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TASK TEAM REPORT

CRITICAL SITUATION OVERVIEW

The Soviet-Czechoslovak Crisis, 1968

The Soviet-Czechoslovak crisis of 1968 continues to be useful for retrospective study and analysis of the main problems posed for intelligence both in monitoring the evolution of a critical situation and in making adequate judgments regarding the likelihood and imminence of ensuing hostile military action. Documentation on the intelligence coverage of this crisis is extensive. Community reporting over its long course was voluminous. Under USIB aegis, detailed post-mortems were also prepared on this crisis shortly after it had subsided.\* These post-mortems reviewed and appraised the intelligence publication record, the performance of sources, and the general effectiveness of the indications/warning process in such crises. In the succeeding paragraphs of this paper we have drawn upon these records to: (a) summarize the crisis itself, and (b) highlight the characteristics of this crisis which are probably common in many crises.

1. The Origin and Beginning of the Crisis. The Soviet-Czechoslovak crisis of 1968 was marked initially by Soviet miscalculation--a factor which also figured in the Cuban missile crisis, 1962. First, the USSR had not evidenced any particular or growing concern over Czechoslovak restiveness which had been brewing since 1963. Second, Moscow failed to appreciate that fundamental political changes were underway in Czechoslovakia and in late December 1967 acquiesced in Novotny's ouster, paving the way for Dubcek's assumption of power. But the moves made by the new Dubcek regime in early January 1968 to liberalize Czechoslovak political life and encourage a free press began to arouse Soviet apprehension. From the intelligence standpoint

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the crisis began at that time--although its roots may be traced back, historically, for several years and possibly even decades.

2. Build-up of the Crisis. The crisis built-up slowly almost imperceptibly at first. During the first two to three months in 1968, we believe that the Soviet leadership came to recognize the Czechoslovak liberalization actions as an open, heretical threat to Communist ideology. From the Soviet point of view, unless arrested, such a heresy could spread into other satellite countries and, conceivably, to the Soviet Union itself. More importantly, Czechoslovak independence could seriously weaken the heart of Soviet strategy in Eastern Europe: political hegemony, a military buffer zone west of the Soviet frontier, and a shield of reliable satellite forces arrayed opposite NATO.

3. Late in March, intelligence began to suggest that, if things went unchecked, there was ultimately the possibility of Soviet military intervention in Czechoslovakia. Earlier in March, statements by the leaders and in the Soviet and East European press as well as information from other sources clearly indicated that the Soviets were alarmed over developments in Czechoslovakia and considered them more serious than the Rumanian assertion of independence in foreign policy. Reports received during and after the 23 March Dresden meeting confirmed that the Soviet Union and its orthodox allies believed that Communist rule was indeed threatened in Czechoslovakia. However, other considerations made it appear to intelligence at the time that Prague had succeeded in gaining Moscow tolerance of its experiment, at least momentarily.

4. The Crisis Worsens: Deployment of Soviet Troops on the Czechoslovak Borders. The situation became "more serious" in early May when the Soviets moved elements of seven to eight ground divisions to the borders of Czechoslovakia. The initial deployment of these forces probably occurred between 5 and 8 May. In retrospect, it appears that this troop activity was a reaction to Soviet failure to persuade Dubcek to alter his course during his stay in Moscow, 4-5 May. The earlier last-minute cancellation of Warsaw Pact Exercise CASCADE, which had been scheduled to start on 1 April indicated developments in Czechoslovakia had reached a point where Prague's willingness to honor Warsaw Pact commitments had been at issue.

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5. [redacted] we believe that these ground forces were drawn out of garrisons of the Group of Soviet Forces, Germany, the Northern Group of Forces, Poland and the Carpathian Military District and shifted, respectively, to areas of East Germany, Poland, and the USSR contiguous to Czechoslovakia. [redacted]

[redacted] the precise composition of the forces which were deployed are still unknown to us. We also remain uncertain about the Soviet purpose in deploying these forces. [redacted]

[redacted] Certainly, the forces in place represented a form of pressure. Moreover, they were effectively positioned for rapid displacement into Czechoslovakia either on Soviet decision, or by "invitation" from some conservative elements in Czechoslovakia.

6. Soviet deployment of ground forces to the Czechoslovak border must have been preceded by some preparatory measures. It is probable that preliminary planning of this action took place sometime in April at the latest. But we know little of the advance preparations. Although the troop movements were unannounced and not confirmed publicly by the Soviets until 10 May, we know that ground contingents were at the Czechoslovak borders as early as 5-8 May. We have no firm evidence, however, on their staging, departure, transport, and positioning outside their normal garrisons. It is possible, for example, that advance parties [redacted] could have moved to the border areas sometime before the arrival of the main elements. In the case of the divisions deployed from the Carpathian Military District which have been identified as being at the border in May, it is probable that preparations for their movement involved some augmentation in personnel and equipment and other activity normally associated with such movement. Yet, we did not observe this activity--nor were we able to negate it on the basis of information received either at the time or since.

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7. There was no intelligence evidence of any unusual air, naval, or other military force activity by Soviet or East European units during the initial period of this ground force maneuvering or in the following fortnight or so. We believe that it took the Soviets until about 19 June to complete this initial deployment of divisional ground forces and some non-divisional service and support troops to the border areas. These troops remained in place along the Czechoslovak borders at least up to the time of the August invasion.

8. While the USSR continued political negotiations with Czechoslovakia during May and June 1968, it also exerted new military pressures additional to that represented by border deployment. Military activity was generally stepped up throughout the USSR and Eastern Europe. Some of this activity seemed to focus on Czechoslovakia.

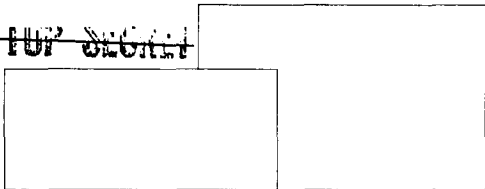
[REDACTED] A number of exercises were conducted and there were many visits to Prague by senior Soviet officers. This increased level of activity continued in the period to the beginning of Warsaw Pact Exercise, SUMAVA.

9. On 24 May, Czechoslovakia announced that Exercise SUMAVA would be held on its territory--apparently in response to Soviet demands for such an exercise. This action provided the Soviets with the excuse which they had seemed to be seeking for several weeks to introduce military forces into Czechoslovakia.

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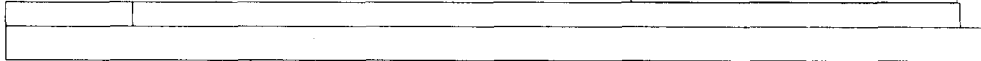
[REDACTED] We know now reliably, but did not at the time, that Exercise SUMAVA was hastily arranged.

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10. The First Intervention: Exercise SUMAVA. Exercise SUMAVA was conducted in the period 20-30 June by Soviet, Polish, Czechoslovak, and East German forces--and possibly Hungarian and Bulgarian. It was widely publicized both in the Warsaw Pact countries and in the West.

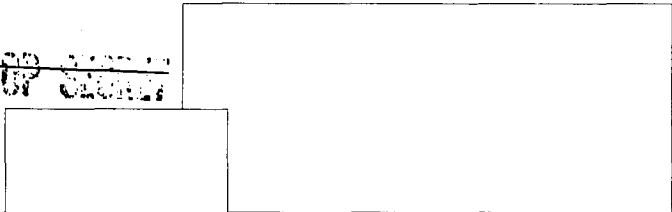
11. The scenario for Exercise SUMAVA



In many respects it was a plan applicable for movement of Soviet forces into Czechoslovakia from positions in East Germany, Poland and the USSR in reaction to any contingency--and it so served.

12. The USSR delayed withdrawal of its forces when the exercise terminated. Soviet elements probably began to leave between 13 and 15 July, but at a slow and deliberate rate--some two weeks after the exercise had ended. Soviet forces were still leaving Czechoslovakia in early August. A definitive account of this withdrawal has never been developed, however. These Soviet troops did not return to their permanent bases; instead they repositioned along the border.

13. The Political Confrontations and the Weight of Soviet Military Pressure Increases, 13-23 July. A new critical stage in the crisis developed during the second half of July 1968. In an Intelligence Memorandum [redacted] CIA noted similarities between the Soviet actions toward Prague and those moves which preceded the 1956 Soviet intervention in Budapest and warned that the "Soviet troops which moved into Czechoslovakia were placed there not for the exercises that provide a pretext, but as a token of Moscow's readiness to intervene militarily if worst came to worst." The Soviets met in Warsaw with their four hard-line allies--East Germany, Poland, Hungary, and Bulgaria-- on 14 and 15 July. This meeting resulted in the harshly-worded "Warsaw letter" to Prague. [redacted] on the situation emphasized that if all pressures failed to divert the Czechoslovaks from their course, the Soviet leaders "would choose...to move militarily to reimpose conventional Communist power." Prague reacted with a counter-proposal for bilateral meetings with Moscow which the Soviets accepted. These meetings were eventually held, of course, in Cierna, 29 July - 1 August.



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14. On the military side during the latter part of July, Soviet activity continued to intensify.

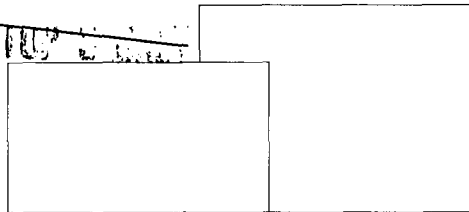
border. Soviet tactical aircraft were deployed to bases in East Germany, Poland, and the Military Districts of the USSR near Czechoslovakia. A number of unusual increases in other military activities were also noted at the time.

15. Soviet Build-up of Capability to Intervene, 23 July - 20 August. On 23 July the Soviet Defense Ministry announced the beginning of a 19-day large-scale military logistics exercise which would involve the mobilization of rear services units, equipment, personnel (including regular troops and reservists) and motor transport from the national economy. This exercise was widely publicized in the Soviet press. Red Star, for example, carried detailed daily accounts about it. The Soviet press coverage was our best source of information on the activity occurring during this exercise. Without this reporting, we probably would not have understood this event in any useful respect.

16. Several factors suggested to intelligence that this exercise was unusual and had a purpose different than was being described in the Soviet press. It was conducted, for example, in conjunction with other large-scale military training activities in a period when tension between the USSR and Czechoslovakia was high. Moreover, it was also during the agricultural harvest season when the mobilization of reservists and requisitioning of various civilian equipments and vehicles, especially trucks, could be expected to adversely affect the level of production in this important sector of the Soviet economy. In retrospect, we have little doubt that the Soviets planned and carried out this exercise as a pretext for movements of major forces and the mobilization of selected understrength combat, service, and support units.

17. During the period mid-July through early August the Soviets established a capability to intervene militarily in Czechoslovakia on short notice, if so ordered by the leadership. To achieve this state of readiness in such a short period, the USSR combined the movement and concentration of a large new

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force of ground combat forces along the Czechoslovak borders with its rear services exercise, which by 30 July had been extended to East Germany and Poland.

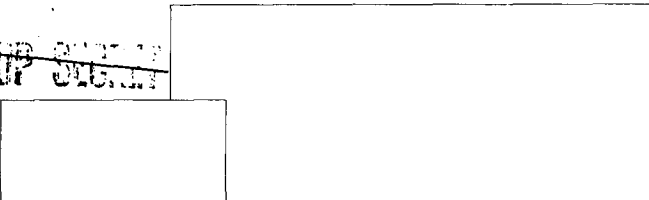
18. [redacted]

[redacted] Between 24 and 30 July, five divisions from the Group of Soviet Forces, Germany moved to the Czechoslovak border, reinforcing those already in place. Three divisions from the Southern Group of Forces, Hungary, deployed on the border, while divisions from the Belorussian and Carpathian Military Districts deployed into Poland. By 30 July there were 18 Soviet divisions at the border. A Bulgarian regiment, two East German, two Hungarian, and three Polish divisions were also positioned along the Czechoslovak borders at this time.

19. A tactical air build-up accompanied these ground force deployments. On 27 and 28 July more than 250, and possibly as many as 400, Soviet fighter-bombers and bombers were deployed from East Germany, Poland, and the Belorussian and Carpathian Military Districts to bases in southeast East Germany and southwest Poland. [redacted]

20. The Cierna conference which began on 29 July in this context was described at the time in a CIA publication as taking place under "immense Soviet psychological-military pressure." Although the USIB Watch Committee concluded on 1 August--the day on which the Cierna talks ended--that while "the USSR is in a high state of readiness to intervene in Czechoslovakia if such action is deemed necessary" (a conclusion repeated by the Committee on 8 and 15 August), some sort of agreement appeared to have been reached in the conference. The Soviet press called for adherence to "the agreement" and seemed less bellicose. There were other signs on the political side that the tension had slackened and these persisted through the Bratislava meeting of 3-4 August. Soviet troops which had been in Czechoslovakia for Exercise SUMAVA were reportedly still withdrawing while the

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Cierna talks were in progress and there were some indications that this withdrawal had been completed about the time the Bratislava meeting began.

21. The Soviet military posture around Czechoslovakia was not affected by the Cierna and Bratislava conferences, however. The Soviet forces remained on the Czechoslovak borders and were reinforced by elements from the Baltic Military District. There was additional evidence that the Soviets continued preparations against the contingency of intervention in Czechoslovakia.

22. From 1-20 August, additional ground forces were moved from the Soviet Union into Poland and additional Soviet tactical aircraft were staged to the Czechoslovak border areas. Long-range subordinated air transports operating in an unprecedented forward area support role flew to the same key destinations later used by the Soviets when they intervened. [Redacted]

[Redacted] Several exercises also took place.

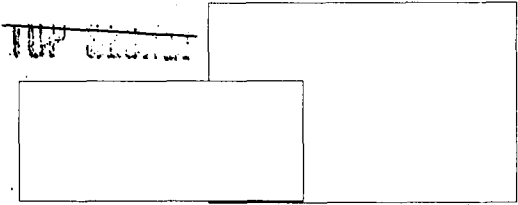
23. The most important of these exercises--a command post exercise involving Soviet, Polish, and East German forces with over-all control in Moscow--began on 13 August and continued for a five-day period. We believe that this exercise was a last-minute rehearsal for the invasion of Czechoslovakia. Its scenario was followed in detail when the Soviets invaded Czechoslovakia.\* Moscow publicized this exercise probably to avoid its being interpreted in the West as preparations for intervention in Czechoslovakia or a move against West Germany.

24. The Invasion, 20 August, and Aftermath. The USSR invaded Czechoslovakia on 20 August 1968 in a coordinated assault involving 16 or so ground force divisions supported by air transport and tactical air elements. There was no Czechoslovak opposition to this invasion when it began. The Soviets quickly seized control of key political administrative, communications, and transport facilities and installations, including at least two

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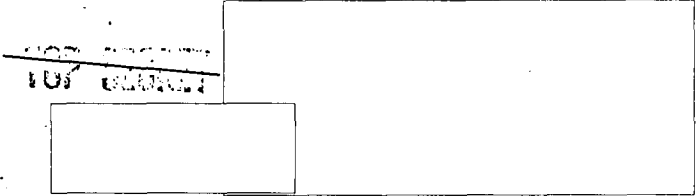




major airports (Prague and Brno). Soviet air units also occupied a large number of Czechoslovak airfields. The forces which penetrated Czechoslovakia initially were delivered by air. The ground forces which moved overland from border positions were linked with these elements within a few hours. During the course of the occupation the Soviets introduced 11 additional ground force divisions, possibly replacing some of the units involved in an earlier stage of the operation. In other actions, the Soviets secured and consolidated their occupation forces.

25. Representative Characteristics of the Soviet-Czechoslovak Crisis, 1968. Many of the elements which entered into this crisis are common to other critical situations, especially those which might arise in Eastern Europe involving the USSR. As illustrated in the foregoing paragraphs a full range of basic political, economic, psychological, ideological, and military factors figured in intelligence coverage of this contingency. The mix and weight of these factors will certainly never be duplicated in any future confrontation between the USSR and one of its East European satellites. But our experience with this crisis provides some specific basis for determining when and where better collection support, for example, would help us in any comparable situation.

26. The 1968 Soviet-Czechoslovak Crisis developed slowly over a relatively long period of time. During the several months of this crisis, however, the situation appeared to intelligence to ebb and flow. Looking back on the crisis, we now believe that even after late March when Soviet leaders first seemed to have perceived the military implications and consequences of the Czechoslovak reform program, they continued to maneuver patiently to annul it by means other than by direct military intervention. In their various efforts to dissuade Prague from liberalization, they tried meetings and conferences, psychological and economic pressures, limited troop deployment and increased military activity along Czechoslovak borders, military occupation under cover of Warsaw Pact exercise, and finally a large-scale build-up of forces that were used ultimately to invade Czechoslovakia. Immediately after the Dresden meeting in March it appeared that Moscow might tolerate the Czechoslovak experiment. But intelligence saw "new frictions" by late April and the possibility that "the growing independence of the Dubcek



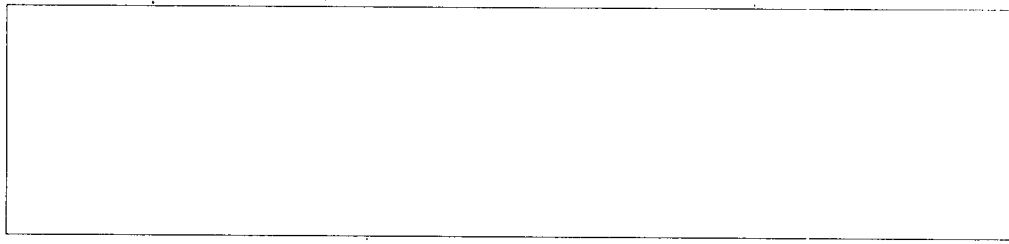
regime may yet bring a harder Soviet reaction, and the relatively muted dispute may become more serious." Subsequent to the early May movement of several Soviet ground force divisions to the Czechoslovak borders, "...the political climate alternately improved and worsened and the tone of the Soviet press oscillated periodically from open, almost threatening hostility to mild, conciliatory rebuke." Meanwhile, however, the USSR maintained its military presence around Czechoslovakia. Almost to the moment of the Soviet invasion, there were signs that the Soviets worked for other than a military solution to the Czechoslovak problem.

27. Reexamination of this crisis alerts us, moreover, to various particular points in time when the Soviets could have shortened this crisis. If the Soviets had chosen to place heavier reliance on their military superiority and only minor concern about the sensibilities and aspirations of its Czechoslovak ally and its other satellites, the timetable of events which actually occurred could have been significantly compressed, assuming no change in Czechoslovak intransigence. On the other hand, the Soviets could have further protracted the crisis. The situation between the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia would not have reached its final critical phase, of course, if the Czechoslovaks had knuckled under at any point along the way.

28. Similar appreciations of various representative problems which could be presented to intelligence in the event of another crisis in Eastern Europe can be discerned in review of the performance in this crisis various intelligence sources, including that which was disseminated openly by the Soviets and Czechoslovaks. In an earlier paragraph we noted that the Soviet press was our main source of information on the rear services exercise conducted in late July.

In another crisis, this might be reversed--or it could happen that neither of these information sources supplied information. These considerations serve as further reminders that in our study of this crisis we should consider both interaction among sources and the many variations in other ingredients of this crisis as possible circumstances which we might encounter in a future crisis in this area.

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