

The Prague Spring: A Year of Awakening

In 1968, Czechoslovakia was a country revelling in the excitement of change. After some twenty years of authoritarian government, an urgent summons for a new form of communism arose from almost every corner of Czech society. "Socialism with a human face" called for the integration of democratic and socialist ideals and placed itself in direct conflict with Soviet interests. Now, 25 years after this monumental year of upheaval, as the Czech and Slovak republics come to terms with the aftershock of a more recent revolution, it is important to remember the energy and defiance instilled by the Prague Spring.

by Alison Pion

This spring a great chance has been given us...It is now up to us to make our way through unknown conditions, to experiment, to give the Socialist development a new look, while leaning upon creative Marxist thinking...No one could forgive us were we to waste this chance, were we to give up our opportunities.

-from a Czechoslovakian government document on reform, entitled "Czechoslovakia's Road to Socialism," April 19, 1968.

Twenty five years ago, while students in the United States demonstrated for civil rights and for an end to the Vietnam War, and while French students and labor leaders took to the barricades in Paris, Czechoslovakian youth groups and intellectuals conducted their own struggle for reform. The so-called "Prague Spring," with its emphasis on rebirth and change, challenged the ruling Czechoslovakian Communist party. It pushed Czechoslovakia's leaders to break with the Stalinist model of communism and to declare their country's independence from the Soviet bloc.

However, the Prague Spring did not denounce communism altogether, the basic tenets of which were integral to the movement's vision of reform. While it did directly confront the ideological and political monopoly of the Czechoslovakian communist government, the movement strove to create a new defini-

tion of communism—one that incorporated a number of Western democratic elements.

Reformers called for an end to censorship and for the establishment of laws and party statutes that guaranteed the right to dissent. They also demanded recognition of Czechoslovakia's freedom to determine domestic policies without outside intervention from powerful countries such as the Soviet Union.



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The Winter Preceding: The Rule of Antonin Novotny

Despite the tight reign and Stalinist-style governance of Communist Party Chief Antonin Novotny, the late 1960s saw the growth of an increasingly restless and frustrated public who condemned and criticized the activities of the government. Many Czechoslovakians faulted Novotny for his retention of the old Stalinist bureaucracy and his refusal to give full backing to Czechoslovakia's economic reform measures. He was also unpopular for his failure to compensate fully the vic-

tims of the 1950 purges and his negative attitude toward the some 4.5 million Slovaks living in Czechoslovakia. These policies, as well as his support of censorship, particularly alienated numerous intellectuals and students and encouraged them to speak out in favor of change.

Intellectuals were well positioned in Czechoslovakian society to be a powerful force for the reform movement. Endowed with a certain respect and status (due them from their education and role as cultural leaders), but removed from political positions that afforded them influence over the government's actions, intellectual reformers were free to point out the government's failures without incriminating themselves.

The intellectual assault on the communist administration began at the Writers Congress Conference in Prague in June, 1967. Impassioned speeches and demonstrations called for an investigation into the activities of Novotny's regime. Declarations boomed that, now, the time was ripe for change. In response, the Novotny government moved to discipline these writers through jailings and stricter censorship regulations.

However, the spirit of reform had already taken hold of the people and was not so easily extinguished. Intellectuals and student groups continued to press for the removal of Novotny and for a change in government domestic policy. Even from within his own administration, Novotny was confronted with demands for reform as more and more politicians sensed the changing mood of the

Czechoslovakian population.

Public reports outlining the abuses and scandals of the Novotny regime flourished. The Communist party was increasingly discredited, while the reform movement was energized. As tensions mounted, the Soviet Union—all the while anxiously awaiting the outcome—pledged a policy of non-interference in the Czechoslovakian power struggle.

Alexander Dubcek and the Blossoming of Spring

In January of 1968, Novotny was replaced by Alexander Dubcek as head of the Czechoslovakian communist party. Dubcek had been a leading figure in the mounting Slovak opposition to Czech dominance in the country's post-war years. He now came to symbolize the spirit of reform and the hopeful mood of the Prague Spring.

Almost immediately after his ascension to power, Dubcek eased regulations regarding censorship and began to move his country towards a model of communism that encouraged political discussion and dissidence. It is unclear whether Dubcek himself shared the desire for reform or whether he simply reacted to the insistent demands of the people. In either case, in a reform platform published April 9, 1968, Dubcek's party outlined its plan for monumental change.

Included in the package were regulations that guaranteed freedom of speech, press, assembly, and religious observance. It established electoral laws designed to broaden the choice of possible candidates and provide greater opportunities for non-communist parties. Dubcek's plan for reform also included economic policies that afforded public and private businesses more independence and allowed them to trade openly with Western nations. In addition, there was a plan to establish an independent judiciary system and draft a new constitution for implementation in 1969.

To keep Dubcek in line and remind him of his promises to the Czechoslovakian people, the country's leading intellectuals issued a manifesto on June 26, 1968. The piece, entitled "2,000 Words to Workers, Farmers, Scientists, Artists, and Everyone," warned against a return to authoritarianism. The manifesto also called for all Czechoslovakians to push for further reform of old Stalinist practices still entrenched in the bureaucracy.

Trouble in Moscow

While the spirit in Czechoslovakia was one of euphoria and rebirth, Moscow's mood was a great deal more somber. A collective warning by Soviet, Polish, East German, Hungarian, and Bulgarian leaders to the Czechoslovakian government went unheeded. Though the Soviet bloc suggested that Czechoslovakia ought to proceed cautiously with its reform policies or face potentially harsh reprisals (like those Hungary received in 1956), the Dubcek regime still declared its right to determine domestic policies without outside interference.



Prague's Old Town Square with Tyn Church in background [Nicholas Breyfogle]

Czechoslovakia's reform movement raised fears in Moscow about the possible adverse effects on the Soviet Union's power position in Europe. It provoked concern that Czechoslovakia's example might lead to other anti-Soviet outbreaks in other parts of Eastern Europe. The reforms had already received support from Yugoslavia and Rumania. Confronted with a mounting sense of vulnerability, Soviet leaders became increasingly convinced that a policy of non-interference towards Czechoslovakia would be counter-productive.

Thus, on August 20, 1968, Czechoslovakia was invaded by the armed forces of the five Warsaw Pact powers. Despite the high level of hostility felt by the Czechoslovakian public, resistance to the predominantly Soviet force of 400,000 was largely non-violent and grassroots based. Reluctant to position itself in direct opposition to the Soviet Union, the Czechoslovakian

government made no appeal to the people to confront the invaders and, instead, preached passive resistance.

From Spring to Winter

In an effort to maintain his power, Dubcek struck a compromise with the Soviets. He legitimized the presence of foreign troops in Czechoslovakia, agreed to increase restrictive measures against dissidents and to restore censorship, and promised to purge the 1968 reformers from the political arena. In return, the Soviet Union offered Czechoslovakia economic assistance and continued peace between the two countries—an agreement that effectively reinforced the political ties between the two countries.

However, most Czechoslovakians remained angry and frustrated by the Soviet Union's invasion and repressive measures. Large and militant demonstrations against the U.S.S.R.'s actions occurred in late October and early November, but the spirit of rebirth was already largely stifled. The verbal protests by communist parties in Yugoslavia, Rumania, and Italy did nothing to affect the Soviet Union's hard-line position on Czechoslovakian reform.

Throughout the next three years, individuals active in the Prague Spring movement were either jailed or expelled from Czechoslovakia for their activities. Vladimir Skutina, former TV commentator and a well known advocate of change, was sentenced to two years in prison on charges of having written unpublished pamphlets slandering Czechoslovakia and the U.S.S.R. A group of fifteen Czech intellectuals charged with "subverting the republic" were sentenced to prison terms ranging from 12 months to 2.5 years. These, and hundreds of other trials, combined with police searches and random mass round-ups, frightened the population and silenced public demands for reform.

What had once been in Czechoslovakia a time of spring, hope, and rebirth quickly transformed into a cold winter of silence and resignation. Yet, the energy and optimism of this movement that galvanized the country into action continues to be commemorated each year in life's enduring cycles. As the revolution of 1989 has shown, while spring leads seasonally to winter, winter leads just as naturally and inevitably to spring.