

~~SECRET~~CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

31 January 1969

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Near Term Prospects for Czechoslovakia

NOTE

The situation in Czechoslovakia changes almost daily. Moreover, the quality of evidence available to sort out the constants from the variables has declined since the August invasion. This paper reviews some of the evidence, and poses three possible Soviet courses of action in dealing with the continuing crisis between Moscow and Prague.

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1. 1969 in Czechoslovakia has begun as eventfully and surprisingly as 1968. It could continue in much the same manner, with fresh outbursts of Czechoslovak defiance of Soviet authority, more brave words and bizarre deeds which the Czechoslovak leaders cannot be sure of controlling. By 15 January, when he appeared on national television, Premier Cernik had apparently convinced

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himself and much of his audience that "the situation undoubtedly has now calmed down somewhat." Barely twenty hours later, in Prague's Wenceslas Square, came the first self-immolation in defense of free speech and free press and against the Soviet presence.

2. Nor can the Soviets, it appears, be certain now that their post-August strategy will work after all. They had hoped to force Czechoslovakia back into the "approved mold" (the term used in NIE 12-68*) mainly by indirection, that is by having the Dubcek regime gradually retreat on its own pre-August promises and thereby discredit itself with the population, destroy its own unity, and hasten its tranquil demise. But progress along this route, from the Soviet point of view, has been extremely slow and uneven.

3. In the Smrkovsky episode, for instance, it appears that the Soviets and their collaborators in the Czechoslovak

* NIE 12-68, "Eastern Europe and the USSR in the Aftermath of the Invasion of Czechoslovakia," 7 November 1968,
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Party made a well orchestrated attempt, both to remove the most outspokenly liberal and anti-Soviet leader from power, and to generate a mood of apathy and ethnic disunity favorable to Soviet and conservative purposes. But so far this effort has produced nearly the opposite results. Smrkovsky now seems to have more Party and popular support than at any time in his career. Slovak Party Secretary Husak, the main Soviet errand boy in the episode, has been at least temporarily put on the defensive by the direct and indirect^{1/} public campaign against him. And the trade unions, in rallying behind Smrkovsky, have added new voice and muscle to the wave of intellectual and youth protests against the Soviets, which, even before the suicide of Jan Palach, was rising.^{2/}

^{1/} An example of the indirect technique: timely publication, without editorial comment, of a public opinion poll on the degree of confidence in the leadership. The poll showed that the Czech, Smrkovsky, was nearly twice as popular in Slovakia as the Slovak, Husak.

^{2/} As of 28 January, according to Czechoslovak Interior Minister Pelnar, 18 persons had tried to commit suicide by self-immolation. The "majority" of these, he maintained, had "no political motives." Among the anti-Soviet protests raised before suicide was an interview with a prominent Communist, published in the 21 December issue of Obrana Lidu, weekly organ of the Czechoslovak Ministry of Defense. The Communist said, in part: "I know from my own experience what a job it was to win people's sympathies for the Soviet Union, especially before the war....During the war I worked for Moscow Radio and lived with the Soviet people....Then came August 1968. I shall never reconcile myself to it. I shall never give up the view that we alone are responsible for the conduct of our internal affairs."

Obstacles in Czechoslovakia to Moscow's Pacification Program

4. If preservation of a strong Communist Party in Czechoslovakia was Moscow's main pretext for intervention last August, it is perhaps Prague's best defense against a new, more brutal Soviet intervention now. Conservatives, pro-Soviet and "realists" have made serious inroads into Party and state organs since last August, yet the apparatus as a whole has remained remarkably loyal to the Top Four (Dubcek, Cernik, Svoboda, Smrkovsky), and the Four themselves appear to be united, even at this late date, on most major issues.

5. The key relationship apparently has been that between Dubcek and Premier Cernik. Liberals in the Party fear that Cernik has been too ready to accommodate the Soviets and their friends on matters such as the demotion of outspoken liberals of the Smrkovsky and Ota Sik* variety, or the reimposition of censorship, or perhaps

* Sik, the most radical economic reformer in Czechoslovakia prior to August and still a member of the Party Central Committee, Eduard Goldstuecker, the outspokenly liberal Chairman of the Writers Union, and Zdenek Hejzlar, director of the Czechoslovak Radio before August and during the first weeks of the occupation, have been living in semi-exile in Western Europe since the invasion. But those three, among others, returned to Prague last week to attend a meeting of the Czech National Council. The first two were identified among the mourners at Jan Palach's funeral. The pro-Soviet Radio Vltava described the return of Sik and Goldstuecker to Czechoslovakia as "incredible."

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even the issuance of some form of official justification of the August invasion. Indeed there is some evidence that Cernik, in his preoccupation with reestablishing public order and a viable economy, has criticized Dubcek for being too inflexible on the other more political, or even philosophic, questions. Cernik probably believes that Dubcek is "naive," whereas he prefers to be "realistic." Certain public statements by the Soviets (e.g., the so-called White Book, an attempt to justify the invasion), indicate that Moscow has tried to capitalize on Cernik's "realism," if only by making favorable reference to Cernik while ignoring Dubcek.

6. But there is no evidence that Cernik has challenged Dubcek for leadership of the Party, or that he disputes Dubcek's contention that there must be no return to the Stalinist '50's in Czechoslovakia, or even to the days before January 1968. As he stated to the Federal Assembly on 30 January, "We will not allow action against citizens who are living within the bounds of the law....No one will be punished for his political views if he has committed no illegal act." Further, Cernik seems to have been useful in keeping in line that ambitious, potential collaborator

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(the Soviets evidently evaluated him that way), Lubomir Strougal, head of the powerful Czech Party Bureau. According to one report, certain forces in the Central Committee might have gathered a majority at a recent plenum (16-17 January) to oust Dubcek from the post of First Secretary, but they failed to enlist Strougal's support.

7. And what of Dubcek himself? An earlier opinion of the man* was that he was an "enigma," and perhaps did "not know whether, if Czechoslovakia should go the road of Hungary in 1956, he would play the role of Kadar, the reluctant Soviet puppet, or Nagy, the reluctant national martyr." There are still many observers who believe he has or will accommodate Soviet demands at the cost of Czechoslovak freedoms. But as of now he seems, in essential matters, more like Nagy than Kadar -- even the Kadar of 1968. He is unwilling to justify the Soviet intervention, whereas Kadar did justify it in 1956, and he is unwilling to countenance the return of "the terror" -- i.e., mass arrests, imprisonments and executions for nonviolent political activities on even a temporary basis, whereas Kadar did. If pressed on these two key issues, according

* Memorandum for DCI, "The Czechoslovak Crisis," July 1968, SECRET.

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to a Western observer with good access to his entourage, Dubcek, as long as he is of sound mind and body, would openly defy the Soviets in some dramatic gesture. Short of that, he will seek to remain in power, hoping for a more moderate attitude in Moscow, meanwhile softening the implementation of Moscow's will and presenting in his private dealings with the Soviets the very same demands as the Czechoslovak people voice publicly, for example, regarding the banning of the Soviet occupation newspaper, Zpravy, the cessation of public criticism by East German and Polish media, and even the withdrawal of the remaining Soviet troops from Czechoslovakia.

8. Perhaps Dubcek is "naive" in his strategy and his assumptions. Perhaps, in a deeper sense, he views his role as being like that of so many Czechs and Slovaks of historical prominence, essentially tragic. In any case, he seems to retain significant personal influence over other figures in the Czechoslovak Party, from the ultra-liberal Smrkovsky and the more

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pragmatic Cernik to many of those whom the Soviets have sought to range against him.* Moreover, Dubcek's stubborn defense of certain basic principles of the post-January 1968 liberalization process enabled him to tell his people earlier this month, in good conscience, that "we have done more than many would have felt was at all possible after August."

External Factors

9. Despite the dire circumstances of the Soviet occupation, there seems to be a growing conviction among many Czechoslovaks, at various levels of society, that the Soviets have moderated, or soon will moderate, their offensive against the Dubcek regime. Dubcek himself is said to believe that during the latter half of October the Soviet Politburo adopted a new stance of relative

* For example, Husak has not been reported as criticizing Dubcek, although he has often attacked Smrkovsky in Party meetings, where Dubcek has usually risen to Smrkovsky's defense. And Bilak, although generally considered to have collaborated with the Warsaw Pact invaders, nevertheless obeyed Dubcek's order to formally protest Ulbricht's speech at the October East German Party (SED) Congress. This was the speech in which Ulbricht opined that the Czechoslovak heresy was at least ten years old, that honest Czechoslovak Communists would follow the inspiration of the SED, and that the Czechoslovak people would rather have tasty German style sausages than "coffee grounds from anti-socialist intellectuals" in Prague.

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"non-interference" in Czechoslovak affairs. Dubcek allegedly interpreted the new charter to mean, among other things, that he could be bolder than previously in defending those of his colleagues whom the Soviets disliked. A Czechoslovak economist, who has been a frequent target of Soviet public criticism, claims that last October the editor of the Soviet publication New Times confided to him that the whole editorial board of the journal considered the invasion to have been a serious blunder. The economist believes that forces such as these will eventually emerge in the Soviet Union and will permit the Czechoslovak progressive development to resume. According to a third story, certain Czechoslovak officials are reported to have knowledge of a letter written by the Party aktiv of the Soviet General Staff Academy to the CPSU Central Committee, protesting the misuse of the Soviet armed forces during the intervention and subsequent occupation of Czechoslovakia. Finally a Czechoslovak ambassador claims that during Premier Cernik's visit to Moscow in October to complete negotiations for the troop occupation treaty, Kosygin told Cernik flatly that the August invasion was a mistake.

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10. It is impossible to know whether any of the above reports are completely true, nor to be sure of the motives of Soviet officials in telling various Czechs and Slovaks what they want to hear. The point is, many in Prague and Bratislava believe there are signs of less harsh Soviet policy, and this conviction stiffens their resolute opposition to Soviet-instigated restrictions. These optimists claim that just as the Soviets backed down after the invasion by restoring the pre-invasion leadership almost intact, they can be cajoled or persuaded to back down again on one or more issues. They feel that the various shades of opposition to the Soviet invasion and occupation among and within the world's Communist Parties -- from the relatively liberal Yugoslav and Italian to the ultradogmatic Chinese and Albanian -- are having their effect in Moscow. They believe the Soviets seriously underrated this factor prior to 20 August, by imagining that the reaction would somehow be milder than in 1956.

11. Finally, some of these Czechoslovak optimists suppose that the West has some leverage which it might use with the Soviets to Czechoslovakia's benefit. This supposition, by the way, is not inconsistent with a view widely held in Czechoslovakia,

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and elsewhere in Eastern Europe, that some form of US-Soviet collusion was a pre-condition for the August invasion. In any case, this heightened interest in Western policies and attitudes may help to explain why, for example, the number of Czechoslovak official and semi-official contacts with the West seems to have risen, not fallen, since last August, or why the regime in Prague has seemed reluctant, until recently when some steps were taken, to curb the free-wheeling activities of Western journalists. Moreover, various elements in the public media have characterized (apparently as an exhortation) the new US administration's position on Czechoslovakia as being a fundamental element in overall US foreign policy. Most of these media do not detail that position, but a commentator for the Slovak youth newspaper, Smena, made the attempt in a message recently broadcast by the official Czechoslovak news agency (CTK) in English:

....Nixon is smiling at all sides. Instead of using his former tough language, and instead of threatening with raised fist, he is waving and speaking of friendship cherished by the US people for the people of the USSR; but between the lines, one can read the conviction that the events of August 1968 will cost the Soviet Politburo dear.

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Some Alternatives

12. In mid-December CPSU Secretary Konstantin Katushev, the Party's principal overseer on Bloc affairs, was reported to have assumed the special responsibilities for Czechoslovakia previously fulfilled by Deputy Foreign Minister Kuznetsov. Katushev then led a CPSU delegation, which included Kuznetsov, on a two week familiarization tour of Czechoslovakia. Unfortunately, little is known about Katushev's specific views. One hunch is that as a Party apparatchik he is likely to be more reactionary and intellectually uncompromising toward Prague than a professional diplomat such as Kuznetsov. Some Czechoslovaks, however, believe Katushev is relatively moderate.* Perhaps their feelings are conditioned by the behavior of their own Party apparatchiks, including political commissars in the Czechoslovak armed forces, over the last several months; many of these professional Party men showed themselves to be more flexible and sympathetic to the Czechoslovak reforms than were their counterparts in the government bureaucracies.

* One Slovak commentator said publicly that Katushev's 10 January television speech in Prague represented a "180-degree" turn from the harsh Soviet policy which obtained in the immediate aftermath of the invasion.

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13. At present it appears that Katushev and the rest of the Soviet leadership must choose among three options, each with its own advantages and disadvantages. There is no guarantee that certain Soviet leaders will not try to combine all three options, but straddling will be extremely difficult given the momentum and unpredictability of events.

14. Alternative A: The Soviets could fulfill the most optimistic hopes of the Top Four leaders in Prague and the ordinary Czech and Slovak citizens by nullifying, in effect, the August invasion. For example, Moscow could issue a statement that "the situation is normalized," and withdraw the remaining Soviet troops, as has been promised by various Soviet propaganda statements.* The Dubcek regime could be warned not to provoke such an

* On Events in Czechoslovakia ("The White Book"), Moscow, English edition, p. 9: "It is because the allied armies came in that the counter-revolution had no time to erect their [sic] gibbets....The fraternal armies did not come in order to interfere in the domestic affairs of the Czech and Slovak peoples, but so that no one should hinder the Czechs and the Slovaks in settling their own domestic affairs tranquilly, confidently and with dignity. We shall leave as soon as the situation is normalized. We shall leave assured that the reactionaries will never again dare menace the gains of the Czechoslovak people and the successes of world socialism."

intervention in the future. Perhaps, to assure no hard feelings, the Soviets might even grant a large hard currency loan. Moscow would reap an enormous propaganda victory. The World Communist Conference would be a smashing Soviet success, and the Soviets might even hope to gain leverage on other issues of interest to them, such as the Middle East, Arms Control, perhaps even on sensitive European issues such as the future of Germany. And of course Prague would be grateful and probably well-behaved -- at least for a while. Eventually, however, Czechoslovakia would probably return to its early August pace and direction. That is, it might enter the transition to a Social Democratic (rather than Communist) state, shaping foreign and trade policies similar to those of Sweden or Austria, and serving as an almost irresistible model for the rest of Eastern Europe. The chances that this present Soviet leadership would allow such a return to pre-invasion days are extremely dim.

15. Alternative B: The Soviets might move forcefully to depose the Dubcek leadership, either by provoking widespread public disorders themselves, or levying clearly unacceptable demands on the Top Four, e.g. for a massive blood purge of Party

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and state officials, journalists and ordinary citizens. There appear now to be a small number of figures of some standing in the Czechoslovak Party who would be potential, even eager, collaborators for such a task, whereas there were virtually none in August; these could be used to issue the necessary appeals for "fraternal aid," carry out the required number of arrests, and then help to pick up the shattered fragments of Party and state structure afterwards. This outcome would certainly simplify the present ambiguities in Soviet-Czechoslovak relations. Moreover, that other maverick on the Soviet borders, Romania, might be terrorized into complete docility. Of course the World Communist Conference would be a farce if it were held, world opinion would be further outraged, and there is a very strong chance that the Czechoslovak youth ready to immolate themselves, and those workers and intellectuals whose current motto is "For Victory or Honorable Defeat," would make the second Soviet intervention far bloodier than the first. Alternative B seems more likely than Alternative A*, but if it occurred it would probably mean that

* There are a few tenuous indications that over the last week or so some Soviets in Czechoslovakia tried to provoke more serious public disorders than have so far occurred.

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there had been some kind of major upheaval within the Soviet leadership, eliminating those who apparently spoke for caution last summer. No firm evidence of such a development is now available.

16. Alternative C: The choice most consistent with the character of the Soviet leadership as it has been understood so far is that the present policy of half-measures toward Czechoslovakia will be continued. They will continue to nag and cajole, and at times indirectly threaten the Dubcek regime to give way, step by step. They will try to pressure Dubcek and Cernik into muzzling the free Czechoslovak press while insisting that Soviet and neo-Novotny media (Zpravy, Tribuna, Radio Vltava) operate unfettered. The Soviets will seek the downgrading of Smrkovsky-type liberals in Prague, and the placing of potential collaborators such as Indra, Bilak, Husak, Jakes (in charge of the Party Auditing Commission), former Armed Forces Chief of Staff Rytir, and former Deputy Interior Minister Salgovic, into positions of influence. The Soviets will perhaps seek to have Czechoslovak Defense Minister Dzur arrange Warsaw Pact exercises on Czechoslovak territory, and retire or demote certain Czechoslovak officers who seem insufficiently

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pro-Soviet. Also, Moscow will continue to play upon national rivalries between Czechs and Slovaks, and to use whatever economic levers seem appropriate.

17. But the main problem with Approach C, as suggested earlier in this paper, is that it may not accomplish the Soviet aims -- it may not bring the Czechs back even close to the "approved mold." The regime in Prague seems to be able to handle major and minor crises, such as the Smrkovsky affair and the political suicides, without falling apart. Many problems for which the regime might otherwise be held accountable are blamed by the population on the Soviets. The demonstrators in Prague last week carried signs saying, not "Down with Dubcek/Cernik/Svoboda," but "Russians Go Home" and "Brezhnev to the Gallows." The Soviets evidently still consider Dubcek to be the same "right-wing opportunist" they disliked so much in August, but, as a Soviet lecturer in Moscow remarked, presumably with some irritation, it is taking a long time to remove him.

18. Meanwhile, others in Eastern Europe are growing restless. For instance, the Soviet press praised the Hungarian economic and political reforms early this month, and by clear implication,

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recommended this example for the rest of Eastern Europe. A few days later, the Hungarian premier promised in a Budapest interview that in the near future the regime hoped to abolish single slate voting lists. This was one of the more radical demands of Czechoslovak political reformers before last August. Moreover, the Yugoslavs are claiming that "democratization" of the Czechoslovak and Yugoslav type is underway in Romania. The meeting of 22 European student associations held in Budapest earlier this month was mainly concerned with debating the August intervention; Polish, Soviet and, to some extent, the Hungarian delegates, found themselves forced to defend policies with which, we suspect, even they did not agree. The Yugoslavs and, surprisingly, the Czechoslovaks themselves stoutly defended the proposition that if ideology can cross state borders, military units should not. Surely someone in Moscow concerned with maintaining the "leading role" of Communist Parties will begin to wonder if the Czechoslovak heresy, seemingly halted last August, has now slowly resumed its diffusion outward from the Czechoslovak borders.

19. Thus, for the near term, the Soviets will probably persist with a postinvasion policy of limited pressures. The momentum of

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developments in Czechoslovakia -- the basic trend toward the democratization of public life -- does not yet appear to have been permanently arrested. If anything, the Czechoslovak masses are probably more politically conscious than at any time in the history of that country, and the Czechoslovak "issue" continues to monopolize the minds and energies of Eastern Europe. The Soviets appear still reluctant to employ the most drastic remedies, those generally embodied in Alternative B. If they are forced to it, however, they will probably do so on the principle that the costs of this course would be less than those of acknowledging failure. Should the Soviets go this way, they may solve their immediate problem but at the cost, in the longer term, of intensifying the crisis they face in Eastern Europe and perhaps also at the cost of precipitating divisions within the Soviet leadership itself.

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