

The Prague Spring and Its Nonviolent Implications

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Abstract. Only a decade after the Munich Agreement in which Nazi Germany annexed the Sudetenland and turned the rest of Czechoslovakia into a puppet state months later, Czechoslovakia was toppled again to be controlled by an intimidating global pact which was one of the only two global superpowers in opposition. The paper explores the so-called nonviolent national spirit of Czechoslovakia by scrutinizing its crucial events throughout history. Most of the part will focus on the overall history of Czechoslovakia to see the national response in crucial circumstances of history, including the Munich Agreement, the 1948 communists' coup d'état, the Prague Spring, and the Velvet Revolution. The author seeks to find out the connection between its conformist attitude in the early years and its nonviolent but revolutionary attitude in the later years. The study reveals that most of them were not violent but only a few of them could be described as nonviolent.

Keywords: Czechoslovakia, revolution, nonviolence.

1. Introduction

Czechoslovakia was officially ruled by the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ) and became a member of the Eastern Bloc until the Velvet Revolution of 1989 after the communist party's takeover of the Czechoslovakian. The dissolution of Czechoslovakia took place on December 31, 1992. Therefore, this paper will use "Czechoslovakia" instead of "Czech" or "Slovakia" as a reference to the geographical region where political events before the end of 1992, such as the Prague Spring, the Velvet Revolution, were taking place. Only a decade after the Munich Agreement in which Nazi Germany annexed the Sudetenland and turned the rest of Czechoslovakia into a puppet state months later, Czechoslovakia was toppled again to be controlled by an intimidating global pact which was one of the only two global superpowers in opposition. It seemed that Czechoslovakia was always in a minor position in the conflict between the superpowers and unable to struggle or resist as in neither case Czechoslovakians supported the government that took over.

This essay will take the people residing in Czechoslovakia as a collective agency and the political actions from 1918 to 1989 as a consecutive whole with no historical gaps in between. It focuses on the nonviolent aspect during the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and seeks to sort out its possible intellectual and historical origins. At the same time, the author will explore the legacy it left for the later generation and its connection with the Velvet Revolution in 1989. The essay begins by analyzing the traumatized Czechoslovakians after the events of 1938 and 1948, then explores different perspectives of how the Prague Spring was evoked and how it triggered the panic of the Soviet Union, and eventually arrived at its legacy and the revolutions in communist regimes at the end of 1980s.

2. The Challenges of Czechoslovakia and The Rule of the KSČ

The coup d'état in 1948 brought KSČ nearly 20 years of stable dominance of the whole country until April 5th, 1968, the launch of the Action Programme by the KSČ itself, aiming to revitalize the stagnant communist society by allowing students, intellectuals, and workers to express their views freely and to form new organizations which alleviate the bureaucratic burden of the communist government. The Programme was unprecedented among the Warsaw Pact nations as it evoked and tolerated mass critiques of the Soviet Union-style communism. Though the study will not discuss the Prague Spring in detail, it should not be taken simply as a recurrence of the 1956 Budapest Revolution. This is because all the critiques of communism and people's yearning for democracy were officially

allowed by the KSČ. At least, it was not subjugated by the Czechoslovak government but by the U.S.S.R itself.

However, it became gradually uncontrollable when the intellectuals began to denounce the Soviet Union as conservative and tried to bring pluralism into the communist monopoly status quo – “An upsurge of support for ‘democratization’ had grown among students, intellectuals, workers and even members of the ruling elite in Czechoslovakia” [1]. When Alexander Dubček, the first secretary of KSČ was still trying to bring a middle ground between the party and the dissidents, Leonid Brezhnev was dissatisfied with Dubček’s negative response of sending police and troops to subjugate the critics. On the night of 20-21 August 1968, 165,000 soldiers and 4,600 tanks entered Czechoslovak territory from across the Polish, Hungarian, and East German borders [1].

Nevertheless, the Czechoslovakians did not yield and conform as they did decades ago but resisted valiantly in nonviolent methods — “a disciplined, active campaign to disorient and demoralize the invading armies by removing street signs, withholding food and water, and haranguing them in Russian” [2]. Though the resistance was crushed by the Soviet Army (hardly any kind of resistance was effective against a trained army except for open military conflict supported by other countries,) the legacy eventually led to the Velvet Revolution in 1989, which was a nonviolent revolution led by Václav Havel that forced KSČ to transmit the power to the Federal Assembly.

The end of the Great War brought the birth of many countries divided by the so-called nation. Czechoslovakia declared independence after the Pittsburgh Agreement in May 1918 and was globally recognized as a republic in the Paris Peace Conference. The newfound country was a strange one for it had two main nations: the Czechs who resided in Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia, and the Slovaks who resided in Slovakia. The rest were the Germans who mainly lived in the Sudetenland and the Hungarians and Ruthenians in Carpathia Ruthenia. In a certain way, Czechoslovakia was a nation-state born from political negotiation but not national unity.

With its capital city decided at Prague, Czechoslovakia took Czech culture as its mainstream culture and as the propaganda to arouse solidarity among people. As Stefan Auer has suggested in his essay, some literature could be used as an official narrative for a certain period or even as a national stance: “For people familiar with Jaroslav Hašek’s masterpiece *The Good Soldier Švejk*, the problem (of the narrative of modern Czech history) can be restated in relation to Švejk’s ambivalent legacy” [3]. In addition to the Švejkian assumption of Czechoslovakia, there is also another famous writer who lived in Prague and was the peer of Jaroslav Hašek but shared a different fate — Franz Kafka. In other words, they lived in two different Pragues.

Jaroslav Hašek is a writer born in Prague whose parents both come from Bohemia and therefore a “pure” Czech, while Franz Kafka came from a German-speaking Jewish family. Even before the founding of the Republic of Czechoslovakia, neither Germans nor Jews were welcomed in Prague. If Hašek’s Prague was a city who disobeyed the “intimidating” Austro-Hungary Empire in its own nonviolent but powerful way, then Kafka’s Prague was a place that metamorphized people into a bug and provoked their ceaseless conflict with each other but impossible to leave. Both perspectives should be taken into consideration when trying to establish an overview of the Czechoslovak mentality.

Czechoslovakia during the interwar period was in diplomatic turmoil—both the Soviet Union and Germany after Hitler came to power in 1933 played essential roles in its political history, mainly struggling to get the favour of either country in order not to be caught up in another war. The political confrontation between the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia began after its establishment. The first official contact between the two was on 25 February 1920, when “the Soviet commissar for foreign affairs, G.V. Chicherin, sent his first note to the Prague government expressing hope that Czechoslovakia would refuse to play any role in an anti-Bolshevik coalition” [4]. The Czechoslovak response was evasive while the Soviet Union rushed to establish a “normal” relationship with Czechoslovakia by sending a Soviet Red Cross group which was secretly an espionage group collecting intelligence and supporting Bolsheviks in or around Czechoslovakia. The Prague government stopped tolerating its existence and declared its recall in 1921. The attitude became even

worse when, in 1921 summer, the Prague government learned from a letter intercepted from the Executive of the Communist International sent to a Czechoslovak communist revealing that “the Bolshevik government could collapse unless revolutions in Western and Southeastern Europe erupted” [4,5].

Later, the Prague police discovered and arrested many Soviet agents who tried to carry out secret operations in Czechoslovakia. The Bolshevik’s misconduct in the Kronstadt rebellion and the Ukraine famine not only discredited its promise to the Soviet citizens but also changed the Prague government’s expectations of them. It supported many White Russian émigrés since their defeat and believed that “the Soviet government would collapse or that it would abandon its revolutionary ideology and embrace capitalism” after Lenin’s death in January 1924 [4]. Till the end of 1924, Czechoslovakia still did not officially recognize the Bolshevik government as the only legitimate government in Russia. The diplomatic relationship between Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union only improved after Adolf Hitler’s rise to power in 1933.

The Prague government was aware of Nazi Germany’s intention when Hitler responded evasively to the Czechoslovak minister in Berlin, Vojtěch Mastný’s inquiry on the increasing German racism against Czechoslovaks in German. Czechoslovakia officially recognized the legitimacy of the Soviet Union on 9 June 1934 to balance the power in Europe as it and France could not resist the more and more aggressive Nazi Germany. At least at that moment, Czechoslovakia was confident that the Soviets’ entry into Europe would bring a new political apparatus until the Great Purge which not only placed Czechoslovak in a discredited position in which it was accused of planning a coup against Stalin [4], but also cut down most communications between the two countries as many diplomats were purged [4]. The sudden military collapse of the Soviet Union and the disunity among the Little Entente caused more uncertainty about the future of Czechoslovakia while in 1937 its citizens were still satisfied with the dramatic economic recovery from the Great Depression.

However, this optimism perished soon after the German Reich’s Anschluss of Austria, making more than half of the Czechoslovak adjoining it. Soviet aid was impossible due to its temporal military impotence. France and Britain became ambiguous about the actual extent of the aid when Germany began its invasion. The Czechoslovak government could do nothing but be confident in them and follow the orders. The Czechoslovak president, Edvard Beneš was even not invited to the Munich conference on 29 September 1938. Betrayed by France and Britain, Czechoslovakia was forced to choose between fighting to death and capitulation. Facing the troops from Germany, Hungary, and Poland, the isolated government chose to accept the Munich Agreement. Czechoslovakia was later dismembered in the First Vienna Awards and occupied by the German Reich as the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia and the Slovak State.

Ironically, the Soviet Union, the country that was expelled from the Munich conference, became the only winner for two reasons: First, the KSČ’s open opposition to the agreement gained them support from most Czechoslovak citizens, who were confident that they could deal with Germany on their own; Second, the betrayal from France and Britain and the capitulation of the Czechoslovak government made most citizens utterly disappointed with the democratic government because of their alliance with Nazi Germany and thus increased the reputation of the Soviet Union which was the only country that openly confronted Germany in a global context, at least before the horrendous Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact.

Six years of the Nazi occupation were both a trauma and a shame for the Czechoslovaks: they conformed with no major resistances, became a part of the German war machine, and even participated in the construction of the concentration camps which created countless atrocities and tragedies during WWII. Their grudge eventually burst on 5 May 1945, 3 days before the official surrender of the German Reich, which resulted in the most violent resistance since the founding of Czechoslovakia. The remaining SS troops kept massacring Prague citizens and using them as human shields. At the same time, Czechoslovak insurgents killed lots of German citizens and surrendered German soldiers even after the arrival of the Red Army. There were many explanations for Czechoslovaks’ excessive behaviours towards Germans. However, this violent uprising, along with

the conformist attitude to the German Reich, cast doubt upon the national spirit of Hašek's Švejk, who exercised his freedom to resist in a nonviolent but "efficient" way.

After the war, due to the wide support of communism, KSČ won 38 percent of the seats in the parliament in the 1946 election [6]. Party leader Klement Gottwald became the prime minister of Czechoslovakia and Edvard Beneš was still the president, forming a communist government under the framework of democracy. However, its support decreased dramatically a year later due to its abuse of police and misconduct in collectivization. Most Czechoslovaks did not expect KSČ to win the next election in 1948. Fearing losing the grasp of the state, KSČ asked for the Soviet Union's support and seized power in February 1948. Edvard Beneš did what he did ten years ago: he chose to capitulate and resign the position of president to prevent the outbreak of a potential civil war. Czechoslovakia, again, conformed to sheer foreign force. The only difference could be the overall acceptance of communism was much higher than it of Nazism since the former, namely, helped the Czechoslovaks to get rid of the German occupation. Only after 20 years did the Czechoslovaks rise and openly resist the communist government. However, the Prague Spring did not take place in one day and multiple premonitions could be found that led to this national resistance — from ordinary citizens to elite KSČ members, all of them participated in this movement of nonviolence.

In a certain way, the Prague Spring was a failure for both Communist Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union: KSČ failed to realize its Action Programme and to fulfill its promise of reforming socialism with a human face; the Soviet Union failed to reform its stagnant system, to preserve the trust of Czechoslovak citizens, and convince the elite KSČ members of the advantage of Bolshevism compared to other ideologies.

Half a year after KSČ seized power, a group of young elite KSČ apparatchiks prepared "substantial materials on religious affairs for...the need to 'take all necessary steps,' including direct anti-church policies, with the objective of achieving the 'final and definitive liquidation of religion'" [7,8]. The Czechoslovak Catholic circles were radically anti-Bolshevik since the founding of Czechoslovakia [4]. Therefore, one of the KSČ's social engineering programs was to establish "scientific atheism" [8]. These young elites, strictly following their discipline of scientific materialism, "launched a project for a standardized sociological survey on the religiosity of Czech population carried out in 1963" [8], which ironically attracted the attention of the Czechoslovak Christian groups and resulted in an intellectual channel between two opposite sides that involved the exchange of ideas, contacts, and support [8]. This kind of connection was only possible because of two reasons: First, they had a high status in the bureaucratic KSČ to secure the connection; second, their stout belief in Stalin-revisional Bolshevism was shattered by their access to Marx's 1844 Manuscripts, Khrushchev's secret speech in 1956, and conversations with Polish and Yugoslav revisionists [8]. In other words, the young experts became more open-minded to different ideas and began to doubt what they used to believe — the still-conservative KSČ. Their eventual contact with Western Marxists like Erich Fromm and Roger Garaudy formed their principal idea in the Prague Spring — to bring humanism into socialism.

In a broader sense, the whole Prague Spring was de facto permitted by Leonid Brezhnev as a search for in-party reform. In the early 1960s, the Soviet Union and its allies in Eastern Europe were facing similar troubles: the growing stagnancy of the bureaucratic system and economy, along with the disobedience of the younger generation. Soviet newspapers expressed concerns that "the Communist Party encountered increased difficulty in its attempts to motivate young citizens for military duties, farm labour, and basic public service" [1]. In other words, the Soviet Union was facing a dilemma: the simplification of the government system and the improvement of the economy would lead to less supervision of citizens and more acceptance of foreign currency, inevitably resulting in the liberalization, both economically and culturally, of the whole Union. On the other hand, enforcing labour upon young people would not only provoke their negative opinion of the government but also over expand bureaucratic power, adding more burden to the Union. Brezhnev chose to a middle path and designed "the programme of 'developed socialism' which was about strengthening Soviet power through careful relaxation of state repression and continued overall domestic control" [1].

Czechoslovak followed the same step of developed socialism but with a different understanding. Alexander Dubček's promise of a new form of communism won him the position of the First Secretary of KSČ on 5 January 1968. In his speech on 22 February, he expressed that developed socialism was about the consolidation of communism's legitimacy through the method of liberalization [9]. This approach was more radical than Brezhnev's economic-focusing method. The Soviet Union still placed its trust in Dubček in early 1968. KSČ published their "Action Programme" on 10 April 1968, which was about the plans of communist Czechoslovakia:

"The system of socialist democracy – the state, social organisations, and the Party as the leading force – purposefully endeavours to bring out the differing interests and attitudes of working people to social problems in a democratic way and to settle them inside the socialist society organisations correctly and regarding nationwide needs and goals. The development of democracy must proceed hand in hand with strengthening of a scientific and professional approach to social management" [10].

Democracy was the main aspect Dubček intended to bring back to Czechoslovakia. Soon, the communist government was drowned in critiques and protests. The situation became uncontrollable, at least for the Soviet Union, when Ludvík Vaculík "published a manifesto on 27 June 1968 – 'Two Thousand Words' – that extended his criticism of the Communist Party voiced a year earlier at the Czechoslovak Writers' Congress" [1]. Vaculík was calling for a direct democratization of Czechoslovakia by reintroducing political pluralism. Dubček thought this manifesto was a necessary step to further reform while the Soviet Union was appalled by its occurrence. They openly condemned Vaculík and asked Dubček to subjugate the protestors and other political dissidents. Dubček refused and this should mark the beginning of the Soviet Union's invasion of Czechoslovakia and the end of the Prague Spring.

3. Nonviolent Responses during the Soviet Invasion and Its Legacy

The Soviet Invasion started on the night of 20-21 August 1968 under the code name Operation Danube [1]. However, the invasion did not develop as expected. According to Kirill Mazurov, Brezhnev's representative in Prague, everything except the invasion was in a mess: "Thuggish elements have been throwing explosives and grenades at tanks, trying to provoke our soldiers. Crude anti-Soviet broadcasts are being transmitted on radio and television from various stations throughout the day" [1]. The Czechoslovaks began to resist, but not in a militant way. With vehicles damaged, the invaders soon fell into a state of attrition. Their immediate collapse of supply lines forced them to beg for food and water from an uncooperative population [2].

According to Jeremi Suri's depiction, young men and women "spat at the tanks and troopers, hurled garbage and insults", and, as mentioned before, set the military vehicles and the tanks occupying the streets on fire in whatever way they could find. Students were ardent about damaging the vehicles. Others painted swastikas on foreign military vehicles [1]. Many Czechoslovak citizens also took passive methods: Residents of Prague and other cities removed street signs and painted over house numbers, making the invaders confused about where they were. Workers initiated a series of general strikes, paralyzing necessary services throughout the country. The troops could not sustain themselves when no worker was willing to maintain their military equipment and replenish their supply. Communist Party officials who courageously defied Soviet authority issued a proclamation that captured the widespread sense of public resistance [1]. The invaders were facing resistance from everywhere, including the party members. Even people in the Soviet Union and other satellite countries began to emphasize the Czechoslovaks. The country never yielded. The invasion was only successful in occupying the territory but nothing else.

Alexander Dubček resigned in March 1969 and was replaced by Gustav Husák, who "reestablished orthodox party controls over all aspects of public life and earned the all-important Soviet approval for having done so" [11]. This period was called "Normalization," in which a large proportion of KSČ party members were purged and disposed of all reformative policies implemented before.

However, the purge of the party never truly excommunicated all the dissidents, nor could they subjugate the gradually growing anti-Soviet/communism attitude throughout the country. On January 15, 1989, a series of spontaneous demonstrations began to protest against the current conservative government [12]. Václav Havel, one of the founders of Charter 77, took this opportunity and pled for the democratization of Czechoslovakia. On November 17, another mass demonstration of nearly 100,000 participants occurred near Wenceslas Square [12], along with nationwide strikes. The whole process was nonviolent, and no citizen was killed. A month later, Havel became the new president of Czechoslovakia, marking the end of Soviet control.

4. Conclusion

The paper provides a comprehensive overview of the history of Czechoslovakia from 1918 to 1989 and explore its national complex and evolving attitude towards several historical events. This period saw a range of responses from the Czechoslovak people, characterized by a mixture of nonviolent resistance and, at times, conformity. To resist non-violently without conformity could be the depiction of the Czechoslovaks in the 1968 Prague Spring and 1989 Velvet Revolution. These events must be understood within the broader context of the nation's historical experiences, and their conformist attitude in 1939 and 1948 should be taken into consideration when exploring their later nonviolent action.

Understanding the Czechoslovak attitude to nonviolent resistance requires a nuanced analysis. However, these events were preceded by years of political and social conformity. The paper thus argues that the Czechoslovak towards nonviolent resistance was shaped significantly by its moments of conformity as well as by its acts of defiance. This paper offers valuable insights into the broader dynamics of national attitudes towards invasion and resistance.

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