



Remembering Prague Spring

When the Eastern European empire of the Soviet Union melted away in 1989, and the Soviet Union itself dissolved two years later, wise observers noted that these developments hadn't materialized overnight on their own. They were the result of critically important events that had punctuated seven decades of Soviet communism. The 35th anniversary of one of those events is now upon us, and its significance deserves to be remembered. As it unfolded in 1968, it was known to the world as the Prague Spring.

Czechoslovakia, on paper at least, did not seem to be a place where a major challenge to communist rule would emerge in the 1960s. Historically, Czechs and Slovaks viewed Germany as their principal oppressor. The West, primarily Britain and France, delivered the Czechoslovakians to the Nazis to make "peace in our time" in 1938. Anti-Russian sentiment was never very strong in the country, and in the aftermath of World War II, Czechoslovakians gave the Communist Party a greater percentage of the popular vote than its counterparts received in other East European nations. As author Mark Almond notes in his book, *Uprising: Political Upheavals that Have Shaped the World*, "the country seemed placidly pro-Soviet well into the 1960s."

Empires, however, have a funny way of

crumbling unexpectedly. The seeds of dissipation are sown by the empire-builders themselves when they impose their will at the point of a gun. Resentment simmers beneath the surface. Ideas of defiance coupled with a vision for a better and freer future take hold. Courage among the oppressed gathers momentum. Leadership emerges from often-unlikely personalities. A critical mass is reached as events spin out of the regime's control and *voilà*—the old, invincible order is, to use a culinary colloquialism, toast.

The thawing of the communist deep freeze in Czechoslovakia started shortly after the aging, hard-line Party leader Antonin Novotny was demoted to the less-important post of president in January 1968. In his place emerged a younger apparatchik named Alexander Dubcek. From Moscow's standpoint, Dubcek was seemingly a safe bet, unlikely to rock any boats. However, the air was thick with talk of "reform" to revive the Czechoslovakian economy, which once rivaled the richest in Europe but under socialist rule had tumbled into depression. Dubcek almost immediately sided with reformers and announced plans to allow a greater role for freedom of expression, private property, and entrepreneurship. Pressure from other reformers, supported by large public rallies, forced Novotny to resign from government in March.

The months of April, May, and June 1968 brought breathtaking change. On April 5 the Czechoslovakian Communist Party itself called for "democratization" of the political

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system and laid out a plan for eventual elections in which it would compete freely with other parties. Sensing a new era, reporters and editors in the state-run media began speaking their minds, criticizing socialism, and endorsing further reform. On May 1—a day the communist world traditionally celebrated with parades and paeans to orthodoxy—Czechoslovakians turned out in throngs to endorse the new freedoms. For the first time anywhere in the East bloc, censorship was officially abolished on June 26. The world watched in amazement, and wondered how far the Soviets would let this phenomenon go.

Kremlin treachery was in full swing while Prague's springtime of liberty blossomed. In late May, high-ranking Soviet military officials visited Czechoslovakia to lay the groundwork for Warsaw Pact military exercises. Six weeks later, a meeting in Warsaw of top Communist Party representatives from the Soviet Union, Hungary, Poland, East Germany, and Bulgaria produced a sternly worded warning to Dubcek. "The situation in Czechoslovakia," they declared, "jeopardizes the common vital interests of other socialist countries."

Brezhnev Doctrine

In early August Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev met with Dubcek in Bratislava. There, the Brezhnev Doctrine was spelled out. It declared, in essence, "once a socialist state, forever after a socialist state." Nonetheless, Brezhnev dismissed the suggestion that he might be about to invade.

But on August 20 one of the ugliest and most duplicitous acts in Cold War history unfolded before a horrified world. Half a million Warsaw Pact troops stormed the Czechoslovakian borders, heading toward the capital city and strategic points across the country. Along their way, they distributed leaflets proclaiming they were sent "to come to the aid of the working class and all the people of Czechoslovakia to defend socialist gains." By the end of the month, the reform leaders, including Dubcek, were stripped of power. Economic and political

liberalization was canceled and censorship was reintroduced.

Faced with overwhelming force, Czechoslovakians met the invaders not with bullets but with protests, the most tragically poignant of which took place in Wenceslas Square in downtown Prague on January 16, 1969. On a spot marked today by a small wooden cross and a plaque, a 20-year-old student named Jan Palach set himself afire. His supreme sacrifice earned him the status of Prague Spring's foremost martyr.

When a spokesman for the last Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, was asked in 1987 what the difference was between Gorbachev's reform policies and those of Prague Spring, his famous reply was "Nineteen years." The spirit that galvanized the Czechoslovakian nation in 1968 had not been crushed; indeed, it had infected the very heart of what Ronald Reagan labeled the "Evil Empire." The freedoms aborted in 1968 were won in the Velvet Revolution of November 1989, when, sapped of any moral legitimacy or resolve, communist rule and Soviet domination evaporated as millions of Czechoslovakians danced in the streets.

I confess to keen, personal sentiments for the brave citizens of Czechoslovakia in 1968. As a 14-year-old in junior high school at the time, Prague Spring captured my fascination. The shock of the first report of the invasion remains one of the defining moments of my life. I was profoundly incensed, and within days I gathered with other protesters in Pittsburgh to demand that troops withdraw. That began my life-long commitment to freedom and free markets. I quickly learned that waving a placard was hardly enough to be a good anti-communist. To defeat despotism, one must understand the philosophy and economics of liberty.

For the memory of Jan Palach, for the perseverance of the Czech people, for the greater message of resistance to tyranny everywhere, we should not let the 35th anniversary of Prague Spring pass without reflection on its meaning and gratitude for its contribution to the eventual liberation of half a continent. □