked Dubček insidiously: “Do you guarantee that the NATO countries will not bring their troops up to the [Czechoslovak] border tomorrow?” Although nobody could give such a guarantee, U.S. and West German troops had in fact recently been brought *away* from that border, so they would be one less pretext for bringing the Soviet troops up to it.³⁶

At first, Kosygin’s tactics seemed to work. Both delegations left the meeting convinced that the other side would act as they hoped it would. On the premise that a political solution was in the making, the Soviet foreign ministry sent word to its ambassadors in Warsaw Pact capitals that “the two delegations had reached an agreement.” Polemics ceased, and Soviet leaders were getting ready to leave for holidays. But once they realized that their Czechoslovak counterparts were not doing anything that would appease them—because of Dubček’s ineptitude rather any intention to defy Moscow—on 6 August they decided to go ahead with a full-scale invasion, barring an eleventh-hour turnabout in Prague.³⁷

All this time, NATO had been watching closely and concluding correctly that, notwithstanding those weapons in the drainage pipe, there had not been any Soviet cover-up for a possible intervention. On 19 August, the alliance’s high command (SHAPE) noted that “Soviet forces still preserve a posture which enables them to intervene at short notice,” although the best political judgment in the NATO headquarters still was that they would not. By then, this judgment was wrong—but barely so, for it was only the day before that the final green light had been given at a hastily convened meeting of the “Five” in Moscow. NATO was not alone in making a wrong last-minute estimate; so did Ceaușescu, a master reader of the Soviet mind. Fresh from a visit to Prague, on 17 August he gave an upbeat report to his politburo, assuring it that he had

35. Soviet note to Czechoslovak government, 20, July 1968, Vondrová, *Mezinárodní souvislosti, prosinec 1967–červenec 1968*, 331–33. Memorandum of Rusk-Dobrynin conversation, 22 July 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1969, vol. 17, 212–14. Pikhoia, “Чехословакия, 1968 год,” *Novaia i noveisbaia istoriia* 1995, no. 1: 34–47, at 36.

36. *Ibid.*, 37. Record of the Cierna negotiations, 29 July 1968, Navrátil, *The Prague Spring*, 284–97, at 296.

37. Pikhoia, “Чехословакия, 1968 год,” *Novaia i noveisbaia istoriia* 1995, no. 1: 34–47, at 38. Kramer, “The Czechoslovak Crisis,” 151.

found no creeping “counter-revolution” in Czechoslovakia, and, hence, presumably no grounds for a Soviet intervention either.³⁸

The surprise achieved by the invaders when they struck on 20 August is a sobering reminder that even with abundant and accurate intelligence it is extremely difficult to ascertain an adversary’s intentions if he is himself undecided about those intentions. And it is all but impossible to ascertain them in time if the interval between the final decision and its execution is too short. Surprise, however, is seldom decisive in warfare, and this time, too, it brought no substantial benefit to the aggressor. No sooner did the invading troops start moving than the proverbial “fog of war” enveloped them, confounding not only Western but also Soviet expectations, albeit differently.

THE CONSEQUENCES

NATO’s files show the surprise to have been political and tactical rather than strategic. Its officials had been aware all along that Soviet forces were poised to attack Czechoslovakia and could do so without much advance warning but were not positioning themselves to attack NATO. If they were about to do this, at least some warning would have occurred, concluded its supreme commander, Gen. Lyman L. Lemnitzer. Another ex post analysis supported his conclusion by elaborating, somewhat pedantically but correctly, that Czechoslovakia had “had ample political warning, but NATO [had] . . . not had political warning of an attack against NATO. However, had the tension been between NATO and the Warsaw Pact, NATO also would have had ample political warning.”³⁹

In a tribute to the NATO officer corps as a product of free societies, many local commanders took precautions on their own initiative—something that their Warsaw Pact opposite numbers would have hardly dared to do in a similar situation. West Germany, Norway, Denmark, and the Netherlands had all their key commanders on duty and troops combat-ready. The United States forces in Germany were at their normal 80 percent strength, on a two-hour move-out alert. And much of the Greek army was actually on a war footing, since it happened to be taking part in a major NATO exercise, “Deep Furrow.” Despite the surprise at the headquarters, the alliance’s national armies were thus not nearly so unprepared as critics would have it.⁴⁰

38. “Preliminary Staff Evaluation of AC/237-Warsaw Pact/34 (Revised),” IMSWM-259-68, 20 September 1968, IMS, NATO-A. Pikhōia, “Чехословакия, 1968 год,” *Novaia i noveisbaia istoriia* 1995, no. 1: 34–47, at 44. Minutes of Romanian politburo session, 17 August 1968, CC PCR, folder 131/1968, 4–10, ANIC.

39. “Analysis of Recent Soviet Actions in Czechoslovakia from a Military Point of View,” 20 September 1968, MCM-70-68 rev., IMSWM-258-68, IMS, NATO-A.

40. Summary record of the second special meeting of the Military Committee, 21 August 1968, MC-210868 SPEC-2, IMS, NATO-A. For criticism of a “problematic nature of NATO crisis management during the Prague Spring,” based on U.S. rather than NATO sources, see John G. McGinn, “The Politics of Collective Inaction: NATO’s Response to the Prague Spring,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 1, no. 3 (1999): 111–38.



Figure 2: Anti-NATO demonstrators in the Netherlands are unimpressed by the threat of a Soviet offensive against Western Europe.

And yet, there was more than just a whiff of queasy feeling when NATO's Military Council first convened the day after the invasion started. Adm. Murdoch of the Canadian navy saw the "nearest parallel to a catastrophe facing NATO" since the 1956 Soviet invasion of Hungary had caught it napping. The lack of contingency plans for what actually happened meant, for example, that there were no guidelines about how to handle a possible massive influx of

refugees across the Czechoslovak border into West Germany. Luckily for NATO, no such influx took place.⁴¹

More disconcertingly, since no emergency had been expected, three of NATO's top officials were vacationing when the invasion started, one out of reach cruising on a pleasure boat without a radio. The alliance's monitoring system became strained, though not paralyzed, by the overflow of incoming information and spillover from Soviet jamming of Czechoslovak communication channels. The reason for delay in passing on intercepts was the dispatchers' opinion that there was no urgency. As a result, the headquarters first learned of the invasion from the wire services. Even the next day, the Situation Center still relied "entirely on information received from the Associated Press, with the exception of one report from SHAPE that three NATO radar stations in West Germany had been buzzed by Soviet aircraft."⁴²

This was a minor embarrassment, however, compared with the one that occurred across the Atlantic. When Dobrynin, having urgently requested an appointment with Johnson at the White House, read to him Kosygin's message certifying that the troops marching against Czechoslovakia were not marching against NATO, the president appeared to be at a loss understanding what it was all about. Having been under the impression that the envoy had come to fix a date for a summit with Kosygin that Johnson wanted badly, he bantered jovially with the visitor. Bringing up the summit issue time and again, he finally dismissed Dobrynin with a casual promise to give him a reply about Czechoslovakia later. The Russian was flabbergasted. "The most remarkable thing about . . . the developments in Washington throughout the evening," he later reminisced, "was that Johnson, in spite of everything, was still hoping for a meeting in Moscow" at the highest level. Not until the National Security Council assembled for an emergency session later in the day was the president enlightened by his advisers about the full import of what was going on at NATO's Central Front. It was not his finest hour.⁴³

Moscow's handling of the invasion may seem impressive by comparison. The Soviet military has been usually judged as having done a creditable job, even while its political masters botched theirs by assuming that a puppet government could be installed in Prague with ease, only to find themselves compelled to

41. Summary record of the first special meeting of the Military Committee, 21 August 1968, MC-210868 SPEC-1, IMS, NATO-A.

42. Ibid. Richard K. Betts, *Surprise Attack: Lessons for Defense Planning* (Washington, 1982), 83–85. See also Jon McLin, *NATO and the Czechoslovakian Crisis, part 2: Invasion, Reaction, and Stocktaking*, American Universities Field Staff, West Europe Series, vol. 4, no. 4 (Hanover, 1969).

43. Summary of the Johnson-Dobrynin-Rostow conversation, 20 August 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–68, vol. 17: 236–41; excerpts from letter by Johnson to Secretaries of State and Defense, NSSM 28, RG 273, NARA. Anatoly Dobrynin, *In Confidence: Moscow's Ambassador to America's Six Cold War Presidents* (New York, 1995), 180–81. A balanced interpretation of the record of the Johnson-Dobrynin meeting is in Thomas A. Schwartz, *Lyndon Johnson and Europe: In the Shadow of Vietnam* (Cambridge, 2003), 216–18.



Figure 3: Soviet tanks at Wenceslas Square in downtown Prague. Only retrospectively did the Soviet military try to justify the operation on dubious military grounds, besides the real political grounds.

reluctantly reinstate in office, at least temporarily, some of the very people they had tried to oust. Upon closer examination, however, the Soviet army's performance, too, left much to be desired.⁴⁴

As it was about to strike, the Soviet Union felt more vulnerable than NATO. Numbering half a million men and carrying huge amounts of ammunition, the invasion force was prepared for encountering resistance. To minimize its likelihood, the plan provided for a swift pincer movement aimed at isolating and neutralizing the bulk of the Czechoslovak army in the western part of the country. At the same time, in executing the plan, the invading troops were kept far enough from the West German border to allay any NATO fears that they might be on their way to crossing it. Airfields in the vicinity of that border were also conspicuously exempted from the list of airfields seized by airborne commandoes during the earliest hours of the invasion. Despite all these precautions, the Soviet High Command did not entirely rule out the possibility that NATO might move in to counter it. In that case, Grechko briefed his subordinates cryptically, "we would have to act in accordance with the situation."⁴⁵

44. Thomas W. Wolfe, *Soviet Power and Europe, 1945–1970* (Baltimore, MD, 1970), 473–74. Speech by Brezhnev at the meeting of the "Warsaw Five," 18 August 1968, in Navrátil, *The Prague Spring*, 395–99.

45. Fidler, *21.8.1968*, 124. S.M. Zolotov, "Шли на помощь друзьям" [They Went to Help Friends], *Voennostoricheskii zhurnal* 1994, no. 4: 14–23, at 18.

A Russian officer who was with the invading troops later described what this meant. He remembered having been instructed that “if you encounter any NATO forces, you are to stop immediately and hold fire until otherwise commanded. . . . Our objective is to take control of as much territory as possible. Let the diplomats decide later where the border will run between eastern and western Czechoslovakia. It is a matter of honor that eastern, socialist, Czechoslovakia should be larger than the western part.” If this remarkable testimony is accurate—it can be neither confirmed nor refuted from the documents that are under lock and key in the archives of the Russian defense ministry—it allows for the amazing conclusion that, if NATO had moved into Czechoslovakia, Moscow would have preferred the partition of the country rather than oppose the advancing enemy at the risk of war.⁴⁶

In the event, NATO did not move, the Prague leaders chose not to resist, and the Czechoslovak army obeyed Gen. Džúr’s orders to that effect, which earned him Moscow’s gratitude and continued stay in office for many years. Even so, the invaders had a hard time. The locals were quick to move road signs and were not helpful about giving directions. Soldiers went hungry because food trains were late. Helicopters landed in wrong places, the advancing columns failed to secure fuel depots, tanks and trucks got caught in bottlenecks. In combat conditions, much of the war machine would have run out of fuel very quickly, becoming a sitting duck for air interdiction by the enemy. This was the army supposed to be capable of reaching the Rhine in a week!⁴⁷

Nor did the operation prove Soviet ability to use the Warsaw Pact for effective military action, as some NATO experts were too ready to believe. The overwhelming bulk of the troops were Soviet, with but token representation of others. At the last moment, East German combat units were kept home lest the Czechs draw awkward comparisons with the intrusion by their Nazi predecessors. The Bulgarian troops had to be airlifted via the Ukraine to bypass unreliable Romania. The rank and file of the Polish and Hungarian troops grumbled and were sent home soon.⁴⁸

Once the Soviet forces were safely in control of Czechoslovak territory, showing no signs of wanting to move on, NATO faced the problem of what, if

46. Viktor Suvorov, *Освободитель* [The Liberator] (St. Petersburg, 1993), 175–76.

47. Leo Heiman, “Soviet Invasion Weaknesses,” *Military Review* 49, no. 8 (1969): 38–45.

48. Keßler to Honecker, 31 August 1968, VA-01/23454, 146–48, BA-MA. Rüdiger Wenzke, *Die NVA und der Prager Frühling 1968: Die Rolle Ulbrichts und der DDR-Streitkräfte bei der Niederschlagung der tschechoslowakischen Reformbewegung* (Berlin, 1995), 151–59. Kramer, “The Czechoslovak Crisis,” 164. At the 2002 NATO summit in Prague, Ceaușescu’s former aide Ion Iliescu, by then President of Romania, attempted to claim that in 1968 Romania “was commanded to come with tanks in order to end the Prague Spring [but] . . . refused.” Speech by Iliescu, *Prague Summit 2002: Selected Documents and Statements* (Brussels, 2002), 42.



Figure 4: Soviet forces advancing into Czechoslovakia. As the proverbial “fog of war” enveloped troops, their performance left much to be desired.

anything, it should do. Denmark’s Gen. I.J.D. Schroder thought it “would be inexplicable to the Soviets if no visible NATO reaction resulted.” Ambassador Beam later recalled that “the first thought was to limit the military repercussions, and this is what NATO was instructed to do in an early message which called for vigilance but not for a general alert.” The allies remained wary that Moscow might move somewhere else, particularly against Romania but possibly also Yugoslavia, Albania, Austria, or Finland.⁴⁹ This was the most immediate concern.

In coping with the challenge of being Moscow’s next possible target, Ceaușescu showed his sure grasp of Soviet mentality. He did not panic. As soon as the unexpected news from Czechoslovakia reached Bucharest, he convened his top aides and assured himself of their loyalty. Acting on the fair assumption

49. Summary record of the second special meeting of the Military Committee, 21 August 1968, MC-210868 SPEC-2, IMS, NATO-A. Beam, *Multiple Exposure*, 197. Memorandum for the Military Committee, 13 November 1968, IMSWM-308-68 (2nd Revised), IMS, NATO-A. “Possible NATO Precautionary and Counter Measures in the Event of Soviet Military Action against Certain European countries,” MCM-102-68, 18–20 December 1968, IMS, NATO-A.

that the Soviets were not going to invade as long as they were busy in Czechoslovakia, Bucharest on 21 August denounced publicly Moscow's action against an ally in concerned rather than indignant terms. At the same time, however, colorful documents now available from Romanian archives reveal that privately Ceaușescu's right-hand man Emil Bodnăraș minced no words telling the visiting Soviet politburo member Averkii B. Aristov that what Moscow had done was plain "stupid." "Does Soviet prestige mean nothing to you?" he harassed the Russian, eliciting from him but the lame explanation that all had been the result of Khrushchev's faults. "What should we learn from this?" Bodnăraș went on. "That we need to be careful. First it was Czechoslovakia, it might be our turn soon. We will take measures that we feel are warranted." Romania ostentatiously mobilized its ramshackle "workers' militia," which would have been no match to invading Soviet forces, assuming correctly that its resistance would not be tested.⁵⁰

On the next day, Bucharest continued to carry on its criticism out of public sight in messages to the invading "Five" deploring the intervention as a breach of the Warsaw Treaty, which was supposedly directed against Western "imperialists" rather than socialist friends. In a further calibrated assault on Soviet sensitivities, on 22 August the Romanian ambassador to Beijing met with Chinese foreign minister Chen Yi. The next day Premier Zhou Enlai, acting on Mao Zedong's specific instructions, was heard saying at a Romanian embassy reception that his country would stand by Romania against Soviet aggression—leaving the question how tantalizingly open. The day after, Ceaușescu met secretly with Josif Broz Tito of independent Communist Yugoslavia, to sound him out about supporting a proposal for an emergency meeting of Communist parties that would take Moscow to task.⁵¹

The Romanian sources show the Yugoslavs as having been skeptical about the wisdom of such a proposal. When Ceaușescu asked the pertinent question of whether they would receive Romanian troops if his country suffered Czechoslovakia's fate, Tito answered in the affirmative, but added that the troops would be disarmed and interned in camps. In this light, the Bucharest politburo took another look at the situation, and became more careful. Another Ceaușescu aide,

50. Record of the Romanian politburo meeting, 21 August 1968, Retegan, *In the Shadow of the Prague Spring*, 277–95. Record of the Bodnăraș-Aristov meeting at Mangalia, 21 August 1968. Thanks to Mircea Munteanu for providing the document and its translation.

51. Report by Hungarian embassy in Bucharest, 24 August 1968, translation, Z/M-30, ÚSD. Zhou's private assurances to the Romanian ambassador were reportedly more explicit than his statement at the embassy reception, according to testimonies by ambassadors Romulus Ioan Budura and Zhu Ankang, in *China and Eastern Europe, 1960s–1980s: Proceedings of the International Symposium, Beijing, 24–26 March 2004*, eds. Xiaoyuan Liu and Vojtech Mastny (Zurich: Center for Security Studies, 2004), 111, 116–117. Chen Delai at the conference, "Reviewing the Relations between China and East European Countries from the 1960s to the 1980s," Beijing, 24–26 March 2004. Chen Jian, "Sino-Soviet Relations after Czechoslovakia," paper presented at the conference, "NATO, the Warsaw Pact, and the Rise of Détente, 1965–1972," Dobbiaco, 26–28 September 2002, 5 and 7.

Gheorghe Stoica, spoke for the group by admitting candidly that “it is useless starting polemics, so to hell with them, they would anyway be full of perfidy and lies.” This applied to both sides, as Ceaușescu next sought out Soviet ambassador Basov to assure him of Romania’s loyalty to the Soviet alliance. More to the point, he added that, much though Romania disapproved of the treatment given to Czechoslovakia, it would not raise the issue with other Communist parties.⁵²

Not only China but, more importantly, the United States as well stood by Romania. This was not only because the strategically secondary country was of primary political importance because of its maverick status within the Soviet bloc, but also because the idealistic Czechoslovak Communists had shunned the United States as the bastion of capitalism, whereas the corrupt Romanian Communists had been currying American favor. After U.S. intelligence came to believe that it had detected ominous movements of Soviet troops near the Romanian border, Rusk on 28 August summoned Dobrynin to warn him against any Soviet action against Romania or, for that matter, West Berlin—a warning reinforced publicly by Johnson two days later. Although no evidence has been found that Moscow contemplated any such foolish action, another U.S. intelligence report a month later, suggesting that a Soviet move against Romania might be imminent, prompted an emergency session of NATO’s Military Committee.⁵³

The European allies, better attuned to what was happening on their continent than Americans often were, did not share Washington’s concern. They saw no preliminaries comparable to those that had preceded the operation against Czechoslovakia. The British intelligence did not detect any suspicious military movements near Romania’s Bulgarian border either, nor increased pressure on West Berlin. London perceived a mere Soviet “war of nerves” against Bucharest, as well as against Belgrade, while the Kremlin’s priority remained the elusive “normalization” of the Czechoslovak situation.⁵⁴

Rumors of a Soviet buildup in the Balkans did not go away. From a record in the Chinese Communist Party archives, we know that Chairman Mao confided in the visiting Albanian defense minister, Beqir Balluku, his worry that airborne Soviet forces might have sneaked into Bulgaria. The Albanian seconded him that there might be as many as forty thousand of them, donning Bulgarian uniforms to fool observers. But the good news, according to the chairman, was that Yugoslavia could now be counted as their two countries’ “indirect ally,” in the same category as Ceaușescu’s Romania and even Czecho-

52. Ion Gheorghe and Corneliu Soare, *Doctrina militară românească 1968–1969* [The Romanian Military Doctrine, 1968–1969] (Bucharest, 1999), 48–49. Minutes of Romanian politburo meeting, 25 August 1968, Retegan, *In the Shadow of the Prague Spring*, 226–41, at 237.

53. Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, 182–83. *New York Times*, 31 August 1968.

54. Summary record of special meeting of the Military Council, 25 September 1968, MC-250968-SPEC, IMS, NATO-A.

slovakia, where the hapless Dubček was still formally in charge. Mao's splendid isolation had evidently taken a toll on his judgment.⁵⁵

As rumors multiplied, even the usually clear-headed British apparently took seriously the report they received on 19 November from the respected Dutch intelligence services that 150,000 Soviet, Polish, and Hungarian troops would invade Romania four days later at 4 o'clock in the morning. Although London may have passed this information on to Bucharest, Ceaușescu kept his cool, probably because he knew better. All this time, he had been busy reassuring Moscow of his loyalty, with his representatives turning unusually cooperative during the final round of talks about the Warsaw Pact reform. The Soviet Union took note, and the Romanian war scare faded away.⁵⁶

In the months that followed the Czechoslovak invasion, NATO was not alone in being nervous about what the other side might do next. The Soviet Union, too, had reasons to be concerned, particularly about what practical consequences MC 14/3 might have on the Western military posture in view of the extension of the Soviet military perimeter in Central Europe. NATO's first instinctive reaction to the surprise it had suffered was taking the view that its own deployments and contingency plans must henceforth be guided solely by the estimates of enemy capabilities, not intentions—as if estimates of capabilities were fool-proof. The Military Committee commissioned studies to determine exactly how the East-West balance of forces had been altered, and what should be done about it.⁵⁷

East German intelligence files show that the Warsaw Pact was trying hard to find out what conclusions the adversary had reached. In the second half of October, its spies and their superiors monitored with some anxiety NATO's big annual maneuvers in Germany, "Fallex-68," assuming with good reason that these were a faithful reflection of the actual war plans. They were able to learn about as much as could be learned. According to a former high-ranking official in East Germany's intelligence service, Heinz Busch, one of its men was present on the spot, sending copies of documents from the maneuvers right to the Berlin headquarters via courier—the total of twenty-four films, "half of them Minox films with 50 frames." Interpreting the information thus received, the officials there, never far off in their thinking from that of their Soviet mentors, were reinforced in their belief that the adoption of flexible response made NATO more capable of waging a limited war to split the Warsaw Pact.⁵⁸

55. Minutes of Mao-Balluku conversation, 1 October 1968, *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 11: 156–57.

56. Martin Bright, "Revealed: Britain on Brink of War with the Soviet Union in 1968," *Observer*, 9 January 2000. No evidence substantiating the sensational title of this article has been found in the British archives.

57. Report by the Military Committee on the military implications of the invasion, IMSWM-270-68 (2nd Revised), 26 September 1968, IMS, NATO-A. Heuser, *NATO, Britain, France and the FRG*, 6.

58. Busch, "Militärspionage der DDR," 24. Report by Hoffmann for session of the National Defense Council, 21 November 1968, NVR, DVW1/39492, 13–26, BA-MA. "Die Kriegsdoktrinen der wichtigsten NATO-Staaten," November 1969, VA 32659, BA-MA.

In contrast with the prevailing Western estimates, NATO's enemies were far from dismissive of its capabilities. The East German chief of staff, Gen. Heinz Keßler, cautioned his subordinates not to think that NATO's intelligence was poor just because its leaders had been taken by surprise in Czechoslovakia. The manuals Moscow supplied to its allies drew a picture of the enemy officer corps as fully reliable, professionally competent, and staunchly anticommunist. They considered NATO's potential in Central Europe to be "very high"—not only because of superior Western technology and economic base, but also because of the "high moral and political potential of both the troops and the civilians."⁵⁹

Only retrospectively did the Soviet military try to justify the Czechoslovak intervention on dubious military grounds, besides the real political grounds. Gen. V.N. Ogarkov's remark a few weeks after the event, claiming that the country's occupation provided the Soviet army with a strategically important space where tactical and medium-range missiles could now be installed, was a description of the occupation's incidental military benefits rather than of its primary political motives. In any case, the Czechoslovak authorities had already agreed to the installation two years earlier, and never seriously opposed it.⁶⁰

While Western experts agonized about how the balance of military forces may have been changed in Soviet favor, the Soviets themselves could not be certain that the opposite had not happened. The forward deployment of the largely useless nuclear missiles was small consolation for the loss of an effective Czechoslovak army, previously a crucial link in the Warsaw Pact's western flank. After August 1968 that army was in shambles, disarmed, demoralized, and purged of some of its best officers, to be only gradually reconstituted as a mainly auxiliary force on the reasonable assumption that it could not be trusted. It never became what it used to be.⁶¹

When the North Atlantic Council reconvened in mid-November for its semiannual meeting, the sense of urgency had passed. It chose to condemn the Soviet Union for its aggression in less stringent terms than it might have done. Lest it send a wrong signal to the enemy, NATO nevertheless cancelled the ongoing and planned reductions of its conventional forces in Europe. At the council's meeting, Rusk pleaded for issuing a specific warning against any

59. Report by Keßler, undated [after 20 August 1968], AZN 32921, pp. 2–18, BA-MA. "Skupina armád a polní armáda v operacích počátečního období války" [The Army Group and the Army during the Initial Period of War Operations], Zprav-51–92, 124–34, Sbíрка čs. vojenských předpisů [The Collection of Czechoslovak Military Manuals], VÚA.

60. Ogarkov quoted in Jan Paulík, "Rozmístění sovětských intervenčních jednotek v Československu na podzim 1968 a jeho důsledky," [Deployment of the Soviet Intervention Forces in Czechoslovakia in the Fall of 1968 and Its Consequences], *Historie a vojenství* 43, no. 1 (1994): 37–76, at 41. Agreement on the stationing of Soviet nuclear forces, 13–14 November 1968, Rusov to Svoboda, November 1968, VS, OS-QL, čj. 00671/12, VÚA.

61. Jindřich Madry, "Sovětské zájmy v pojetí obrany Československa (1965–1970)" [Soviet Interests in the Concept of Czechoslovakia's Defense (1965–1970)], *Historie a vojenství* 1992, no. 5: 126–40.

aggression or provocation that would affect countries in the “gray” zone—Yugoslavia, Austria, Finland—but failed to convince the allies that this was necessary. The final communiqué included but a mild warning, while reaffirming NATO’s commitment to the Harmel Report, with its simultaneous objectives of defense and détente.⁶²

By then, according to the confidential information distributed within the Warsaw Pact, Soviet intelligence had found out enough about the outcome of NATO’s internal debate to become reassured by its assessment of the balance of forces.⁶³ Significantly for the adversaries’ mutual threat perceptions as well as the superpowers’ mutual desire to minimize the chances of a clash because of their allies’ deliberate or inadvertent action, the forces along the Czechoslovak-West German border were henceforth deployed in a reassuringly asymmetrical fashion. The eastern side continued to be manned, as before, by what was left of the Czechoslovak army, with superior Soviet troops now based behind it at a safe distance from the line, whereas on the western side of it the pattern was reversed. There the impressive U.S. forces took positions directly at the border and the capable West German Bundeswehr only in the rear. These were the revealing military dispositions marking the incipient period of détente.

The “Appreciation of the Military Situation as It Will Affect NATO through 1977,” prepared in December at the request of the alliance’s Defense Planning Committee, was somber but not alarmist. During the period, it anticipated no negotiated disarmament agreements that would alter the balance of forces, no major technological breakthroughs, and no drastic change of Soviet leadership—all assumptions to be proven correct. But it still attributed to the Warsaw Pact a “formidable capability to mount attacks on any scale, against any region or any number of regions of the NATO area,” against which defense would not be possible without the use of nuclear weapons, warning that improvements of the West’s conventional forces might not be enough—all incorrect assumptions. Not only would NATO’s improved conventional forces be sufficient to ensure its security, they would also be crucial in eventually impressing upon the Soviet Union that it could not prevail in the technological competition—as the prescient Gen. Rytíř had predicted.⁶⁴

If NATO’s response to the 1968 crisis was on the whole calm, reasonable, and ultimately effective—actually much more so than its progenitors dared to

62. Ranger, “NATO’s Reaction to Czechoslovakia,” 19–24.

63. KGB report on the reaction of NATO countries to the invasion of Czechoslovakia, 18 December 1968, Z/S-208, and “Názory členských vlád NATO na další vývoj vztahů mezi Východem a Západem” [Views of NATO Governments on the Further Development of East-West Relations], čj. 0042347, GŠ-ZS-1968, ÚSD.

64. “Appreciation of the Military Situation as it will Affect NATO through 1977,” IMSWM-208-68-REV-2 and IMSWM-208-68-REV-2-ADD-1, 2 December 1968, IMS, NATO-A. Cf. Vojtech Mastny, “Did NATO Win the Cold War? Looking over the Wall,” *Foreign Affairs* 78, no. 3 (May/June 1999): 176–89.

imagine in their wildest dreams—the same cannot be said about the strategic vision of the Nixon administration that came into power in January 1969. There was something frantic about Henry Kissinger, its national security adviser, ordering immediately first an “inventory” of the international situation and then a whole battery of studies on topics ranging from “NATO Policy Alternatives,” “East-West Relations and Their Perception by the USSR,” “U.S. Strategic Posture,” “How the Soviets View the Strategic Balance,” “Alternative Military Objectives, Forces and Budgets for General Purpose Forces,” and “Strategic Force Postures and National Security Interests and Objectives.” When completed, the last of those studies included such ominous caveats as “It should be noted that some of these objectives are incompatible,” or “It is not clear whether any of the alternatives would ensure the survival of Europe should deterrence fail.”⁶⁵

Despite such caveats, Washington deemed it appropriate to keep expanding the US nuclear arsenal. The new administration ruled out any reductions of the “MIRVs”—the “multiple independently targeted reentry vehicles” that were the worst proliferators of nuclear weaponry—or even cessation of their testing, on the spurious grounds that otherwise Moscow would not have enough incentive to negotiate. In late 1969 the two sides did start negotiating about strategic armaments, leading eventually to the SALT I treaty and a host of other arms control agreements that temporarily institutionalized superpower détente, but more permanently created a nuclear arms race within mutually agreed limits.

The nuclear impasse contrasted with the political dynamism sent into motion by the Czechoslovak crisis and its military implications in Europe. Only superficially can the invasion of Czechoslovakia be regarded as the event that allowed the Soviet Union to consolidate its grip on its restive dependencies. The March 1969 meeting of the Political Consultative Committee in Budapest that finally approved the restructuring and institutionalization of the Warsaw Pact desired by Moscow made the alliance into a more effective military instrument. Apart from the diminished relevance of this accomplishment at the time of rising détente, however, the approval had in any case been forthcoming already before the invasion, which had mainly helped in making the Romanians less obstructive in this, but not in other matters.⁶⁶

The Budapest meeting coincided with the Sino-Soviet border clashes that brought the two Communist powers closer to war than they had ever been before. When Soviet deputy foreign minister N.P. Firiubin called attention to

65. NSSM 6, NSSM 10, NSSM 3, RG-273, NARA. Quotes in “Summary Report on Strategic Force Postures and National Security Interests and Objectives,” by Political Evaluation Subgroup, 18 April 1969, NSSM 3.

66. On how the reform of the Warsaw Pact reflected successful features of NATO, see Vojtech Mastny, “Learning from the Enemy: NATO as a Model for the Warsaw Pact,” in *A History of NATO—The First Fifty Years*, ed. Gustav Schmidt, vol. 2 (New York, 2001), 157–77, at 163–70.

what had happened to elicit the allies' support or at least sympathy, his Romanian counterpart Mircea Malița invoked the provision in the Warsaw Treaty that limited its applicability to Europe. He blocked discussion on the subject, and the Soviet Union did not insist. The aggravation of the Chinese threat while the situation in Czechoslovakia was not yet "normalized" actually made Moscow more rather than less accommodating toward its allies.⁶⁷

The reform of the Warsaw Pact was not a simple Soviet diktat. It entailed concessions that gave its junior members a greater say in discussing, even though not deciding, substantive matters of common interest. The proclamation in the aftermath of the Czechoslovak crisis of the so-called "Brezhnev doctrine" was not the important innovation in the way the Soviet Union maintained its empire that uninformed Western observers believed it was. Moscow's affirmation of its supposed right to intervene militarily in any "socialist" country whenever it deemed the political system there might be in danger merely expressed verbally what the Kremlin had practiced before—but would never again practice in the region. The intervention in Czechoslovakia demonstrated the high political cost and doubtful military value of any repetition.⁶⁸

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Within the context of the emerging East-West détente, 1968 highlighted the growing divergence between the pointless U.S.-Soviet nuclear rivalry and the more important confrontation of the two military groupings in Europe. If the superpowers' strategic posturing was increasingly detached from reality, the effect of the Czechoslovak experience on the prospective European battlefield was real, if not immediately evident. The adversaries still kept planning for a military contingency in which they could use their conventional forces without having to resort to nuclear weapons, so that they could fight a war more safely. But the 1968 experience ensured that they never would.

The behavior of both sides in a confrontational situation proved to be a far cry from the scenarios for which they had been exercising. At a moment of truth, they both showed a prudent disposition to underestimate their own strength and overestimate the strength of the adversary. Their respective performances in the crisis invited the sobering conclusion that the war they had been preparing for was wrought with so many uncertainties that it could not be planned with any reliability.

This may seem to have been a heartening conclusion, and it was—in that it fostered the budding détente. But it was not so welcome to Soviet generals who,

67. Kruczkowski to Jędrychowski, 16 March 1969, DI-Og-0-2101-1-69, AMSZ. Record of Romanian politburo session, 16 March 1969, CC PCR, folder 16, ANIC. For records of the PCC meeting, see PHP website, <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/php>.

68. On the origin of the Brezhnev doctrine, Robin Alison Remington, ed., *Winter in Prague: Documents on Czechoslovak Communism in Crisis* (Cambridge, MA, 1969), 412–16, and on its further evolution, Matthew Ouimet, *The Rise and Fall of the Brezhnev Doctrine in Soviet Foreign Policy* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2003).

hostages to their offensive strategy, became conspicuous saboteurs of détente. This was not the case with their Western counterparts, who were bound to be less frustrated thanks to NATO's defensive strategy, and would soon have reasons to feel more comfortable as advances in Western military technology began to translate into advantages for the defense rather than the offense.

Although there would still be brushes with disaster during the remaining two decades of the Cold War, after 1968 neither side courted a disaster in Europe deliberately. Herein was the true significance of that year as a watershed—not on the way to the fragile détente that gave the moribund Soviet system a lease on life while prolonging the costly arms race, but beyond—on the way toward a different Europe that eventually emerged from the Cold War. This is the Europe of today—despite all its problems a model of sanity in thinking about security, and as such more stable and peaceful than it has ever been.

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