

How the Prague Spring Led to the Fall of Communism

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In January 1968, spring came early. On January 5, Alexander Dubcek was elected First Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. After two decades of ruthless communist rule, hopes of change blossomed.

Czechoslovakia was the first victim of Nazism, which lost its outer geographic defenses at the 1938 Munich conference and was wholly swallowed a few months later by Adolf Hitler. As the war raced to its cataclysmic conclusion, Germans treated Czechoslovakia as a final redoubt. Prague suffered the last major battle of the conflict and fell only in early May. Indeed, some fighting continued after Germany's surrender on May 8.

Alas, "liberation" led to more tyranny. It took a bit of extra effort for the Soviet Union to impose unpopular communist rule on the Central European country after the end of World War II. The USSR gained some advantage from its perception as a liberator, but more important was the local Communist Party's ruthless drive for power, which culminated in a coup d'etat in 1948. Free thought and action were eliminated as hardliners extended their control. In Czechoslovakia, in contrast to the Soviet Union, Stalinism outlived Stalin.

Dubek's Decentralization and Liberalization

However, Communist Party apparatchiks were far better at jailing people than creating prosperity. The economy stagnated, leading to pressure for change. In 1965, the party adopted the New Economic Model, which loosened state control of the economy. Modest political reforms, too, were introduced, though the old guard resisted serious changes. In late 1967, a Slovak reformer who had studied in the USSR, Alexander Dubcek, challenged Antonin Novotny, head of both the party and state. Little more than two months later, Dubcek was in charge.

Dubcek and his supporters pushed both decentralization and liberalization. The country was divided into Czech and Slovak socialist republics. Greater freedom of press and speech was granted. Restrictions on travel also were loosened. Farmers and trade unionists gained freedoms heretofore limited to the West. Communist Party members were allowed to act "according to their conscience," even to challenge official policy.

Dubcek said his objective was "to build an advanced socialist society on sound economic foundation" and "a socialism that corresponds to the historical democratic traditions of Czechoslovakia." He issued an "Action Program" in April, which envisioned a ten-year move to elections and the creation of democratic socialism.

Mindful of what happened in Hungary little more than a decade before, Dubcek emphasized maintaining good relations with Moscow and its other satellites. Czechoslovakia would remain in the Warsaw Pact. Moreover, the Action Program treated communism's record gently: It only

suggested that previous collectivist policies were outdated and no longer necessary. Happily, socialism had triumphed.

“Antagonistic classes” had been suppressed. Class conflict was eliminated, which all justified reform.

"Socialism With a Human Face"

So Dubcek pushed changes that looked distinctly out of sync with communism—more bluntly, that would send communist greats Marx, Lenin, Stalin, and Trotsky, as well as millions of other true believers spinning in their graves. He spoke of “socialism with a human face” and planned the 14th Party Congress for September when the Action Program would be adopted, new laws would be enacted, and a new Central Committee would be elected.

Although Dubcek was careful in his criticisms, his relaxation of censorship allowed others to attack communism’s crimes. Democracy might not yet have arrived, but independent political clubs emerged, and Social Democrats began to organize.

Unsurprisingly, the Soviet Union, just entering the age of stagnation under General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev, who had led the ouster of erratic Nikita Khrushchev, was concerned. So were Moscow’s satellites, some of which were being criticized by newly liberated Czechs and Slovaks. A meeting ensued in late July between the Soviet and Czechoslovak leaderships. Dubcek made all the seemingly necessary concessions: He affirmed loyalty to the Warsaw Pact, agreed to block revival of the Social Democrats, promised to control the media, and pledged to limit “anti-socialist” tendencies.

A couple of days later, Czechoslovak leaders met with their Warsaw Pact counterparts and signed the Bratislava Declaration. Everyone opposed the “bourgeois” system and “anti-socialist” actors, pledged “unswerving loyalty to Marxism-Leninism,” and backed “strengthening and promoting fraternal co-operation among socialist States.”

Soviet Socialism with an Inhuman Face

Then the Soviet Union withdrew its troops from Czechoslovakia, but in a reprise of Hungary left them along the Czechoslovak border. On August 20, Soviet tanks and soldiers backed by forces from Bulgaria, Hungary, and Poland invaded Czechoslovakia with a force that ultimately reached a half-million men and 2,000 tanks. (The East German military stayed home, reluctant to reawaken ugly memories of three decades before.)

The invaders surrounded the Czechoslovak army in its barracks, occupied the airport, and filled the streets. Dubcek ordered the public not to fight, explaining that “presenting a military defense would have meant exposing the Czech and Slovak peoples to a senseless bloodbath.” However, sporadic resistance occurred, and 137 Czechoslovaks lost their lives resisting. Hundreds more were injured.

Moscow justified its action based on a party request for military assistance. Several authoritarian Czechoslovak party leaders did ask for Soviet intervention, though that was pushing on an open door. The USSR’s UN Ambassador, Jacob Malik, defended “fraternal assistance” to combat “antisocial forces.” Brezhnev explained:

When forces that are hostile to socialism try to turn the development of some socialist country towards capitalism, it becomes not only a problem of the country concerned but a common problem and concern of all socialist countries.

Unsurprisingly, Soviet control meant the return of socialism with an inhuman face. First, Dubcek and other officials were flown to Moscow and given their marching orders. They were forced to reverse course, slowly undoing previous reforms. Dubcek soon was replaced by Gustav Husak and later expelled from the party, after which he was sent to the Forestry Service. Husak and the Soviet-backed party instituted a period of “normalization,” which meant reversing the Prague Spring in virtually every particular. Some 300,000 Czechs fled before the national doors were closed. The most dramatic protest came on January 16, 1969, when student Jan Palach set himself on fire. He lived on for three days, even giving interviews before succumbing to his injuries.

The willingness of what Ronald Reagan later called the Evil Empire to crush the slightest flicker of humanity in Eastern Europe was a bitter defeat for not just Czechoslovaks but all those throughout the Eastern Bloc who nurtured the spark of liberty. Hope for a better future seemed more forlorn, with communism’s cruelties a permanent reality.

The Prague Spring

Yet all was not lost. It turned out that a rising Soviet watched the Czechoslovak experience. In 1987, Mikhail Gorbachev admitted that his “glasnost” and “perestroika” reflected the influence of the Prague Spring. For the average Czech and Slovak, that additional 19 years might have seemed like a lifetime. However, most of those who enjoyed the taste of greater freedom in 1968 participated in the Velvet Revolution, a phrase credited to dissident (and later Czech ambassador to America) Rita Klimova in 1989. The critical difference with the latter was that liberalization began at the center rather than the periphery of the Evil Empire. Moscow no longer would prevent its satellites from breaking free.

In 1989, Poland held the first elections. Hungary cut a huge hole in the Iron Curtain when the reform regime tore down the border barrier with Austria. On November 9, the Berlin Wall fell, and the so-called German Democratic Republic tottered toward history’s trashcan. On November 20, a half-million Czechs and Slovaks filled Prague’s streets. Eight days later, the apparatchiks and timer-servers who filled the Communist Party, unable to either trust their nation’s military or turn to the Red Army, announced that they would yield power.

Playwright, dissident, and opposition activist Vaclav Havel ended up president of the new democratic republic. Although Dubcek’s time had passed since his countrymen and women were no longer interested in reforming communism, he was not forgotten. He appeared with Havel as protests reached their climax, and he ended up chairman of the Czech Federal Assembly and later head of the Social Democratic Party of Slovakia. He died in a car accident at age 70 in 1992, but at least he saw the final culmination of his dream. Like Gorbachev, he discovered that a government with a human face could not be communist.

Despair was a common response to the Soviet-led invasion in 1968. Yet without the Prague Spring, the miracle of 1989 might not have occurred. As both Hungary and Czechoslovakia demonstrated, the key to the freedom of Eastern Europe was military restraint by the Soviet Union. And it was Gorbachev, who had been inspired by Dubcek’s reforms, who ended up as

Soviet Communist Party General Secretary, in a position to enforce what his officials wryly referred to as the “Sinatra Doctrine” that is, allowing the Eastern Europeans to do it their way. Out of that simple principle emerged the popular force that toppled the communist dominoes and felled the Wall—and, ultimately, forced the dissolution of the Soviet Union itself.

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