

The CIA and Strategic Warning: The 1968 Soviet-Led Invasion of Czechoslovakia

An Overview

The Czechoslovak crisis, as it became to be known, started in January 1968, when Alexander Dubček was elevated to the post of First Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (CPCz), replacing moribund Antonin Novotny, who had served as First Secretary since 1957. Under Dubček, the communist leadership embarked on a program of dramatic liberalization of the Czechoslovak political, economic, and social order, including the overhaul of the CPCz leadership, increased freedom of speech, surrender of authority to the Czech National Assembly by the Communist Party, real elections at local and national levels, and even the suggestion of legalizing non-communist political parties.

In all, the crisis lasted more than a year, with the first nine months consisting of Czech reforms triggering Soviet statements of concern and eventually threats, buttressed by Warsaw Pact military buildups disguised as exercises (see *Timeline of the Czechoslovak Crisis, 1968-69* for a complete chronology of events). When the invasion occurred in the early morning hours of 21 August, the Czechoslovak leadership was not immediately removed, but remained largely intact through April 1969, when Dubček was finally replaced as First Secretary by Gustav Husak.

Dubček and the Prague Spring: A Threat to the Warsaw Pact?

All this alarmed Moscow and the leadership of the Warsaw Pact, but throughout the Prague Spring, Dubček

went out of his way to demonstrate his personal loyalty to Moscow and Prague's intention to remain firmly within the Warsaw Pact military alliance. How sincere he was in these remonstrations is difficult to say, but Dubček and his allies clearly feared a repetition of the Hungarian uprising of 1956, brutally crushed by Soviet troops.

These fears were mirrored in Washington and, to a certain extent, even in Moscow. Certainly the Kremlin, under the nearly comatose leadership of Leonid Brezhnev, had no desire to provoke a crisis, while any disturbance anywhere was seen as a threat to the increasingly fragile stability of the Soviet bloc. There was, moreover, a general tendency--at least in the West--to view some kind of internal reform as a necessary precondition for the stability of the Warsaw Pact.

Although the Pact had been created in 1955 as a "paper organization" to counter the rearming of West Germany and the cooperative effort of the western Allies in NATO, by the early 1960s the Warsaw Pact gradually was acquiring more form and substance as a military alliance. Under Khrushchev, the Pact had become the mechanism by which Moscow could introduce large-scale troop reductions, principally in conventional forces deployed to Europe.¹ With substantially fewer forces on the ground in Eastern Europe, Moscow had more at stake in making the alliance work. Thus, although the non-

¹ NIE 12-65: *Eastern Europe and the Warsaw Pact*, 26 August 1965, pp. 1, 3-4.

Soviet members of the Warsaw Pact had had little choice in joining the organization, once members of an alliance with the Soviet Union, they found they had a relatively greater voice in ordering their own affairs.²

By 1965, the Warsaw Pact was becoming a framework in which the nations of Eastern Europe could exercise a growing level of autonomy. General disenchantment with Marxist economics and Soviet-style politics and the growing attraction of the West were giving the state of Eastern Europe "both the incentive and the opportunity for striking out on their own," noted the Office of National Estimates (ONE), in a special memorandum in 1965. "The Soviets," according to ONE, will find it difficult to arrest the process; "though crises are an ever-present danger, we believe that these countries will be able successfully to assert their own national interests gradually and without provoking Soviet intervention."³ The Prague Spring thus seems to have been evaluated as part of a broader reform movement with the Warsaw Pact as a whole. There was the cautious belief that Sasha Dubček--if he were very careful and very, very lucky--just might pull it off.^{4 5 6}

² *Ibid.*

³ ONE Special Memorandum No. 10-65, *Prospects for Independence in Eastern Europe*, 18 February 1965, p. 1.

⁴ ONE Special Memorandum 1-68, *Czechoslovakia: A New Direction*, 12 January 1968, p. 14.

⁵ CIA Intelligence Information Cable, *Political Events and Personnel Changes in Czechoslovakia*, 27 March 1968, p. 7.

⁶ Unsigned CIA Memorandum, *Need of Czechoslovakia for Western Economic Support*, 8 April 1968, pp. 1-2.

CIA Analysis and the Prague Spring

Agency analysis in the Prague Spring focused in on two critical factors. This first of these was the importance of the Czechoslovak armed forces to Warsaw Pact military planning. In a war with NATO, the Czechoslovak army would have formed the first echelon of a Warsaw Pact attack into southern Germany, intended to outflank any NATO effort to defend along the inner-German border and, ultimately, to drive across Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg to the Rhein.⁷ The Czechoslovak military leadership was given command of the Front and would have retained command of its armed forces in wartime--which put Czechoslovakia, alongside Poland, in a privileged position in the Warsaw Pact hierarchy.⁸ The reduction of Soviet ground forces in the early 1960s had only increased the importance of the Czechoslovak army to Soviet/Warsaw Pact war planning.⁹

The second factor was the importance of the Czechoslovak economy within the Soviet bloc. Czechoslovakia was among the most industrially developed of the Warsaw Pact countries, yet it had suffered the most from 20 years of communist rule. In 1948, Czechoslovakia was better off than West Germany, but by 1968 per capita output had slipped to about two-thirds that of the Federal Republic, in addition to major differences in quality. Moscow was aware that popular opinion in Czechoslovakia blamed the old-line

⁷ DI Intelligence Memorandum (OSR), *Warsaw Pact War Plan for Central Region of Europe*, 18 June 1968, p. 5, p. 1.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁹ *Ibid.*

party hierarchy for its relative decline.¹⁰ "Economic pressure is a major force for political change in Eastern Europe," noted a March 1968 intelligence report. Without meaningful reform, Czechoslovakia's problems "may become acute in the next two or three years..."¹¹

To CIA, the Czechoslovak economic crisis meant that the Soviet leadership was concerned over the stability and reliability of Prague's military contribution to the Warsaw Pact. They thus were likely to be receptive to anything that promised a solution to Czechoslovakia's internal problems. Moscow also realized that the first result of a premature attempt to decisively intervene in Czechoslovakia likely would be demoralization of the Czechoslovak military. At the same time, the Kremlin was concerned that the "contagion" of Czech democratization not spread nor that the Czechoslovaks themselves go too far in creating an open society. All these factors seemed to add up to a Soviet decision to watch, wait, and hope for the best, while preparing for the worst.¹²

Setting Limits on Reform

As the snows of winter melted, it became possible to hypothesize that Dubček's "socialism with a human face" would find a place in the Warsaw Pact. On 23 March, Czechoslovakia was the main topic of discussion at a Warsaw

Pact summit in Dresden. CIA reported that Moscow had used the occasion to put a limit on how far Dubček could go, but that,

If the new leadership in Prague proceeds carefully and step-by-step good progress can be made...(I)n view of its political economic and military importance to the USSR and the Soviet Bloc, the CSSR cannot start an anti-socialist or anti-Soviet policy. The USSR would not allow this...(but) there (is) no anti-socialist or anti-Soviet movement involved in the new political evolution of the CSSR...only a strong movement for democratization and liberalization of the system.¹³

Consequently, according to CIA, the Soviet leadership "...did not consider Dubček as someone willing to start an anti-Soviet line."¹⁴

This conclusion was supported by the CPCz Party Action Program, published on 10 April. The DI noted that it was "restrained in tone, realistic and relatively free of cant...disappointing to the radical reformers in some aspects."¹⁵ Armed with this evidence of Dubček's moderation and the Kremlin's intolerance, by the end of April, the DI had concluded that the leaders of the Soviet Union appeared to have "grudgingly accepted" the Czechoslovak reforms. The only limits placed on these reforms were the continued primacy of the CPCz and that Czechoslovakia honor

¹⁰ DI Intelligence Memorandum (OER), *Economic Pressure for Change in Eastern Europe*, ER IM 68-33, 27 March 1968, p. 2, pp. 1,4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Unsigned CIA Memorandum, *Need of Czechoslovakia for Western Economic Support*, 8 April 1968, pp. 1-2.

¹³ CIA Intelligence Information Cable, *Political Events and Personnel Changes in Czechoslovakia*, 27 March 1968, p. 7-8.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ CIA Weekly Summary, *Czechoslovaks Publish Party Action Program*, 19 April 1968, p. 13.

its military and economic commitments to the USSR.¹⁶ An unsigned CIA memorandum argued that the Soviets could have applied economic pressure, had they wanted to halt Dubček's reforms and cited as evidence a Czech radio broadcast:

Let us not forget that...our cars run on Soviet gas, two out of three rolls are baked from Soviet flour, and our gigantic metallurgical combines would come to a standstill within a few days after Soviet ore shipments stopped. Nothing of the sort is happening here, as is common knowledge: cars are running, rolls are baked, and so forth...¹⁷

Tensions Rise

In general, CIA analysis seems to have accurately characterized attitudes inside the Soviet Politburo. Correctly deducing that the Soviet leadership was split over the need for intervention, the Office of National Estimates reported that—at least for the time being—the Kremlin had accepted the Czech reforms as the lesser of two evils.¹⁸ Although there was strong evidence of Soviet "anxieties" over the Czech reforms, Dubček continued to prove himself adept at balancing reforms inside Czechoslovakia with continued adherence to doctrines of communism and pledges to uphold Czechoslovakia's military commitments to the Warsaw

Pact.¹⁹ There thus seemed reason to hope that, although Soviet pressure on Czechoslovakia would increase over "the long hot summer," the Soviets "will take no 'harder,' i.e., military measures."²⁰

Relations between Moscow and Prague deteriorated steadily in the next few months. The Politburo remained reluctant to sanction military action, but CIA in late April reported that "(d)developments since the Dresden meeting indicate that the Russians and the Eastern Europeans were dissatisfied with the results of the conference and remained concerned about Czechoslovakia's course."²¹ By mid-June, Czechoslovakia was reported to be in an "uneasy truce" with Moscow.²² Dubček reportedly was now playing for time, hoping that he could implement enough reforms quickly to present the Kremlin leadership with a fait accompli. "At some stage in the game," the Agency reported, "the Soviets will...become aware that their earlier hopes for a return to anything like the status quo ante in Czechoslovakia were without foundation. It is the Czechoslovak hope that this realization will have come too late and that the Soviets' reactions will be minimal."²³

¹⁶ DI Intelligence Memorandum (OCI), *Czechoslovakia in Transition*, 23 April 1968, p. 2.

¹⁷ Unsigned CIA Memorandum, *Need of Czechoslovakia for Western Economic Support*, 8 April 1968, p. 1.

¹⁸ ONE Memorandum for the Director, "The Czechoslovak Crisis", 17 July 1968, p.5.

¹⁹ DI Intelligence Memorandum, "The Czechoslovak Situation (as of 1200 hours)", 9 May 1968, p.3.

²⁰ CIA Intelligence Information Cable, *Present USSR Attitudes Toward Czechoslovakia*, 10 May 1968, p.2.

²¹ DI Intelligence Memorandum 0658/68 (OCI), *Czechoslovakia in Transition*, 23 April 1968, p. 12.

²² ONE Special Memorandum 12/68, *Czechoslovakia: The Dubcek Pause*, 13 June 1968, p. 1.

²³ *Ibid*, pp. 16-18.

It was now clear to Agency analysts that the Politburo viewed developments in Czechoslovakia with growing unease.²⁴ Indecision still reigned in Moscow, but the only thing now preventing the Soviet Union from intervening militarily was concern over the broad impact of yet another violent repression of an Eastern European bid for autonomy.²⁵ On 17 July, the Office of National Estimates warned CIA Director Helms: "We know of no way of foretelling the precise event in Czechoslovakia which might trigger...extreme Soviet reaction, or of foreseeing the precise circumstances which might produce within the Soviet leadership an agreement to move with force."²⁶ But the Soviets believed that communist authority in Czechoslovakia was seriously threatened. "The possibility will exist for some time that the Soviets will choose to intervene rather than permit Czechoslovakia to...move decisively toward...an open disavowal of communism or of the Warsaw Pact."²⁷ Still, the Soviet leadership had not decided what to do. Very much still depended on Dubček and Czechoslovakia. "Some appropriate concessions" from Dubček would remove the need for military action. So would a conservative overthrow of Dubček.²⁸

The crisis seemed to be reaching a climax at the end of July, when Soviet leaders traveled to Čierna nad Tisou, on the Czechoslovak border, to meet with the Czech Politburo. The bilateral talks were cloaked in secrecy but, on 31 July

²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 5.

²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 9.

²⁶ ONE Memorandum for the Director, *The Czechoslovak Crisis*, 17 July 1968, p. 7.

²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 4.

²⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 6-7.

the Soviet wire service TASS reported that the talks at Čierna had atmosphere of "frankness and comradeship," which, according to CIA analysts, was Soviet code for tough talk but no action.²⁹ Ominously, however, that same day Dubček's family was reported leaving Czechoslovakia for Yugoslavia.³⁰

The Čierna conference concluded on 1 August and was almost immediately followed by a general Warsaw Pact summit at Bratislava. Two days later the only written statement to emerge from either of these meetings was produced. It was little more than a statement of alliance solidarity, combined with an affirmation of the principles of Marxism-Leninism. With this, the crisis seemed to be over. The Czechoslovak leadership apparently had mollified its Soviet and Warsaw Pact allies, at least for the time being. Dubček seemed to have won.

Less than three weeks later the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia.

CIA Military Reporting

As a member of the Warsaw Pact, Czechoslovakia was perforce under a fairly high level of routine surveillance. As tensions heightened over the spring and summer of 1968, so did the attention paid to Czechoslovakia by US and NATO intelligence services. The full panoply of sources available to Western intelligence included photo-reconnaissance satellites, covert intelligence collection performed by USAF aircraft transiting the Berlin traffic corridors--and by SR-71

²⁹ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, *The Situation in Czechoslovakia at of 4:00 PM EDT*, 30 July 1968, p.1.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 2.

reconnaissance aircraft along the inner German border, if required--SIGINT collection sites in southern Germany and on the Teufelsberg in occupied Berlin, and--particularly important during the Czechoslovak crisis--observations by the Allied military missions in East Germany. There also appeared to have been some agent reporting available.³¹

Military tensions ratcheted up in the last half of March, as the USSR concentrated troops along the Czech-East German border in the period leading up to the Warsaw Pact summit in Dresden.³² This was judged to be a preventative measure, but on 9 May CIA reported that Soviet troops in Poland had been seen south of Krakow moving in the direction of Czechoslovakia.³³ Noting that the Soviets had a total of 39 divisions available, should they decide to intervene militarily,³⁴ CIA concluded that "(i)t would appear that Moscow has decided to some saber-rattling in order to influence the Czechoslovaks to put a brake on their democratization.³⁵

The next month, the Soviet Union began a series of Pact-wide military exercises designed to mask the build-up of forces against Czechoslovakia. These included:

- SUMAVA or BÖHMERWALD: over 20-30 June, a command post and communications exercise

³¹ See, for example, CIA Intelligence Information Cable, *Preparations for Military Intervention in Czechoslovakia*, 26 July 1968.

³² CIA Intelligence Information Cable, *Political Events and Personnel Changes in Czechoslovakia*, 27 March 1968, p. 7.

³³ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, *The Situation in Czechoslovakia as of 1200 hours*, 9 May 1968, p. 4.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2-3.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4

involving Soviet, East German, Czech, and Polish troops in Czechoslovakia;³⁶

- NIEMEN: from 23 July to 10 August, a rear-services exercise.
- SKYSHIELD: an air defense exercise, conducted over 11-20 August.

Of the three, the rear services exercise was regarded as the most ominous, since it involved recalling reservists, requisitioning transport from the civilian economy, and mobilizing forces from Latvia to Ukraine--measures that obviously could be designed to cover the mass movement of troops against Czechoslovakia.³⁷ Nevertheless, although CIA warned that these exercises could well be signs of military intervention,³⁸ most analysts in the US intelligence community continued to believe that the Soviet Union would exercise restraint.

The situation grew more ominous in July. On 26 July, CIA reported that the Polish Government was under great pressure to prepare for an invasion. The Soviet 32nd Army in Poland had mobilized, as had large forces in East Germany. Five Polish divisions in the Silesian Military District were at a high state of readiness.³⁹ That same day, substantial elements of three East German divisions moved into restricted

³⁶ Grabo, Cynthia, *Soviet Deception in the Czechoslovak Crisis*, Studies in Intelligence, Spring 1970, p. 29.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ ONE Special Memorandum 12-68, *Czechoslovakia: The Dubcek Pause*, 13 June 1968, p.2.

³⁹ CIA Intelligence Information Cable, *Preparations for Military Intervention in Czechoslovakia*, 26 July 1968, p. 1.

areas 75 miles south of Berlin.⁴⁰ To find out more, USAF SR-71s flew along the inner German border, from where they could monitor developments up to 100 KM inside East Germany.

By the end of the month, most of the Soviet troops in Czechoslovakia had been withdrawn, but they remained just outside the country and Western observers noted that the route signs leading into Czechoslovakia for the military movements had been left in place. Four Soviet divisions in Hungary were reported moving into the field, roadblocks were set up and convoys were seen moving in the direction of Czechoslovakia.⁴¹ The Soviet air forces on 31 July were detected making contingency preparations for operations in Czechoslovakia, while high-level military officials in Moscow were reported operation on an indefinite alert status.⁴² Three days later, CIA's Office of Strategic Research (OSR) warned, "(i)t would appear the Soviet high command has in about two weeks' time completed military preparations sufficient for intervening in Czechoslovakia if that is deemed necessary by the political leadership."⁴³

CIA Warning and the Czech Invasion

Over the next three weeks, CIA was forced to function without the

⁴⁰ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, *The Situation in Czechoslovakia as of 4:00 PM EDT*, 26 July 1968, p. 2.

⁴¹ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, *The Situation in Czechoslovakia as of 4:00 PM EDT*, 30 July 1968, p. 1.

⁴² CIA Intelligence Memorandum, *The Situation in Czechoslovakia as of 4:00 PM EDT*, 31 July 1968, p. 2.

⁴³ CIA Intelligence Memorandum, *Military Developments in the Soviet-Czech Confrontation*, SR IM 68-19, August 1968, p. 2.

support of its principal collection asset, photo-reconnaissance satellites. The film-return systems in use at the time lacked the flexibility to respond to the rapidly changing situation in Czechoslovakia. A KH-4B satellite was in orbit, but its canister was not recovered until after the invasion. When it was, the film showed Soviet forces deployed to invade--airfields packed with aircraft, Soviet military vehicles painted with white crosses to distinguish them from identical Czech equipment.⁴⁴

By this point in time, however, overhead reconnaissance was not really necessary; there already was ample intelligence from other sources to show that, by the end of July, the Warsaw Pact was mobilized for an invasion of Czechoslovakia. The next two weeks or so were something of an anti-climax, for the simple reason that the Soviets themselves had not decided to intervene. This hesitation gave some reason to hope that an invasion was not forthcoming--but, with nearly 40 Soviet divisions on the move it was clear the Soviet alert remained in place. When the Soviets did decide on 18 August to intervene, it was announced by SIGINT reporting of a Soviet military communications blackout all over Central Europe.⁴⁵

Two days later, on the morning of the invasion, Director of Central Intelligence Richard Helms met with Bruce Clarke (Director of Strategic Research in the DI) and Richard Lehman (the DI's Director of Current

⁴⁴ Jeffrey Richelson, *The Wizards of Langley: Inside the CIA's Directorate of Science and Technology* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001), p. 170.

⁴⁵ David Miller, "The Cold War: A Military History" (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), p. 38.

Intelligence) for an update on the Czechoslovak situation.⁴⁶ Lehman relayed a wire service report that Soviet leaders had been summoned to Moscow for an urgent Politburo meeting--which, in fact, had occurred on 18 August. This was unusual in itself: Soviet leaders normally spent August entrenched in their dachas, and only a crisis would suffice to get them out. Clarke, Lehman, and Helms agreed that, taken together with the military alert in Central Europe, the emergency Politburo meeting was a sure indicator something was about to happen, most probably the invasion of Czechoslovakia. Helms was already scheduled to meet with President Johnson and decided to convey the information personally. Remarkably, LBJ rejected that conclusion, saying, "Dick, that Moscow meeting is to talk about us." What Johnson knew, and Helms did not know, was that the Soviet Union and the United States were due to make a joint announcement on 21 August concerning the planned strategic arms limitation talks. Not unreasonably, but unfortunately, LBJ believed that to be the subject of the meeting in the Kremlin.

The President and his advisers soon were disabused of that notion. At 2300, central European time, on 20 August, a Soviet special forces battalion landed at and occupied Prague airport. At 2311 NATO radar monitors reported that the air space around Prague was covered with artificial "snow," blanking out radar screens and preventing observation of what was happening. Just a few hours later, at 2200, EDT, Helms was summoned back to the White House for

an emergency meeting. The invasion of Czechoslovakia was underway.

Given the swiftness of events, it is hard to see how Johnson could have received more warning than he did. Official Washington was holding its breath in August 1968, waiting to see what the Soviets would do. Ample, precise, and accurate strategic warning concerning events in Eastern Europe had been pouring in all summer. The August calm before the storm may have meant that much of the intelligence community was surprised by the invasion when it occurred, but there had been no indication that the Soviets had stood down in Eastern Europe, nor had strategic warning ever been withdrawn.

A CIA memorandum prepared immediately after the invasion noted that the decision to intervene must have come very late in the game.⁴⁷ Exactly how and when Moscow's forbearance "became unraveled" was something of a mystery. To CIA analysts, however, it was clear that the decision had come sometime after the Čierna nad Tisou and Bratislava conferences. The time that elapsed, the scattering of the Soviet leadership to their dachas for the August holidays, the attitude of the Soviet press, the anodyne communiques that were issued after each meeting all were indicators that the Dubček government was being given more time--to do what was not clear.⁴⁸ "The most likely explanation," Agency analysts concluded, "appears to be that, under the impact of internal pressures within the leadership and of importuning from its anxious allies in Eastern Europe...the

⁴⁶ Richard Helms, "A Look Over My Shoulder: A Life in the Central Intelligence Agency" (New York: Random House, 2003), pp. 340-341.

⁴⁷ DI Intelligence Memorandum, "The Soviet Decision to Intervene", 21 August 1968.

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 1-2.

fragile balance in the Soviet leadership which produced the Čierna agreement has, in the space of less than three weeks, been upset in favor of those who may all along have wanted the toughest kind of policy..." With the political scales in Moscow in such precarious balance, "it would not have needed a great shock to upset them."⁴⁹

And so, in the early morning hours of 21 August, Czechoslovakia was invaded from the north, east, and south by 20 Warsaw Pact divisions totaling some 250,000 men. At the same time, the positions vacated by these units were backfilled by 10 Soviet divisions. Once strategic points in Czechoslovakia were occupied, most of these forces redeployed into western Czechoslovakia, restoring the front against NATO. There they were backed by the full might of the Warsaw Pact, including thousands of nuclear weapons targeted against Western and Central Europe. Nothing short of a world war was likely to get them out. In 1938, the Western powers had responded to threats against Czechoslovakia by backing down, rather than face a Nazi Germany they falsely believed was ready for war. In 1968 they had no choice.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.