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40 Years On

The `Prague Spring' and the `Prague Autumn'

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November 21 2008 marked the fortieth anniversary of the end of the student strike in Czechoslovakia against the occupation of the country by Russian troops the preceding August.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/609px-SocAnoOkNe.jpg>]

Socialism yes, occupation no

Image: Wikimedia

The strike began in Prague and spread throughout Bohemia and Moravia, following the most dramatic year of post-war Czechoslovak history. A central part of the worldwide ferment of ideas and struggles which lasted through 1968 was the set of developments which took place in the Stalinist states of Central and Eastern Europe, notably in Poland, Yugoslavia and most of all in Czechoslovakia.

The Origins of the Prague Spring

The starting point of the so-called 'Prague Spring' was a reform movement in the Czechoslovak Communist Party. This first became publicly apparent with the removal of the traditional Stalinist bureaucrat Antonín Novotný as First Secretary of the party at the Central Committee plenum on January 5 1968 and his replacement by Alexander Dubček. Novotný carried on as President until March 21 when he was forced to resign and in early April a new government was appointed with Dubček as de facto leader. The new president was the elderly general Ludvík Svoboda and the prime minister was Oldřich Černík but the most significant reformers were figures like Ota Šik (in charge of economic matters), František Kriegel (responsible for the National Front in which the Communist Party co-operated with other political forces such as approved non-Communist political parties and the Central Council of trade unions), Josef Smrkovský (chair of the National Assembly - the equivalent of the Czechoslovak parliament) and Zdeněk Mlynář (appointed to head a team of researchers investigating the future of the political system and the question of socialist democracy). The six months from early April to late August saw a tumultuous succession of political developments in Czechoslovakia in which the initial cautious reforms proposed by the party leadership became radicalised both by internal pressures within the party and associated bodies and more importantly by movements in the population as a whole. This process of radicalisation continued after the Warsaw Pact invasion on August 21, with widespread resistance to that invasion lasting until the middle of 1969. At that point a series of purges and expulsions within the party (including the replacement of Dubček as First Secretary by Gustáv Husák in April) coupled with suppression of popular political movements set the stage for a 'normalisation' of Czechoslovak society which led two decades later to the collapse of the now totally discredited Stalinist regime and the re-establishment of capitalism in the country.

In this way the events of 1968 were pivotal not just for Czechoslovakia but for the whole question of the possibility of a political revolution in the Stalinist countries and of the replacement of the existing bureaucracy not by a rejuvenated capitalist class but by genuine socialist democracy. Together with the Hungarian revolution of 1956 and the Polish strikes of 1970, 1976 and 1981 which led to the formation of Solidarność, they represent a key turning point for the region as a whole.

An important initial question in understanding the Prague Spring is that of why an inner-party reform movement emerged in Czechoslovakia rather than elsewhere in Eastern Europe at this point. Part of the explanation for this lies in the relatively strong Communist tradition in Czechoslovakia before the party came to power in 1948; [during the](#)

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period from 1945 to 1948 the Communist Party, under Gottwald, emerged as the dominant, but not the exclusive, political force in liberated Czechoslovakia' 2. This meant that the Soviet leadership was particularly frightened about the possibility of the Czechoslovak party developing a measure of independence and consequently the purges in that party in the early 1950s following the break with Tito's Yugoslavia were especially brutal. As Jiří Pelikan puts it 3 {The greatest purge in any Communist Party was that which took place in Czechoslovakia in 1949-54. I think it was precisely because Czechoslovakia had the most favourable conditions that it seemed likely to be the most independent in seeking its own path of development. This did not at all suit the Soviet leadership. They wanted to monopolize Eastern Europe, and to impose the Soviet model. For this reason they were obliged to strike hardest against the Czechoslovakian Communist Party.} As a result there was no process of open disagreement within the Czechoslovak party about the correct course of economic and political development following Stalin's death, such as emerged in Hungary around Imre Nagy and in Poland around Władysław Gomułka, and no political ferment in Czechoslovakia in 1956 of the kind which emerged in both those other countries. This in turn meant that many of the contradictions of Stalinism persisted in a particularly 'pure' form in Czechoslovakia only to become manifest a decade later in the mid 1960s. The following four issues were especially central.

Firstly, there were continuing demands for the exoneration of those convicted in the political trials of the 1950s. Even the limited rehabilitation seen in other Stalinist countries had not occurred in Czechoslovakia; the congresses in of writers and journalists in April and May 1963 were dominated by this theme and provided a forum for bitter denunciation of the Stalinist past and the slowness of changes in policy...little could be said openly about these matters, but resentment ran deep' 4. Secondly, there was ongoing discontent amongst Slovaks about their place within the Czechoslovak political system. A serious crisis emerged in 1964 within the Slovak Communist party, especially in Bratislava, which was temporarily resolved in 1966 but without removing the fundamental problems. Thirdly, serious economic difficulties had begun to become apparent. These resulted from the Stalinist concentration on heavy industry at the expense of other sectors, notably agriculture. Czechoslovak national income fell between 1962 and 1963, a very rare development for Eastern European countries under communism. This led to the adoption in 1965 and 1966 of a programme of economic reform but without clear commitments about how this programme would be implemented. Fourthly, there was significant unrest amongst young people, students and intellectuals. This became apparent in a very stormy 4th congress of the Union of Writers in June 1967 at which there were numerous attacks on the system of censorship. Membership of the Czechoslovak Union of Youth dropped from a million and a half in 1963 to little over a million in 1966, only 7.2 percent of whom were party members. At the end of October 1967 discontent over lighting failures and heating breakdowns at the Strahov student dormitories in Prague spilled over into a spontaneous demonstration of 1,500 people which was broken up by tear gas and batons with a number of injuries to the students. All these issues fed into the resignation of Novotný and the formation of a new government. However, it should also be remembered that this new government was not the result of a full Party Congress which could have elected a new Central Committee committed to reforms. Many supporters of the old guard remained in important positions both within the party and the government. Neither did those who wished to follow a reforming agenda necessarily agree on the way forward. There were a number of varying perspectives with Dubček partly being chosen as party leader because he was seen as a compromise candidate able to balance the views of different groupings. {{{From April to August}}} In addition to forming a new government in April the Central Committee adopted an Action Programme. This was designed as an interim document which would provide a framework for party and government measures until the next Party Congress (the 14th, scheduled at this point for the following year - though in May Dubček brought the planned date forward to September 1968). It was an eclectic document, quite general in most of its provisions, and thus left a great deal to be concretely determined in future laws and measures'5. As Philip Windsor points out6

Apart from certain points of considerable implication, but which in themselves represented no more than the humanization of the regime, such as the rehabilitation of all persons afflicted by a violation of socialist legality' between 1949 and 1954...the main burden of the programme was a new emphasis on the rights of Slovakia and the sketch of a future definition of the roles of the Party and the government. That was all.

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As a result of this vagueness the direction of political change became strongly contested throughout the six months leading up to the invasion in August with reformers' and conservatives' each trying to strengthen their own positions in the run-up to the planned congress and with the party leadership largely attempting to mediate between these internal pressures as well as responding to Soviet demands. The key area of contestation was democratisation. The Action Programme sought to organise political decision-making through the National Front, in which the Communist Party would have the leading role while other parties and mass organisations subordinated themselves to its guidance. However, this was increasingly challenged in a number of ways. The existing parties (the Socialist and People's Parties in the Czech lands and the Party of Freedom and Party of Slovak Revival in Slovakia) began to claim the right to organise independently as equal partners in the Front. More significantly, there were attempts to form a Social Democratic Party against the will of both the Front and the CP Praesidium. In addition, new organisations were formed without party approval. The most important of these were K231, an organisation of ex-political prisoners (which claimed 50,000 members by the end of May), 7 and KAN, the Club of the Non-Party Engagés, which was formed to provide a forum for citizens who were not members of any party to participate in the building of democratic socialism. Demands for democratisation also encompassed the party rank and file, who pressed especially for an early congress with elections to a new Central Committee. Closely linked with this pressure for democratisation was the demand for freedom of speech and an end to censorship. H Gordon Skilling describes the atmosphere 8: The public, unaccustomed to public debate, was electrified by the uninhibited presentation of issues until recently taboo or encrusted with propaganda. Almost no topic was sacrosanct. Every aspect of reform was discussed, especially rehabilitation and freedom of the press, and dissatisfaction with the progress so far achieved was often expressed. There was analysis of the political system, including bitter criticism of past practices, and diverse views were articulated on the question of opposition parties and on the role of elections. There was objective examination of historical events, hitherto distorted by ideological interpretations. Such demands were not limited to publications but were expressed in events like the May Day march in Prague. One of the most significant moments in the struggle for democratisation and free expression was the publication of the so-called 'Two Thousand Words' at the end of June. This document was drafted by the writer Ludvík Vaculík, signed by over sixty people (including a mixture of prominent intellectuals and artists as well as workers and farmers) and published in the journal of the Writers' Union, *Literární listy*, which at that point was producing 300,000 copies of each issue 9. Written in response to a perception of growing conservative pressures which threatened to derail the reform process, Vaculík's text was notable for its stress on popular action as the only guarantee for safeguarding that process. It called for supporting the 'progressive wing' within the Communist Party but also emphasised that in the future, we shall have to display personal initiative and determination of our own 10'. Vaculík argued that under quite superficially boring headlines, a very fierce struggle is going on in the press about democracy and who leads the country'. He stressed that 11 {We should demand the resignation of people who have misused their power, who have damaged public property, or who have acted in a dishonest or brutal way. We have to find ways and means to persuade them to resign, through public criticism, for instance through resolutions, demonstrations, demonstration work brigades, collections for retirement gifts for them, strikes and picketing their houses.} The Trotskyist historian and activist Pierre Broué described the 'Two Thousand Words' as 'truly revolutionary' because of this stress on mass action 12. However, it was not followed up by an upsurge of activity of the kind argued for by Vaculík. July and August saw the reforms thrown on the defensive as negotiations continued between the Czechoslovak and Soviet leaderships. There were important gains; most notably the rehabilitation law passed in June and the decision to prepare a constitutional law on the federation of Czech and Slovak representative organs by the end of October; but the reform process was not able to develop into a full-scale political revolution against the bureaucracy before the Warsaw Pact invasion took place.

Here the lack of activity amongst workers becomes crucial and represents a key difference between what happened in Czechoslovakia in 1968 and the experience of Hungary in 1956 and Poland in the 1970s and 1980s. The economic policies of the Czechoslovak reformers, led by Å ik, were firmly in the mainstream of Eastern European reform economics of the 1960s and 1970s, stressing the need for market mechanisms and incentives as the basis for decentralising economic decision-making. This approach at best provided no clear basis for mobilising workers in support of the reforms and at worst threatened the gains which workers had made under the bureaucratic regime.

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Skilling reports Žerník's first major economic policy statement to the National Assembly as follows 13:

Žerník devoted much attention to the problem of living standards, arguing that they were lower than they should be, and that whatever benefits the workers might have had under the old system, they had suffered, like all citizens, as consumers. He assured the assembly that the new economic policy would not cause a lowering of living standards but pointed out that an improvement would depend on higher productivity.

He goes on to point out that the focal point of reform was to establish a market system in which the chief role would be taken by the enterprise' 14. From June onwards workers councils began to be formed as part of the economic reform process but before the invasion these were seen very much as a top-down initiative and by September there were only nineteen such councils in existence¹⁵. Working class activity in Czechoslovakia in 1968 took place after the invasion rather than before. *{{After the Invasion}}* The invasion to some extent radicalised the political process in Czechoslovakia, but tragically in circumstances which made resistance extremely difficult. The initial focus was the decision by the radical wing of the reformers to convene the 14th party congress as an emergency congress (known as the Vysočany Congress after the industrial district where it was held) on the 22nd August, the day after the invasion. However, while the congress reaffirmed support for the reforms and opposition to the invasion and elected a new Central Committee along these lines, it failed to build on this to organise direct action. As Jiří Pelikan (a delegate to the congress) describes 16 *{Although the convening of the Congress was to be a great success, there was still no clear decision on the resistance...At the Congress there was a long discussion as to whether to declare a general strike or only a one-hour strike. It is very interesting that many were afraid of declaring a general strike on the grounds that it was the workers' ultimate weapon and should not be lightly used. In the event the Congress decided to call for a one-hour general strike. It was observed throughout the country and was a full success, but of course it could not have the same effect as a proper general strike.}* The attempt to base a unified party response to the invasion on the Vysočany Congress failed when the party leadership went to Moscow at the end of August and with the exception of Kriegel, reached an agreement with the Russians which included a declaration that the congress was null and void. This then shifted the emphasis of the opposition to popular mobilisation outside official party structures. Central to such mobilisations were the actions of both students and workers. Between 1 October and the end of 1968, 260 further workers councils were created, with the trade unions playing a leading role in initiating this development 17. In January 1969 a national meeting in Plzeň of councils and preparatory committees representing 890,000 employees (over a sixth of the workers in the country) took place and thereafter, the workers' movement sheltered the political left as the ŽKD-Vysočany plant had sheltered the secret August congress' 18.

The November student strike led to increased contact between student and worker activists. Skilling argues that 19

The trade unions also became a powerful force for reform, especially the metal workers, 900,000 strong, who threw their weight behind the student strike and later concluded a formal alliance with the Union of Students²⁰. This provided for cooperation in opposing "the policy of continual concessions to external pressure" and in pressing for freedom of expression, workers' councils, elections, and other progressive demands. Mass demonstrations in the streets on the anniversaries of October 28 and November 7 contributed to the spirit of resistance

The agreement with the metal workers on 19 December was followed by agreements in January 1969 between the students and construction workers, mineralogical, geological and gas workers and print workers and later by collaboration with power-station workers, designer and civil engineers, lumber workers and railway workers. Galia Golan reports that by and large these alliances held throughout 1968-9 though they were much criticized (and feared) by the conservatives in the regime. In concrete terms, they led to the formation of worker-student action committees which coordinated efforts designed to salvage what was possible of the post-January policies'²¹. Petr Cerný describes Prague radicals who, for a brief moment, achieved what the western left had only

dreamed of in 1968: a worker-student alliance' 22.

Yet, resistance to the invasion was eventually isolated and defeated. The mass of the population remained loyal to the party leadership under Dubček and this leadership continued to compromise with the invaders rather than to support those workers and students prepared to take the reform process forward. Predictably, this led to the downfall of the leadership itself following a police provocation when the Aeroflot offices in Prague were attacked after a demonstration stimulated by the victory of the Czechoslovak ice-hockey team over the Soviet Union. Jiří Pelikan sums up the fatal mistakes of the group around Dubček 23

We may conclude that there were three mistakes made in the course of this whole development. The first mistake was that the leadership did not mobilize against the possibility of an invasion before it took place, and make it clear to the Soviet Union that it would not just be a walkover. The second was that they waited in the Central Committee instead of going to the factories and organizing resistance. The third was that they signed the Moscow agreement.

Interpreting the Prague Spring

The events of 1968 in Czechoslovakia have provoked a range of divergent interpretations. Amongst orthodox observers a major area of debate concerns the extent to which the developments represented a reform process within the communist system or an 'interrupted revolution' which could have led to a systemic break, with for example Galia Golan endorsing the former view and H Gordon Skilling the latter. To a large extent this simply shows the inability of conventional political science adequately to characterise the unstable nature of bureaucratic transitional societies. In such social formations, as Trotsky and others have recognised, the fundamental weakness of the position of the ruling caste means that quite limited reforms create a dynamic which can irresistibly throw the system as a whole into question, as happened most obviously under Gorbachev in the USSR in the 1980s. However, there are also important questions for the left to consider when analysing the Czechoslovak events. To what extent, given the central role of reformers within the party, many of whom had a relatively limited agenda, can these be seen as the early stages of a political revolution? How significant was the role of popular mobilisation, especially working class and student self-organisation? What kind of trajectory might the reform process have taken if the Warsaw Pact invasion had not happened? There have been three influential accounts from the left of the nature of the Prague Spring. The first, most widespread, view sees the reform process as laying the basis for a genuine reformed socialism with a human face' which would, if the invasion had not happened, have been able to combine social ownership and political democracy in a sustained way.

While this analysis accurately reflects the tremendous popular support for the democratisation which took place in 1968 it avoids a number of difficult issues. The implication is that the Czechoslovak bureaucracy could have been transformed into the guardians of socialist democracy in a smooth and conflict-free way, had external intervention not halted the process. It also glosses over the potential conflicts contained in the economic reform proposals and the intended moves towards market incentives. This approach suggests that working-class activity might play only a secondary role in a movement from bureaucratic rule to socialism.

The second approach, associated in particular with the Monthly Review school in the USA, while condemning the invasion, sees the reforms in Czechoslovakia as having an inherent tendency towards capitalism within them – a tendency shared with similar reforms elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe, particularly Yugoslavia, and in the USSR itself 24.

This account provides an important analysis of the contradictions of economic reform. But it completely ignores the

issue of popular mobilisation and involvement in the reform process and the potential for such involvement to alter qualitatively the character of that process.

The third analysis sees the Czechoslovak reforms as a particular example of what it regards as a key conflict within 'actually existing socialism', that between the bureaucracy and the intelligentsia²⁵. The Prague Spring is seen as a movement originating in the intelligentsia which represented a challenge by that grouping to the foundations of bureaucratic rule. Adherents to this form of analysis differ markedly in their assessment of the extent to which the intelligentsia in Stalinist societies represented a progressive force. Writing from an anarchist viewpoint Petr Cerny argues that the reformers were essentially technocrats hostile to working-class self-activity and popular control. Jerome Karabel takes a more differentiated view, recognising the anti-egalitarian viewpoint of many of the reformers and their elitist statements but also claiming that especially in its vision of a more democratic version of socialism, the intelligentsia was a carrier of proposals for the expansion of human rights and a radical redistribution of political power away from the party-state and toward a revitalized citizenry²⁶.

This approach provides an important analysis of the nature of reform communism both in Czechoslovakia and elsewhere in Central Europe. The analysis given of the contradictory role of intellectuals in this context enriches the classical Marxist account of bureaucratic transitional societies given by writers like Trotsky and Rakovsky in significant ways. However, the continual focus on the intelligentsia runs the risk of sidelining the activity of other social groups, especially workers. Workers tend to be viewed through the prism of the analyses and programmes provided by intellectuals rather than in their own right.

Revolutionary socialists will want to draw on the strong points of all of these analyses but to embed them in a different context. Accounts of popular enthusiasm for the reform process initiated by the party, of the tensions created by economic reform and of the struggles between intellectuals and bureaucrats all illuminate aspects of the events of 1968 in Czechoslovakia. But for us what is central is the way in which firstly the initial steps towards reform and secondly the invasion created the context for popular activity, working-class organisation and collaboration between students and workers. The conditions under which this activity and organisation took place made it ultimately impossible to create enduring structures which could take the struggle forward and led to defeat. But the courage and resolve of the Czechoslovak people remains a central part of the legacy of 1968.

Notes

1 For an account of the strike by a participant see P Tomalek 'Report from Prague: The Student Action' (*New Left Review First Series* no.53 January-February 1969) 2 H Gordon Skilling (1976) *Czechoslovakia's Interrupted Revolution*, Princeton University Press p.22 3 J Pelikan 'The Struggle for Socialism in Czechoslovakia' (*New Left Review First Series* no.71 January-February 1972 p.15). Pelikan was Director of Czechoslovak television from 1963 to 1968 and then went into exile in Italy where he joined the Italian Socialist Party and edited *Listy*, the journal of the Czechoslovak socialist opposition.

4 Skilling op cit pp48-9

5 Skilling op cit p.217

6 P Windsor and A Roberts (1969) *Czechoslovakia 1968: Reform, Repression and Resistance*, Chatto and Windus for The Institute for Strategic Studies, p.35

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7 The 1948 law for the defence of the Republic was numbered as law number 231. Membership of K231 was open to all those who had been imprisoned under this law.

8 Skilling op cit p.236

9 For the text see L Vaculák 'Two thousand words to workers, farmers, scientists, artists and everyone' in A Oxley, A Pravda and A Ritchie (ed) (1973) *Czechoslovakia: The Party and the People*, Allen Lane The Penguin Press pp.261-8 10 Vaculák op cit p.265 11 *ibid* 12 Cited by Skilling op cit p.279 13 Skilling op cit p.421 14 *Ibid* p.425 15 V Fišera (ed) (1978) *Workers' Councils in Czechoslovakia: Documents and Essays 1968-69*, Allison and Busby, p.12 16 Pelikan op cit p.29 17 Fišera op cit p.12 18 *Ibid* p.13 19 Skilling op cit p.817 20 For the text of this agreement see Fišera op cit pp.102-4 21 G Golan (1973) *Reform Rule in Czechoslovakia: The Dubček Era 1968-1969*, Cambridge University Press, p.278 22 P Cerny (n.d) *Czechoslovakia 1968: What socialism? What human face?*, Solidarity (London) Pamphlet no.55, p.12 23 Pelikan op cit pp.31-2 24 See P Sweezy 'Czechoslovakia, Capitalism and Socialism' in P Sweezy and C Bettelheim (1971) *On the Transition to Socialism* (2nd edition), Monthly Review Press

25 The key work is here is by the Hungarian sociologists György Konrad and Iván Szelényi; see G Konrad and I Szelényi (1979) *The Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. Jerome Karabel applies a similar approach to Czechoslovakia in J Karabel 'The Revolt of the Intellectuals: The Origins of the Prague Spring and the Politics of Reform Communism' (University of California, Berkeley, Institute for Research on Labor and Employment Working Paper iirwps-020-90 available at <http://repositories.cdlib.org/iir/iirwps/iirwps-020-90>)

26 Karabel op cit pp.81-2