

30 YEARS OF REFORMS

PRAGUE SUMMER: 1968 INVASION OF CZECHOSLOVAKIA IN A HISTORICAL DETAIL

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Abstract

The invasion of Czechoslovakia was an extraordinary event in the history of the Warsaw Pact but not because it was not a repetition of sorts of the 1956 crackdown of the Hungarian Revolution of 1953 Berlin strikes and riots. It chanced the history of the ex-Communist countries: it was a technical “success” of the Soviet army, the other members of the Pact had played just a marginal role. The real victor was the generation of on the 1960’s that dismantled the central planning and the only party dictatorial regime and dismissed the Warsaw Pact.

Introduction

50 years ago, in August 1968, armies of the Warsaw Pact invaded Czechoslovakia, out of fear she liberates itself from the Communist Camp, a liberation that was under way in the cultural, religious and social life of the country, not so much in the economy. By mid-1960, the Communist failed to oppress the Church and intellectual quest for freedom of expression, a quest that penetrated all walks of society, from pop music and Scout movement, from vigorous defense of religious and human rights by priest, to high literary circles and some honest, though naïve, individuals in ranks of the Communist party. This Liberation become known as Prague Spring, the August 20-21st invasion attempted strangling militarily these embryos of freedom, deferring the liberation for another 20 years.

Lessons from that Czechoslovak summer seem today forgotten, even in former Warsaw Pact nations – including young Czechs and Slovaks – seem to have forgotten this invasion.

Between 250,000 and 500,000 soldiers of the Warsaw Pact (WP) armies stood on high alert, massed and ready to attack at the border of the nation then known as Czechoslovakia. The soldiers came from Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland and the Soviet Union. (East German forces opted to provide only logistical support.) A total of 27 divisions had at their disposal 6,300 tanks; 2,000 cannons, and 800 airplanes. However, this belies the army’s diversity. The military might was overwhelmingly Soviet. Some 85 to 90 percent of the forces deployed – as well as 100 percent of planning, logistics, communications, and leadership – were also Soviet. Two Soviet divisions just “forgot” to leave the country after end-July WP exercises. The role of the other armies was rather to help with some task and legitimize the military intervention, augment the propaganda. The top brass of KGB, not the generals, had final say throughout the invasion.

This was the largest military operation in Europe since the Second World War. The task was “to capture all important state institutions” in order to support “people’s power organs suppressing

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counterrevolutionary forces.” The 130,000-member Czechoslovak Army had orders to stand down – orders they gladly followed.

Before the Prague Spring, there was a Prague Autumn

On the surface, the formal reason for the invasion was the “Prague Spring,” a common name for a new kind of socialism dreamed up by the naïve majority at the top of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia between December 1967 and January 1968. They were forced by the events to seek something called He planned to adopt an action plan making this phrase a reality in September 1968, at the next Communist Party congress.

The “human face” metaphor was a name for a It came as a sincere reaction to events of October 11, 1967. Students, irritated by power shortages in a region of Prague, held a demonstration in front of the president. Though police dispersed the rally by force, the students continued to demonstrate more. (In general, students’ protests in Eastern Europe, from 1945 to 1989, were always to protect individual liberty and human dignity, not to promote Communist ideas as in, e.g., 1967-1968 France.)

In an attempt to calm down the situation, the Soviet leaders sought to replace the secretary of the Communist Party, Antonín Novotný, with the poet-and-journalist-turned-Communist boss Alexander Dubcek. Dubcek was educated and lived in USSR. An honest, good-natured, and naïve believer that mankind is basically benevolent (no observer denies these characteristics), in January 1968 Dubcek proposed his own counterpoint to Novotný’s policies, which he called “socialism with a human face.” The very title of the proposed program shocked Communist leaders. Brezhnev is said to have commented off-the-record to Dubcek, “If your socialism has a human face, what is the face of ours?”

The program was modest and cosmetic. It promised separation of the Communist Party from the executive branch of government; political equality of all parties in the People’s Front, which had ruled under Communist domination since 1948; equality between Czech and Slovaks; a federation; decriminalization of small private businesses and meritocracy in the huge government sector; abolishing censorship and easing the freedom of association. It was never implemented, but the very promise sparked a strong, grassroots liberty movement.

The role of the Church

This is rarely talked about. 76% of Czech and Slovaks have been and still are Catholic believers, 10-11% were Czech Hussites. After 1948, the Communists authorities attempted to impose atheism on the society, and to blame the priesthood as cleric-fascists, to split the Church between the two nations, and between coopted “New Catholics” (young priests, who pretended to support Communism) and bishops, who opposed it and were bold guardians of religious liberties and human rights.

By early 1960s, the New Catholics lost their public appeal. Dubcek had no choice but to liberalize the nation’s religious life by ending the persecution of, and tacitly lifting the ban on, Catholic priests and other Christian clergy. Prior to 1968, the Byzantine Catholic Church was prohibited, though bureaucratic toleration extended to Orthodox Christian priests. Prior to the invasion, Cardinal Frantisek Tomasek was one of the key defenders of liberty, after 1968 he reaffirmed his role as human rights and freedom fighters, along with Vaclav Havel and other intellectuals, until 1989.

The invasion

The plan to invade Czechoslovakia started as early as on April 8, 1968. The objective stated above, to “to capture all important state institutions” of the country is from an order of the minister of defense to the Chief of the General Staff of the Soviet army. The plan was ready by mid-April. It was based on the assumption that “Zionist, revisionist, and counter-revolutionary

elements” had undertaken “a major assault on socialism.” It arranged for “liquidation of Zionist and enemy forces” and recommended, as parallel line of action, and elimination of all Zionist elements in the Czechoslovakian Communist Party. The most often quoted “Zionist” organization was the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Vienna, some targeted people were not even Jewish...² Between April and August 20, the Pact armies conducted five military exercises on the borders of and, the last one within Czechoslovakia.

In July 1968, the Red Army simply forgot to go home.

Between January and late July, the Communist leaders met eight times to discuss how to harass Dubcek and his fellows, while the KGB organized (read: bribed and threatened) the opposition to his rule; their formal call for an invasion was written in Moscow. In the meantime, they also brainwashed their own military personnel. KGB chief Yuri Andropov, the key organizer of the invasion of Hungary in October 1956, played the key role in providing disinformation.

On one hand, from a military perspective, the invasion was overkill. As the Czechoslovak Chief of Staff said, it was an “operation to kill a fly with a sledgehammer,” especially given the fact that the army had been under Pact’s command, and the Pact had no other military strategy than that devised by the Red Army. On the other hand, the capture of airports went smoothly, due to no resistance and experienced commander.

“The Master of Invasions”

General Makrelov, who led the operation, cherished first of all cooperation with KGB (mastered in WWII) and was previously involved in the invasions of Poland (1939), Finland, the Baltics (1939-1940), and Hungary in 1956. His biography is one of the contemporary army myths of Russia. Monuments of him are still being erected around the country (the most recent in April 2018). For his 1968 “victory,” he became “a hero of USSR,” and between 1969 and 1985 was decorated with more than a dozen top-medals from WP countries (four of them from Czechoslovakia, five from my native Bulgaria).

Logistics and victims

Indoctrinated soldiers did not meet armed imperialists, in fact no single shot was fired against them by any army or police officer. In some big cities, the locals used homemade amalgam to ignite fire, or street cars and buses to block streets. Some of the soldiers were surprised to realize that Czech and Slovak ladies were no whores (as they were “informed”), that Czech and Slovak way of life was much richer, and especially cleaner than what they knew as a “superior Soviet life” back home.

Logistically, the invasion was next to a nightmare. KGB squads and one airborne infantry division captured the airports and post offices because no one guarded them. But ground troops were puzzled: Maps were more than 20 years old towns and villages often had new names, and the locals changed or painted over the street and railway signs. Poor logistics, disinformation, and culture shocks greatly contributed to the decline of soldiers’ morale. Often invaders were ashamed even to appear in dirty attire before the locals, not even thinking of talking to them – out of natural inferiority complexes.

This situation led to countless irrational shootings, suspicion and paranoia among invaders: there are many instances of tanks crashing shops, attacking barefoot protesters or street cars, or simply shooting against walls and militarily insignificant buildings, like museums and schools.

Czech sources report 137 Czechs and Slovaks died as a result of the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, and 400 between then and 1989. The public went out on the streets on August 21, built improvised barricades, stopped tanks with human chains, and refused to

² One of the excuses for this Anti-Semitic attitudes was, perhaps, the fact that in 1967 the Soviet sponsored and equipped Arab invasion of Israel ended up in a complete failure. The rhetoric of the plan aimed at motivating decision about Czechoslovak operation by the Soviet and WP authorities.

cooperate. The latter, besides random shooting³ in the air, was the most often reason for incomprehensibly cruel killings of innocent, unarmed individuals, teenagers and young women. The most organized resistance was around the building of National Radio in Prague, which continued broadcasting real life news for about a week. (The Soviet invaders lacked the technical knowledge to stop it.) Then the radio went underground, and illegal newspapers flooded the nation.

On the invaders side, 98 were killed, most of them in automobile or equipment accidents, including the inexperienced use of firearms. Five committed suicide in the first month of invasion. Eleven Soviet soldiers are believed to have been killed by locals. One Bulgarian soldier there was either killed in a drunken quarrel while attempting to desert, or killed by border guards while trying to flee into West Germany.

”The Oak Out, KGB Stays,” Ice Hockey Episode and Human Torches

Police deployed heavy troops, including tanks patrolling the city, on the first anniversary of the invasion: August 21, 1969. The Soviets sent 130,000 troops, ready to intervene. The locals named it “The Day of Disgrace.” Despite threats of violence, about 100,000 went to Prague’s main square that day.

In the rear mirror, many backward changes took place in one year. Here is brief account of the events.

By the fall of 1968, the unarmed resistance was already fading away. In order to wake up the nation, on January 16, 1969, Jan Palach (21) set himself on fire, leaving a message “I burn myself in order to wake up the people of this land.” It caused anger in Moscow: Kremlin cabled Dubcek to “stop politization,” he failed to deliver “appeasement.” Unfortunately, human torches started burning one after another – six young men and one young woman set themselves on fire and died in the following month, 26 were saved by medical intervention; three protesting torches perished in Poland, Hungary and Latvia. The letters they left were, in substance, the same: I burn myself not for fame, but as a sign of protest against the invasion.”⁴

Alexander Dubcek (whose last name may be translated into English as “Oakson”). The order given by Brezhnev to no other than Marshal Andrei Grechko: “Oak – out, KGB stays.” As a result of the [Hockey Riots](#) Dubcek was dismissed in April 1969, served for two years as ambassador to Turkey, and then until retirement as a clerk as ministry of forestry. He was replaced by the KGB loyalist Gustaf Husak, who ran the country until 1987. Since his last name means “goose,” the Czechs and Slovaks dubbed the regime “socialism in a goose skin.”

What really horrified the Soviets was the fact that Czechoslovakian ice hockey team defeated the USSR in the world championship in March 1969 in Sweden. They did it twice, in the run offs and in the finals, making no secret they played for the national dignity.

The Soviet animosity against Czechoslovak Ice Hockey had a long history. After WWII their team was the best in the world – at no excuse for vassal country. In 1950, Soviet KGB and partners staged a beer brawl between some of the champions and unnamed hooligans downtown Prague, as a result the entire team was arrested and convicted of a lack of loyalty, treason, and espionage; sentenced to a combined 77 years of prison and forced labor; and sent to the uranium mines. (The most famous champion, the goalkeeper Bohumil Modry, was not involved in the brawl but received the longest jail-term and died soon after his release.) By the mid-1960s, the

³ Random shooting at buildings happened most often. One of the houses that “suffered” was that of the National Gallery. The students named its walls “Frescoes by El Grechko” (after the name of the de facto commander of the invasion, Marshal Andrei Grechko, defense minister of USSR, former commander in chief of the Soviet ground troops in East Germany and until 1967, commander in chief of the WP armies).

⁴ Here are the names: Jan Palach, Jan Zajic, Evzen Plocek, Josef Hlavaty, Miroslav Malinka, Blanka Nachazelova, Michal Lefcik, and Ryszard Siwiec (in Poland), Bauer Sandor (in Hungary) and Elijahu Rips (in Latvia)

Czechoslovakian team was again one of the best in the world, their victory in March 1969 was celebrated everywhere in Eastern Europe. I was then 14 years but still vividly remember the joy this victory caused in Sofia.

Why did this happen?

Besides some theoretical reconstructions of the events preceding the invasion, the reasons for the discontent were not immediately economic. Power shortages were regular phenomena in ex-Communist Europe, as the shortages of everything, as Ludwig von Mises predicted in 1922.

Beside post-WWII reparations by Soviet Russia (irrespective of the fact that Czechoslovakia and Poland were victims of the German invasion, the Red Army confiscated key industries in both countries), the economy of Czechoslovakia was the most competitive Communist economy, their cars were far superior than those produced in USSR or East Germany, their shops offer better food and non-food goods, and by the end of the 1980s the country traded “only” 55-56 percent of its output with Soviet Union (Poland and Bulgaria – over 80 percent).

Most of the reasons for invasion were both historic and symbolic.

“The Evil Empire” was exporting Communism since the founding of the Comintern in 1919-1920. In 1922, it exported the Bolshevik system to the Caucasus, and financed a rebellion in Bulgaria in 1923. In 1939-1940, it occupied West Ukraine, Bessarabia, and the Baltics. And from 1944 to 1950, the Soviet system reached East Germany, China, and North Korea. These nations were held at the point of a gun – in East Germany in 1953, in Hungary in 1956. The invasion of Czechoslovakia was more “business as usual”: deadly, nasty, and fundamentally unjust, but also typical.

Because the system could not work by itself economically, without private property and free trade, the peoples and individual must be kept within it by force. For individuals, there was an Iron Curtain, for peoples – there was the Warsaw Pact under Soviet, and KGB, command.

For the West, the invasions were an internal Soviet affair. No one would risk another war or a nuclear standoff in the 1960s because of distant country about which they “know nothing” (as Neville Chamberlain said of Czechoslovakia three decades earlier). This argument is thoroughly analyzed in the literature. The Soviets risked no worsening of relations with the West. And attempted both expansion and retaining the control over the WP countries and other friendly regimes until 1989. The Russian military base in Syria is a legacy of those years.

Today, the Russian Federation keeps the tradition alive, with KGB tactics, first of all USSR countries, less strongly in New Europe and elsewhere. This is the key motivation for the post factum glorification of the deeds of the Red Army and embellishment of the activities of “masters of invasions” like Margelov.

The invasion produced three major losses.

- Life. The number of casualties from the invasion remains a top military secret of the Russian Federation.
- Greater religious liberty.
- Greater economic and personal liberty.

Those three freedoms – religious, economic, and personal – rise, or fall, as one.

The Prague Spring was suffocated by military force, a generation lost the hope for instant liberation. But the flashes of discontent with the Communist-Soviet rule that sparked across Eastern Europe did not cease to exist. 1968 generation of our countries, to which I too belong, had put an end to that rule in 1989. The remembrance of the misdeeds of the Warsaw Pact and the USSR is a precondition of not repeating similar crimes in the future.