



Prague 68: Revolution and Counter Revolution

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1968 was one of history's 'mad years' like 1848, 1917-18, 1989 and, most recently, 2011. It was a time when the eruption of revolts in one country quickly stimulated upheavals in others. The spread of international revolutionary upheavals seemed to offer the prospect of a dramatic thawing of the permafrost imposed on Eastern Europe by the Soviet Union and a flowering of democracy and social transformation, the "Prague Spring".

The revolutionary year 1968 began with the Tet Offensive by Vietnamese guerilla forces, inflicting severe casualties on the US and raising, for the first time, the spectre of the US behemoth losing a war. It saw the rise of a mass anti-war movement in the USA that triggered similar movements in France, Germany, Britain and beyond. In May, in France, it became a workers' struggle with a 10 million strong general strike. In October, in Mexico City, 300-400 students were killed when police opened fire on a demonstration.

As the Americas and Western Europe were rocked by the student revolt, unrest spread to young people behind the Iron Curtain, to Poland but also to Czechoslovakia, whose regime had, hitherto, been one of the most loyal of Russia's East European satellites.

Like many other 'mad years', these movements took place without a politically prepared and organised leadership and 1968 ended in disappointment and counterrevolution. Nonetheless, the struggles that erupted in that year, and the impact they had on an entire generation, almost globally, gave rise to a decade and more of radicalisation, of new women's, antiracist, Black, Lesbian and Gay liberation movements. The old parties of the working class, official Communist as well as Labour and Social Democratic, largely lost control of the youth and of a huge layer of militant workers, too.

Fifty years on, both the advances and the mistakes the militants made in all those courageous struggles will not have been wasted if we learn from them. This no less true of the movement in Czechoslovakia, although it was finally defeated by a combination of military invasion and lack of an adequate political leadership. Coming just months after the demobilisation of the French general strike by the French Communist Party, it confirmed for millions, not only in Europe but globally, that pro-Moscow Stalinism was anything but a progressive, let alone a revolutionary, force in the world.

How Czechoslovakia 'went Communist'?

The Stalinist system in Czechoslovakia had been installed in a rather different manner from those in Poland, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria, and evolved at a different pace from many other Eastern European countries.

The Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KS?) had been a mass party within a bourgeois democratic state before the war. The KS? underground organisation gained popular prestige after it joined the resistance in 1941. In 1946, in the last free elections, it scored 38 percent. Although the ensuing government had a non-Communist majority, nine Communists and seventeen non-Communists, the KS? had control over the police and armed forces.

Though a majority of the country's industrial infrastructure, owned by the Nazis or their collaborators, was immediately nationalised, this did not lead to the introduction of a planned economy or announcement of socialism. The KS? leader, Klement Gottwald, stressed, "in spite of the favourable situation, the next goal is not soviets and socialism, but rather carrying out a really thorough democratic national revolution".

From 1945 to 1947, Stalin and the Communist Parties in Europe kept to the Yalta and Potsdam 'Big Four' agreements that there were to be no socialist revolutions in the states occupied by the Soviet armed forces, nor in the countries like Italy and France, where the PCI and the PCF leaders, Palmiro Togliatti and Maurice Thorez, were ministers in coalition governments with conservatives. Stalin even left the Greek Communists to the tender mercies of the British and the Greek monarchist right. Europe's CPs were encouraged to develop 'national roads to socialism' and Stalin himself mused publicly on whether, after all, there could be a parliamentary road to socialism.

The USA, under its new President, Harry Truman, however, saw all this as just a ruse. On 12 March, 1947, Truman elaborated what became known as the Truman Doctrine to Congress: 'It must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressure.'

He, too, thought it was possible that the Communists might come to power electorally in major states like France and Italy. To stop this, he cajoled, threatened and bribed the European conservatives into breaking with their Communist wartime allies. He rolled out the Marshall Plan, offering huge economic assistance to governments that toed the free market line, and he concluded the military pacts that, in 1949, became Nato.

In Czechoslovakia, there was an enthusiastic response to the Marshall Plan by not only President Edvard Beneš and the bourgeois ministers but also Klement Gottwald and the KSČ ministers. This alerted Stalin to the dangers the new US policy represented. Czech government representatives were summoned to Moscow. There they were browbeaten into rejecting the American offer. In response, in May, the Communist ministers were dismissed from the French and Italian governments under direct American pressure.

Stalin's own response was to consolidate his grip on the states that the Red Army had liberated in 1944-5. Realising that his decision to dissolve the Communist International in 1943, which was done to assuage his imperialist allies' fears of revolution in post-war Europe, had deprived him of a valuable tool, in September he summoned a conference of Communist Parties to found the Communist Information Bureau or Cominform. Here, the French and Italian Communist Parties were the whipping boys for 'allowing their opportunity to seize power to pass them by'.

Ironically, as events were soon to show, it was Tito and the Yugoslav Communists who really laid into the French and Italians. Though not attacked directly, the Czechoslovak party was clearly also meant to take heed and mend its ways. Between April and June of the following year, a series of virulent attacks developed between the Soviet and Yugoslav parties, leading to the latter's expulsion from the Cominform at its second congress, accused of nationalism.

Meanwhile, the Czech Communists dutifully set about ousting the bourgeois party ministers from the coalition, which they did by mobilising mass workers' demonstrations in Prague and other cities on 25 February 1948, threatening a general strike. This was dubbed by the KSČ 'Victorious February.' President Edvard Beneš held on for a few months but finally resigned on 7 June. Now, the remaining parts of the economy were taken into state hands and a system of bureaucratic central planning was set into operation. Czechoslovakia became a copy of the Soviet system, that is, a degenerate workers' state, where the capitalists were expropriated and the profit system suppressed, but in which no democracy based on workers' councils existed.

In 1949, as the Cold War intensified, Stalin became obsessed that KSČ 'victors' might be tempted, with the support of the Czech working class, to follow Yugoslavia and Tito's 'national road'. There still remained a culture of debate and criticism across wide sections of Czech society that the 'Leader of the World Proletariat' detested. So, under Soviet pressure, the party conducted a series of show trials of key leaders and purged hundreds of thousands of activists.

The most infamous was the trial of the KSČ's First Secretary, Rudolf Slánský, and thirteen leading party members, eleven of them Jews, accused of participating in a Trotskyite-Titoite-Zionist conspiracy. After torture, they confessed to all the crimes they were charged with and eleven, including Slánský, were hanged on December 3, 1952. Perhaps as a result of these macabre imitations of the Moscow Trials and Great Purges of 1936-38, Czechoslovakia did not see a version of the anti-Stalinist rebellions that shook East Germany (1953), Poland and Hungary (1956).

Could Stalinism be reformed?

By the early 1960s, Czechoslovakia was suffering from an economic slowdown. In 1962, there had even been a drop in living standards, and in the following years there was not much of a recovery. The quality of the consumer goods produced was very poor and there was a desperate need for modern plant and machinery in the factories. The lack of goods in the shops was a cause of growing anger, particularly amongst the youth, who were less willing to tolerate the inadequacies of the Stalinist system. Meanwhile, capitalism, next door as it were, was booming and generating a popular youth culture.

Alongside these economic problems, there was a growing discontent among sections of the intelligentsia against stifling cultural conformity and they raised demands for rehabilitation of prominent dissidents who had been victimised before 1954. In 1967, the Union of Czechoslovak Writers developed into a forum for criticism of the party leadership and its organ, *Literární noviny*, began to argue that works of literature should be freed from Party censorship.

The Union of Writers' fourth congress, held in June 1967, witnessed open attacks on censorship. In October 1967, a demonstration over repeated power cuts in the student dormitories at the Strahov Technical University, in Prague, saw police wade in with tear gas and batons.

Jan Kavan, one of the student leaders, records:

By the early summer of 1967, we had established close cooperation between students and writers, who demanded more freedom of press, association and assembly and less strict control by the party of all forms of social activities. By the autumn, this cooperation was enhanced by a tentative collaboration with more radical Communist Party (CP) reformists such as František Kriegel, Petr Pithart and others.

The dynamism of the opposition was partly fuelled by the discontent of the Slovak section of the party with the hyper-centralisation of the state and the second rank status accorded to Slovakia. In late 1967, the First Secretary and state President, Antonín Novotný, increasingly unpopular with large parts of the population and the party, met an open challenge from Alexander Dubček, secretary of the Slovakian Party. Despite an appeal to the Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev, the Kremlin refused to step in and Dubček duly became the First Secretary in January 1968. Jan Kavan remarks that he was chosen as a compromise, with both sides believing they could manipulate an indecisive and weak man with no strong power base.

From that point on, there was a new faction in charge of the KSČ, one committed to greater regional autonomy for Slovakia and loosening party control generally, especially over cultural matters. Party censorship was abolished on March 4, greatly increasing freedom of expression in the press. Changes in economic policy emphasised the need to produce better quality and wider ranges of consumer goods. Skilled workers were promised that they would now be rewarded for their qualifications and technical skills.

When Novotný was ousted from the presidency on March 22, and replaced by Ludvík Svoboda, a supporter of reform, Brezhnev became alarmed and leaders of five Warsaw Pact countries met in Dresden, in the German Democratic Republic, to discuss what to do. Here they raised the question of the breakdown of the system by which all candidates for important positions had to be drawn from the Party's approved list, the *nomenklatura*, claiming that "antisocialist elements" were now in control of the press and TV stations. Clearly, for the Soviets and their allies, the entire Stalinist system was in the process of disintegration.

Vasil Bilák, one of the Czech Party's Central Committee hardline conservatives recorded the Soviet advice.

They warned us that the counterrevolution does not always begin with murders, but often with demagoguery, pseudosocialist phrases and appeals to freedom, harmful to the party, the societal apparatus with the weakening and demoralising of the instruments of power, the army, the security organs, the courts, the procuracy??

There, in a nutshell, you have a description of what socialism means to Stalinism; the bureaucratic apparatus and its totalitarian repressive forces for which freedom and democracy represent a mortal threat.

Reform speeds up

In April, the Central Committee issued an Action Programme which could hardly have calmed fears in Moscow or Berlin. It included the statement:

"Socialism cannot mean only liberation of the working people from the domination of exploiting class relations, but must make more provisions for a fuller life of the personality than any bourgeois democracy."

It went on to promise:

"to build an advanced socialist society on sound economic foundations... a socialism that corresponds to the historical democratic traditions of Czechoslovakia, in accordance with the experience of other communist parties..."

As opposed to the blind, monolithic obedience essential to Stalinism, the programme stated: "each member of the party and the party bodies has not only the right but the duty to act according to this conscience."

The Action Programme also called for the election of workers' councils in industry, increased rights for trade unions to bargain on behalf of their members and the right of farmers to form co-operatives.

These glowing phrases were all well and good but there were still no genuine democratic structures within the party which enabled ordinary members to organise to change policies or the leadership. For Dubček, the central role of the party remained sacrosanct, as did the alliance with the Soviet Union. Several times in these months he emphasised that there would be no change in the foreign policy of the country.

The reformers in the KSČ leadership saw themselves as carrying through the de-Stalinisation promised during the years of Nikita Khrushchev's rule within the Russian party (1958 to 1964). On the one hand, they could not concede to Moscow's demands to rein in the freedom of the press without fatally undermining their own base but, on the other, they did not want to see the initiative pass to forces outside the party, let alone to the masses, the students and workers, organised independently of it.

Nevertheless, Dubček did view himself as forging a new path for official Communism, referring to his reform package as "socialism with a human face", that is, the abandonment of the inhuman face of Stalinism. This had been inflicted not only, and not so much, on the capitalist and counterrevolutionary forces but on working class elements who dared be critical of bureaucratic repression and privilege and on the intelligentsia, students, writers, film makers, most of whom were initially sympathetic to socialism.

Workers' Councils and Economic Reform

From June, in accord with the Action Programme, the election of workers' councils began in some industries and rural workers were allowed to form their own cooperatives. The councils adopted their own statutes based on the slogan of "workers' self-management".

Those of the Wilhelm Pieck Factory in Prague (June 1968) stated: "The workers of the W. Pieck factory (CKD Prague) wish to fulfill one of the fundamental rights of socialist democracy, namely the right of the workers to manage their own factory?. A "workers' assembly", involving all the plant's employees, was the sovereign body and elected the workers' council to carry out the decisions of the collective, to manage the plant and hire the director. Council members served limited terms, were elected by secret ballot and were recallable.

Nevertheless, the process was slow and by August there were still less than two dozen such councils, albeit these were in the largest enterprises. Here there was a convergence between the plans of the KSČ reformers, especially those in the economic apparatus like Ota Šik (1919-2004) who had already been involved in attacks on centralised command planning, and sections of workers who wished to establish elements of workers' control and management over production.

The Soviet-style fetishism of sheer quantity of products, they argued, needed to be replaced by criteria based on quality

and efficiency. Obviously, workers as consumers also had an interest in a greater variety of goods and, moreover, goods which worked. Indeed, it was the manifest failures of bureaucratic command planning that tended to sow illusions in the market as a neutral "mechanism" for reconciling demand and supply.

A serious problem for the CP leadership was the manifesto "Two Thousand Words", written by Ludvík Vaculík and published in *Literární listy* and a number of other publications on 27 June. The manifesto was soon signed by thousands. It called for a popular initiative from below:

"Let us set up our own civic committees for the solution of problems that no one wants to deal with. It is simple: a few people meet, they elect their Chair, they write proper minutes, they publish their findings, they demand a solution, they will not be silenced."

It also warned of the threat of "foreign forces" gaining control of the government, which was immediately seen as a direct reference to the Soviet forces who had extended their ongoing military exercises in the country.

The Politburo in the Kremlin were alarmed by the slightest talk of democratisation of the political system. The majority of the Czechoslovak leadership, however, thought they were simply implementing the long awaited de-Stalinisation that Khrushchev had promised after 1953. They were confident that there was no scope for military intervention from the Warsaw Pact states.

The USSR then claimed to have evidence that West Germany was planning to invade the Sudetenland and applied to the Czechoslovak government for permission to deploy the Red Army to defend against a potential incursion. This evidence was clearly bogus and Dubček rejected it, knowing that the real intention of the Kremlin was to crush the growing movement and place the country under military control.

On the night of 20-21 August, the five Warsaw Pact countries, which had recently declared each nation must have "respect for the independence and sovereignty of states", launched "Operation Danube", an invasion of the country with upwards of 200,000 troops. The Kremlin announced to the world that the Warsaw Pact Forces were coming to the aid of their Czechoslovak allies to fight "counterrevolutionary forces", but President Ludvík Svoboda, in a radio statement broadcast as the tanks moved in, declared the invasion illegal.

Dubček, fearing a repeat of the 1956 massacre in Hungary, ordered Czech soldiers not to open fire. As the troops stood down and the occupying tanks rolled into Prague on the 21 August, it was left to hastily organised and unarmed youth and workers to mount resistance, throwing up barricades in order to make the tank crews talk to the demonstrators. But, in the end, flowers placed in rifle barrels are no match for tanks. Of course there was also more determined resistance and clashes during the first eight days left 84 Czechs and four Soviet soldiers dead.

Resistance

Whilst Dubček and six other leaders were seized and whisked away to Moscow, the Prague City Committee decided to go ahead with holding the already planned KSČ Congress. It met in one of the largest industrial plants in Prague's Vysočany district. The Congress condemned the invasion, endorsed the reforms and elected a new leadership. But it did not issue a call for mass action, a general strike and insurrection. In practice, leadership remained in the hands of the party reformers.

Indeed, one of them, the Slovak leader, Gustáv Husák, went over completely to the Soviet demand for "normalisation". He argued that the Vysočany decisions were invalid because the Congress was not quorate. Few Slovak delegates had made it to Prague, thanks to the occupation. Over the next six months, the crippling legalism of the reformers repeatedly obstructed effective resistance and thwarted the brave and creative initiatives from the youth and the militants in the factories. In this period, the number of workers' councils increased dramatically, but the still influential reformers repeatedly diverted them into debating laws and constitutions for workers' self-management, recipes for the cook books of the future, a future that would never come.

Meanwhile, despite the hastily erected barricades in Wenceslas Square, and the brave propaganda war by young

students and workers aimed at the soldiers in the Soviet tanks and in contrast to the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, in which over 2,500 Hungarians and 700 Soviet troops were killed, there was no resistance by the Czech armed forces, there was only mass unarmed resistance on the streets. In a sense, the capitulation of the top Party leaders opened the way for more determined and radical elements amongst the students and working journalists and the workers in the factories to take their own initiatives; organising massive protests and confronting the occupiers with arguments that here was no counterrevolution. Ján Ťulák, then 15 years old, reports in an article of 24 May 2018;

“People had not lost their appetite for public debate and they passionately involved the Soviet troops sitting on their tanks in the streets of Czech cities, telling them that there was no ‘counter-revolution’ in Czechoslovakia. Shop windows and street walls were immediately plastered with hundreds of posters, slogans and cartoons, mocking the invasion. Weekly newspapers started being issued several times a day: vans filled with the new editions distributed the newspapers free throughout the cities. The nation entered a strange state of euphoria.”

Students spoke daily in factories to thousands of workers. They organised a nationwide student strike and campus occupations in November 1968 with the aim to link up with the factory councils to unleash a general strike. For example, a workers’ delegation from the huge East Slovak steel mill in Kosice came to Prague University to discuss this plan with the students.

However, the party ‘reformers’, still nominally in office, were repeatedly able to abort it. Indeed, it was the second most popular figure of the Prague Spring, Josef Smrkovský, who convinced the workers not to take strike action. Again and again the argument was deployed that it was necessary to restrain the resistance to the level of protest in order to keep the reformers in ‘power’. A combination of empty promises and creeping repression continued until, one by one, the dissenting voices were silenced.

A mark of the growing despair of the youth at the withering of the Spring came on January 19, when the 20 year old Jan Palach set fire to himself in the Prague square which now bears his name. There were 200,000 people on the demonstration that followed, the last expression of the mass movement, though two other students immolated themselves in the succeeding months. One of the burns specialists who tried to save Palach’s life said he claimed that his action ‘?’ was not so much in opposition to the Soviet occupation, but the demoralisation which was setting in, that people were not only giving up, but giving in. And he wanted to stop that demoralisation.’

Once the mass movement was demoralised and crushed, the role of the reformers for the Kremlin was exhausted and, like squeezed oranges, they were tossed aside. Dubček was replaced as First Secretary on April 19, 1969 and expelled from the party in 1970 and all talk of reform was scrapped.

The flowers of the Prague Spring were not all that was crushed under the tracks of the Soviet tanks. The revolutionary enthusiasm of the early days and then of the resistance in the autumn had been frittered away under the leadership of the ‘reformers’. The simple fact was that Stalinist socialism could not be given a “human face”.

It was utterly incompatible with the political freedoms; of speech, assembly, and the right to form party and trade union organisation free of KSC control (misnamed ‘the leading role of the party’). A genuine revolutionary party could only win a ‘leading role’ by the free vote of the workers and youth and this in turn required workers’ councils like those of Russia in 1917 (soviets). These had to be organisers of political struggle for, and ultimately of, state power, not simply a means of workers’ self-management of individual enterprises. Market socialism, such as Sik and the reformers wanted, was, as the 1980s showed, a short road back to capitalism, privatisation, and mass unemployment. If workers do not control the state power and the entire economy, then management will be an empty exercise in ‘participation’.

Many accounts paint Dubček as someone breaking from Stalinism, but in essence his reforms were carried out within its top down, anti-democratic bureaucratic structures. His remarks after the takeover indicate how far he was from being a revolutionary: “It is my personal tragedy. My whole life I dedicated to cooperation with the Soviet Union and they do this to me”.

The lack of working class mobilisation in Czechoslovakia, until it was too late, stood in marked contrast to Hungary in the 1950s, and it also revealed the class basis of the opposition movement as being rooted in the intellectuals and sections of the party bureaucracy.

The leading figures in the world communist (Stalinist) movement were placed in a serious dilemma by the Czech intervention. Those parties that had gone furthest along the road to accepting the 'peaceful, parliamentary road to socialism', openly criticised sending in the tanks. On the other hand, hardliners like the French Communist Party supported it. Those who did support it, earned (and, indeed were proud of) the nickname, 'tankies'. The Soviet crushing of the Prague Spring was a major element in breaking young radicals from Moscow style Stalinism.

A bigger shock, to his admirers on the Western New Left, was that Fidel Castro supported the intervention; 'Right here I wish to make the first important affirmation; we considered that Czechoslovakia was moving towards a counterrevolutionary situation; towards capitalism; into the arms of imperialism? So this defines our first position in relation to the specific fact of the action taken by a group of socialist countries. That we consider that it was absolutely necessary, at all costs, in one way or another, to prevent this eventuality from taking place.'

For Stalinists like Castro, defending the 'socialist bloc', whose economic and military aid was crucial to the survival of the Cuban Stalinist regime, was more important than measures like democratic reforms (which he could not imitate in any case) and exposed as empty rhetoric the spreading of the international revolution, associated with Che Guevara, who had been murdered by a CIA operative in Bolivia the previous autumn.

The final lesson of the Czechoslovak struggle in 1968-9 is embodied in the words that the German dramatist Georg Buchner (1813-37) put into the mouth of the Jacobin leader Robespierre: 'The social revolution is not over yet. He who makes only half a revolution digs his own grave. The old ruling class is not yet dead.'

What was needed was a proletarian political revolution, like that fought for by Trotsky in the 1930s; breaking up the power of the bureaucracy by creating the power of workers' councils, not marketising the economy but creating a democratic planning system coordinated by a democratically agreed plan.

Only under the latter would genuine workers' management in the enterprises end the alienation of either Stalinism or capitalism. There was no party fighting for such a programme in 1968 and so, although the discrediting of Stalinism was a vital lesson for workers and youth all over the world and many were inspired by the Czech workers, for most, particularly those still living under Stalinist rule, the lesson to be drawn was the need to go much further along the road of 'market reforms'. Thus, the defeat of the Prague Spring opened the way to the 'Velvet Revolution' and the restoration of capitalism.

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