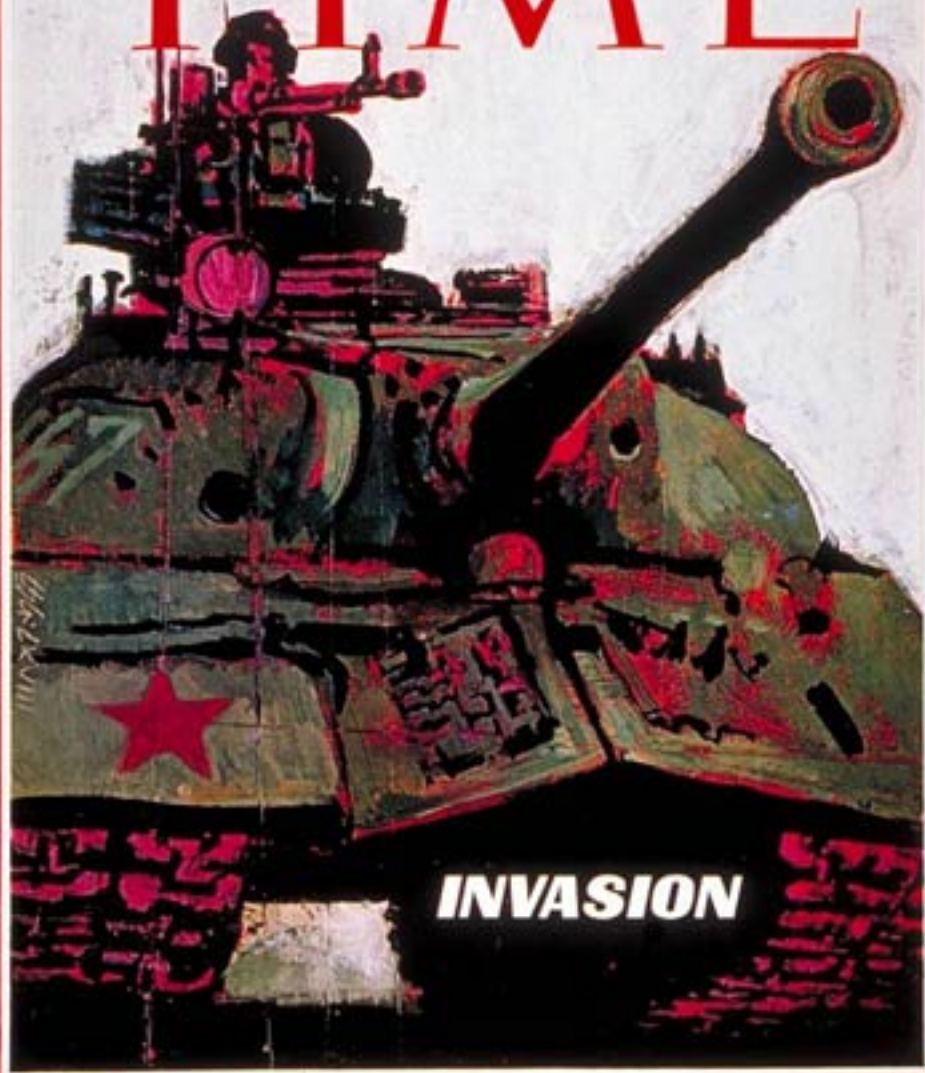


TIME



INVASION

The Soviet Invasion of Czechoslovakia and the crushing of the Prague Spring

[20-08-2003] By [Jan Velinger](#)

Listen  [16kb/s](#) ~ [32kb/s](#)

It has been thirty-five years since Soviet troops began entering Czechoslovakia late on August 20th and early August 21st in a carefully orchestrated invasion designed to crush the period of political and economic reforms known as the Prague Spring, reforms led by the country's new First Secretary of the Communist party Alexander Dubcek. A movement viewed by Leonid Brezhnev and other Soviet hard-liners in Moscow as a serious threat to the Soviet Union's hold on the Socialist satellite states, they decided to act. In the first hours on the 21st Soviet planes began to land unexpectedly at Prague's Ruzyně airport, and shortly Soviet tanks would roll through Prague's narrow streets. Within hours foreign troops would take up strategic positions throughout the city, including surrounding the building of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, taking hold of Wenceslas Square, and eventually taking over Czechoslovak radio and television. The occupation of '68 had begun.

The tanks roll in



Soviet tank in front of the Czechoslovak Radio building, photo: CTK

"I was sleeping soundly when a friend from New York called me and said 'Have you evacuated the family?' I answered 'Why should I?' and he said 'Prague has been invaded, the airport has been seized, and the Castle is under Russian control...'"

American editor Alan Levy was a foreign correspondent in Czechoslovakia in 1968. On August 21st he witnessed some of the first tanks as they steered their way in to the Czech capital.

"I got dressed and went out with my sixteen year-old niece who was staying with us and we didn't see any Russians for a while until in Pohorelec dozen tanks rolled out down the ramp out of Strahov. They were lost. They couldn't find the Castle. They had a tourist map and nothing else. And, they started pointing guns at the crowd and nobody would tell them. When your life almost ends, when a man with his finger on the trigger points it at you is getting ready to shoot - in my case he was ready to shoot at a taxi he thought might be alerting the troops - you're on borrowed time."



[Vinohradská Street, August 21st, 1968](#)

Borrowed time was all that remained for Czechs and the relative sovereignty of their country as they awoke on that fateful morning. It was the most bitter of realizations. For believers in socialism - like Dubcek and other party reformers - it was a betrayal, by partners within the Warsaw pact. Poland, Hungary, East Germany, Bulgaria, the Soviet Union. On the other hand, for long-time opponents to the regime it was final damning proof that at its core Moscow had always been tyrannical - willing to stop at nothing to exercise its will. The Prague Spring, the series of reforms and cultural freedom - including the lifting of censorship, the creation of dialogue, the addressing of past wrongs and new openness in published books and the press - that had been so thoroughly embraced over the last eight months, would prove a short-lived experiment. Socialism with a human face would be stamped out by the presence of more than 200, 000 foreign soldiers, who would triple in number by the end of the week.

Meanwhile, on the morning of the 21st, shooting had begun at the Czechoslovak Radio building on Vinohradská Street. After the station broadcast a statement by the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party condemning the invasion, Prague citizens gathered at the building to defend the strategic site. Soon, however, broadcasts would be cut off. The last few sentences on the air told Czechs and the rest of the world they had only ever wanted humanistic socialism, adding truth would prevail.

Broadcasters were then cut off in mid-sentence as the anthem played, while outside in front of the radio building, several Prague citizens already lay dead.

Forced out at gunpoint



[Prague, August 21st 1968](#)

Kamila Mouckova, a well-known news anchor in Czechoslovakia at that time, knew she had to make her way to Czechoslovak TV, in the city centre, to provide whatever service she could.

"I was very upset. In the morning I drove to a nearby gas-station, and it was there, on the steps of building of the Central Committee of the Communist Party that I saw the first body. It was a young man. To this day I can not describe the feeling in me that this evoked."

At the TV station they broadcast reports throughout the morning of the 21st, while there was still time. Mrs Mouckova says she tried to appeal for calm. After all, could anybody really believe such a sordid state of events would continue? She, for one, did not.

"I tried to get people to pull back, to stay at home, not to go out onto the streets. That it was all just some kind of mistake that events would turn out better in the end."

But, as more and more reports of spontaneous demonstrations and clashes and killing of Czechs emerged, an ever-growing feeling of rage and disbelief began to dominate.

"You know what the primary feeling was? It was terrible - there's no nice way of saying it - I was terribly, terribly angry. I was so furious I was practically foaming at the mouth. I couldn't believe what they had done - the audacity and nerve! The invasion, forcing us out at gunpoint then taking aim at us when they finally uprooted us from our illegal radio broadcast point six days later. By then, it had occurred to each one of us we really might end up lined up against a wall."

The situation with the reformers



Alexander Dubcek, photo: CTK

That, in the early hours seemed what the country's leadership awaited as well. On the very first day First Secretary Alexander Dubcek and others were spirited off to Moscow for so-called "talks" with the Soviet leadership. Political scientist Zdenek Zboril, who was part of the student anti-Communist movement in the heady days of '68, recalls the Soviets broke Dubcek in Moscow. There the charismatic Slovak leader, as well as his companions, signed a document renouncing parts of the reform programme. Even worse, they agreed to the presence of Soviet troops in Czechoslovakia, giving legal weight and legitimacy to the intervention.

"He tried to do many compromises, as he said, to try and save the results of the Prague Spring. But, we know that step by step he went very far from the ideals behind it, not

reality, but the ideals of reality, and he declined or couldn't participate later in opposition against the Communist regime."

In his view Mr Dubcek's greatest failure was not accepting that socialism as an ideology was dead as of the invasion. It was a system, after all, to which he had devoted his entire professional life.

"He was a communist! But, after 1968, after August, Communism as an ideal, which was very popular in Czechoslovakia before and after the Second World War, was completely discredited. After August anyone who became a communist could be only an opportunist, for either material or 'moral' profit, but nobody could accept the idea of Communism as an ideology. Maybe only Dubcek was the last."

Journalist Alan Levy agrees, although he takes a kinder stance on the reform leader - even if the reforms failed.

"A lot of anger toward Dubcek that he went too far, too soon, didn't realise the situation: he was not a hero then, but he was to me."

Still, when Dubcek and the others returned from the Soviet Union they were broken men, for all eyes to see. Socialism as a system, in its uncontained, uncompromising and brutally direct show of force, lost all credibility not only in Czechoslovakia after the 1968 invasion but also abroad. Alan Levy again:

"Intellectuals like Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Yves Montand, Arthur Miller, who really thought that there was some hope in the Soviet Union, now saw that if you ever tried to leave the system you would wake up with tanks on the Via Venetou, tanks on the Champs-Elysees... They saw that there was no way out."

Resistance



[Wenceslas Square, August 1968](#)

If you close your eyes and imagine shimmering pictures of invading tanks in the middle of Paris - instead of Prague in those old black-and-white reels, you realize how apt the example is. Something unthinkable: it was no less unthinkable for the Czechs. Wenceslas Square, with its patron saint on horse back draped with the Czech flag, taken over by oppressors. Tanks hurling out of the side streets, firing volleys at the National Museum. Burning cars, people in movement, photographers, pleading faces, and countless pointed

guns. The future of their country was not something the Czechs gave up lightly, although there was little hope. They protested in the thousands for days. They clashed, and they pleaded, they hung up placards, and slogans, and wrote graffiti on the walls, crying a common appeal for justice. In their protest, says political scientist Zdenek Zboril, there was simple genius - emotional to observe even thirty-five years after the event.

"I am happy that I could see the spontaneous resistance of the people on the streets, on the posters on the walls. It was unbelievable. It was poetry, jokes, irony - it was an answer to the brutal Soviet invasion. One slogan was typical for this attitude - originally the slogan read 'With the Soviet Union for All Eternity'. But, in that time Czechs came up with the slogan 'With the Soviet Union for Eternity - but not a single day more!'"

Not another day more but in reality another 21 years of oppression for Czechoslovakia before Czechs and Slovaks would become free. What of the marred lives? Dozens lost during those dark August days, including one student shot at Klarov, in the Little Quarter, for nothing more than wearing a tri-colour pin featuring Czechoslovakia's colours. What of still others who endured the oppressive 'normalisation' period following the fall of Czechoslovakia's reformists? Undesirables, intellectuals, former communists who had erred on the side of reform, who lost their jobs, and were pushed to the fringes. What of their children who were not allowed even to study in university? And, those who were forced to emigrate. Not easy to forget. Even more unforgettable: the sacrifices of Jan Palach and Jan Zajic, who killed themselves in public protest of the regime a year after the invasion - Palach pleading that no other should follow his devastating example, as he lay on his death bed, with third-degree burns on 85 percent of his body. That perhaps was the last enormous symbol of resistance as the period of new oppression set in. TV anchor Kamila Mouckova:

"Every nation has its history, and everybody should know the history of their own nation. The days of August 1968 are of course key. This is not about cramming facts in school - this is about the challenge for all of us to learn from the event so that it will never again be repeated."

1968 - A year that began with hope and promise for Czechoslovakia and ended in tragedy no one could have foreseen. It changed the direction of a country, and the lives of millions. The last Russian troops finally left Czech soil in 1991.