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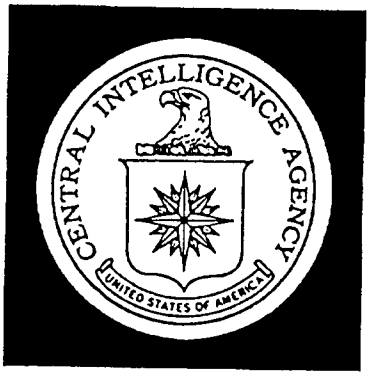

DIRECTORATE OF
INTELLIGENCE

Intelligence Memorandum

The USSR's International Position After Czechoslovakia

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
19 September 1968

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

The USSR's International Position After Czechoslovakia

Summary

Moscow intervened in Czechoslovakia because it feared for its hold over Eastern Europe. Calculations of profit and loss with respect to Soviet international policy in general were secondary. The decision to invade meant that the Soviet determination to preserve the status quo in Eastern Europe overrode any urge that Moscow might have had to seek advantage in limited accommodations with the non-Communist world. In this sense, the Soviet leadership behaved characteristically. Intervention was, at the same time, the most difficult decision ever made by the Brezhnev-Kosygin regime and may turn out to be its most fateful one.

Although the Soviets would like to regard the Czechoslovak affair as essentially internal business and to have the rest of the world so regard it, the issue inevitably raises additional issues for them: relations between East and West and between Communist parties, the trend of Soviet defense spending, the development of the Soviet economy and internal discipline. Only time can tell whether the Soviets were right in concluding that intervention was the lesser of two evils. It will depend, among other things, on whether and for how long the pressures for reform in Czechoslovakia and elsewhere in the Soviet bloc can be contained; whether the collective

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leadership can master its own internal conflicts, and how the policies of others, especially the US, are influenced by what has happened in Czechoslovakia.

Increased distrust of the USSR in the US and Soviet defensiveness and insecurity revealed by the invasion do not bode well for US-Soviet relations in the near future. The possibility should not be excluded, however, that Moscow will see some need after Czechoslovakia for taking steps to keep US-Soviet relations from settling into a total freeze. There is, at any rate, no present indication that Moscow's interest in missile talks with the US is less than before.

1. It will be months before the "fall-out" from the invasion of Czechoslovakia has settled to earth. What this does to Soviet policy will have to be seen. It seems almost certain, however, that Moscow did not mean its intervention to mark a turning point in its policies generally. The Russian leaders would prefer to think of it, and to have others think of it, as a regrettable but necessary disciplinary action within its own family.

2. Intervention was the most difficult decision made by the Soviet collective leadership during its four years of rule, and probably its most fateful one. Moscow invaded Czechoslovakia because it was afraid not to. The signal to intervene was given because a conclusion had been reached that the cost of nonintervention was unbearable. It presumably also reckoned that, though there would be damage from intervention, it would be damage which could be tolerated. The decision stemmed from anxiety and insecurity, but it also rested on the rational calculation that there was virtually no risk of nuclear confrontation. Whether, in fact, the Soviets chose the lesser or the greater of two evils will only become evident in time. It will depend on several unknowns: if and for how long the pressures for reform in Czechoslovakia and elsewhere in the Soviet bloc can be contained; whether the collective leadership can master its own internal conflicts; and how the policies of others, especially the US, are influenced by what has happened in Czechoslovakia.

3. The occupation of Czechoslovakia reveals that Moscow is not ready to tolerate anywhere in Eastern Europe a weakening of the system of centralized, one-party rule it practices at home. It cannot permit the lesser states in the Warsaw Pact alliance to come to think that they can devise their own blueprints for the reform of the Communist system or that they can serve as pathfinders in a search for a reconciliation of the opposing systems in Europe. The Soviets' anxiety about their security in Eastern Europe is all the greater because of their uncertainty about the security--in both political and physical terms--of their other flank, on the Chinese side.

4. For a dozen years--ever since Hungary--the Soviets have been groping for a means of ensuring a more or less voluntary acceptance by Eastern Europe of their leadership. The goals of a "socialist commonwealth" and of a reconsolidation of the Communist movement around Moscow on the basis of common interests were probably never attainable on Moscow's terms, but these were more than just propaganda slogans. Although the goals are a shambles now, the tortuous course followed by the Russians before intervention and their backing and filling since then both suggest that they do not want to have to hold Eastern Europe down solely by force if there is any other way. As soon as Czechoslovakia is "normalized," the Soviets must begin again the search for a non-Stalinist dispensation for Eastern Europe.

4. There is every reason to suppose that the Soviet leadership will remain preoccupied, and painfully so, with the problems of Eastern Europe for some time to come, as it has for the better part of the last nine months. And with the problem of Czechoslovakia there arise such attendant questions as the future of relations between East and West and between Communist parties, defense spending, the development of the Soviet economy, and internal discipline. It would not be surprising if the collective leadership failed to weather in its present form the conflict which these issues seem likely to produce.

6. Intervention need not, and probably does not, mean that a faction of "hawks" has got the better of a faction of "doves" in the Politburo. From its first days, the present ruling committee has consistently shown more concern for the Soviet position among other Communist parties and within the Warsaw Pact than for "detente." While caution and compromise have been the most notable characteristics of the collective leadership's behavior, its alarm about the spreading diversity in Communist ranks and the flouting of Moscow's authority within its own orbit have been apparent. Also evident, side by side with a recognition of the indispensability of "peaceful coexistence," has been a constantly rising alarm

over the hazards for the USSR of exposure to outside influences. With Czechoslovakia, this concern rose to the level of fright. The decision went finally in favor of a primitive, neo-Stalinist attitude which has never, in the past four years, been far from the surface. What is not known, and may not be known for some time, is to what extent this attitude will color Soviet behavior elsewhere.

7. Moscow is now playing for time--time, in the first place, to assure itself that Czechoslovakia is safely back in the fold; to absorb, if it can, the impact of intervention on its own leadership; to sort out the effects on the Soviet position among foreign parties; and to assess the consequences of intervention for its international objectives. It has probably already offered the non-Communist world the only justification it intends to give for its invasion of Czechoslovakia, namely, that Moscow considered its national interests to be threatened and that, like it or not, the world must accept its decision. Foreign Communist parties were clearly expected to respond to the cue of "counterrevolution," but the great majority have not done so. They have seen instead that where Czechoslovakia was concerned, the USSR put its own interests first, and that is what most of the parties have themselves done. The November conference of Communist parties, if now it takes place at all, cannot possibly do what the Soviets intended it to do: develop a new pro-Soviet, anti-Chinese front of Communist parties. Having discovered this, Moscow is likely to value all the more loyal allies like Ulbricht and to consider it all the more necessary to remain sturdy in its support of North Vietnam.

8. There is, in addition, some obvious damage, in the short term, to goals Moscow was pursuing beyond the frontiers of the Communist world. A brake has been put on the momentum which the USSR, together with the US, had succeeded in building up behind the NPT, and considerable diplomatic effort will have to be spent in restoring it. It remains to be seen whether Czechoslovakia has breathed new life into NATO, but the Soviets must now reckon with this possibility. In general, however, the main effects will be in the "psychological" realm and will

depend on whether and how soon Moscow can persuade others to think of Czechoslovakia as an unfortunate episode. In concrete terms, the direct consequences will be slight. Moscow's recurrent expressions of interest in multilateral projects looking toward a lowering of the barriers between East and West in Europe, such as a European security conference, have always seemed more propagandistic than genuine, and it will be no catastrophe for the Russians if these projects are pushed further into the future. Moscow has all along been following a policy of expediency toward Western Eruope, hoping that, with some encouragement, the Western alliance would begin to come apart while its own alliance was still more or less intact. But the Russians have always been more concerned with preserving the status quo in Eastern Europe than in undermining it in Western Europe. Moscow would no doubt have liked to have had it both ways, but Czechoslovakia has made this more difficult. Soviet influence in Western Europe is bound to recede, temporarily at least. But as between the two--influence in Western Europe and authority in Eastern Europe--the Kremlin decided it had only one choice.

9. West Germany is a case apart. Moscow depends on a fear of resurgent German power in Europe--to which it is itself far from immune--to help hold the Warsaw Pact together. It realizes, at the same time, that Bonn will have some say about the shape of a future "European settlement." The Russians have wanted to be able, until that time comes, to keep open a line of communication with the West Germans in order to influence their views on a settlement. They have dangled the prospect of a brighter future before them in private, while inveighing against them publicly. The use of this tactic is now temporarily denied the Russians, and it may turn out that, partly out of their own fear of the impact of Bonn's Eastern policy, they have revived fears in West Germany which will be slow to subside. If this has happened, it will complicate Western pursuit of detente after the Czechoslovak dust has settled.

10. Against the background of heightened Soviet concern for the preservation of the status quo in Eastern Europe, the issue of Berlin will remain a

sensitive one. Moscow is aware, however, that Berlin, unlike Czechoslovakia, could readily become the scene of a dangerous East-West confrontation. How the Russians deal with the problem in coming months--when there will be occasion for a test of the positions of East and West in the city--could be a good gauge of the USSR's intentions in general.

11. The Soviet action will have the least impact in the nonaligned world. The USSR may be damaged in those places where its standing has depended to some extent on the validity of its "anti-imperialist" credentials, but those places are probably few. In the Third World, the Soviet position is not likely to be much weakened where it is now strong, as among the Arab states. By and large, the leaders of the nonaligned nations will want to treat the Czechoslovak issue as none of their business. The abstention of India, Pakistan, and Algeria in the vote on the Czechoslovak question in the Security Council is a good sign that recipients of Soviet economic and military assistance will not want to deny themselves future benefits for the sake of what they are likely to think of as a remote and largely irrelevant issue.

12. Finally, where the future of US-Soviet relations is concerned, the outlook depends to some degree on the US attitude. It will probably cause the Soviets little pain if the US cuts back on cultural exchanges, for which they had no great enthusiasm anyway. The idea of a mutual reduction of forces in central Europe, as a first step toward a solution of the problems of European security, is already a casualty; but this will be regretted more in Washington than in Moscow. Such hopes as there were for cooperation between the US and USSR in removing some of the sources of tension in the Middle East seem dimmer, although it may be all the more in the USSR's interest to see that the conflict there remains mainly in the political arena. Moscow seems likely, moreover, to be more determined than ever to remain strictly in line with Hanoi with respect to the Paris negotiations. But, on the question of the Soviet position on nuclear weapons control, it cannot be said with certainty what Soviet behavior toward Czechoslovakia portends. The

present indications are that Soviet interest in discussions has not been diminished by Czechoslovakia. It may be that the economic and technological arguments for an agreement with the US are apparent to one or another degree across the whole spectrum of Soviet opinion, from militant to pragmatic. Not to be excluded also is the possibility that Moscow will see the need as greater after Czechoslovakia for offsetting steps to keep US-Soviet relations from settling into a total freeze.

13. US-Soviet missile talks, however, have all along promised to be difficult. Distrust of the USSR in the US, which is bound to grow as a result of Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia, combined with the defensiveness and insecurity on the part of the Russians which that action represented, may mean that any talks will now face still harder going.