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29 August 1968

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Soviet Motives for the Invasion of  
Czechoslovakia

1. The final Soviet decision to invade Czechoslovakia appears to have grown out of a complex set of foreign and domestic political considerations. Many of these undoubtedly had been debated for several months as the trend of post-January developments in Czechoslovakia became clearer. There were strategic considerations involved in the possible loss of Czechoslovakia to the Warsaw Pact and the consequent removal of a key buffer state. The communist party in Czechoslovakia was losing its "leading role" with dire consequences not only for that country but for the rest of the communist world. Perhaps most frightening, the infectious freedom could spread to the USSR. Even if this seemed a rather long term threat to the leadership, the failure to act decisively to thwart it could be held against them in the much more immediate future by more militant members of the establishment.

2. There is good evidence, however, that the final decision was a last-minute one. It probably was made only on the weekend preceding the invasion, although at least the military planning involved seems to have been under way for some weeks. The meetings at Cierna and Bratislava resulted in a brief break in the rising curve of Soviet invective, but we know that the Cierna meeting, in particular, involved very tough bargaining and even tougher talk. The public smiles displayed by Brezhnev at Bratislava almost certainly concealed continuing doubts that Dubcek could be counted on to keep the Czechoslovak reform movement under control.

**SECRET**

**SECRET**

3. The curve of Soviet invective rose again during the period between Bratislava and the invasion. As Czechoslovak press restraints proved relatively ineffective, increasingly explicit Soviet statements appeared to the effect that Dubcek was losing control to "counter-revolutionary" elements. The Soviet leaders went on vacation during this period, but they stayed in close touch with the situation. We are inclined to accept reports that some of the leaders were in almost daily telephone contact with Dubcek warning him in private, as the Soviet press was in public, that he was not living up to the Cierna and Bratislava agreements.

4. We cannot say which, if any, single event tipped the balance from testing and political pressure to invasion. It seems likely that the trend of post-Bratislava events in Czechoslovakia swung what was probably a close balance in the politburo in favor of invasion. The views of Ulbricht, who visited Prague, during the middle of this period were undoubtedly a factor, but almost certainly not a decisive one. There is some evidence that the weekend before the invasion was marked by lengthy discussions among the Soviet leaders conducted in what must have been a charged political atmosphere. Undoubtedly tensions were high at this time and the foreign policy calculations -- the weighing of the gains and losses that would accrue to Moscow's world position -- were influenced by considerations of personal political advantage. The results of the Kremlin in-fighting are still to be seen, however, and they will probably depend on the ultimate outcome in Czechoslovakia.

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