

'The violent attack on Prague', from Süddeutsche Zeitung (22 August 1968)

Caption: The day after Warsaw Pact troops entered Czechoslovakia on 21 August 1968, the German daily newspaper Süddeutsche Zeitung considers the reasons behind Moscow's desire to crush the 'Prague Spring' and analyses the impact of the military intervention on the countries of the Eastern bloc.

Source: Süddeutsche Zeitung. Münchner Neueste Nachrichten aus Politik, Kultur, Wirtschaft und Sport. Hrsg. Dürrmeier, Hans ; R.Herausgeber Proebst, Herman. 22.08.1968, Nr. 202; 24. Jg. München: Süddeutscher Verlag. "Der Gewaltakt gegen Prag", auteur: Birnbaum, Immanuel, p. 4.

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The violent attack on Prague

By Immanuel Birnbaum

Is it an act of judgment to punish heretics who have transgressed against the teachings of Soviet Communism if troops from the Soviet Union and their remaining satellite states in Europe have now occupied the territory of the People's Republic of Czechoslovakia overnight and are preventing the elected leaders there from continuing to perform their official duties? For some of those involved in this act of aggression, which is in contempt of all international law, the fear of some loosening in the thinking of the Czech and Slovak intellectuals and workers was certainly the cause of torment. It was quite remarkable to see how many tourists from the Communist-ruled part of Germany were turning to the German-language newspapers that can be purchased in Prague or Karlovy Vary so that they might finally read a word of criticism about their own regime. We can imagine that such a situation is a worry for Ulbricht. It is also understandable that it is causing concern for Gomulka in Poland, who has to fend off liberalising reformers and radical nationalists in his party simultaneously; he must fear that both groups will use developments in the country on their borders to bolster their arguments against his complete subordination to the orders of Moscow. The same applies to the Party Secretary in the Ukraine, Petro Shelest, one of the agitators in the Presidium of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union who is already beginning to feel the sparks from the Slovak reform movement in the neighbouring territory under his control.

However, the risk of contracting the Czechoslovak freedom fever was, it would seem, only a secondary motive for the monstrous decision by the leaders of the Eastern Bloc to mount a military invasion against the country between the Theiß and the Bohemian Forest. This crude breach of the law can only be severely damaging to the international standing of Communism. Out of the nine states in Eastern Europe with Communist governments, only five were prepared to participate. Yugoslavia and Romania declared themselves against the move, not to mention Albania. From now on, Czechoslovakia itself is nothing more than the object of the policies of the Communist bloc and no longer a voluntary participant.. It was certainly neither pretence nor coincidence that, according to reports from the leaders in Prague, the guardian of Leninist doctrine in Moscow, Michael Suslov, was more prepared to reach an understanding in negotiations than other members of the Soviet Presidium. It is to him that the Communist party chiefs of the West are turning, above all those from Italy and France, where membership is very strong. They want to make clear how badly their reputations will suffer if Moscow relapses into Stalinist methods.

The issue is military power

However, such arguments are not decisive for those in power in the Soviet Union at present. Friendly or unfriendly feelings in foreign nations are of little concern to them when it comes to maintaining Russia's position of power. And it is here that the main motive for the invasion is to be found. The first high-ranking representatives of Moscow, who hurried to Prague after the fall of Novotny and Hendrych, were Marshals Gretchko and Jakubovski, the Soviet Minister of Defence and the Commander-in-Chief of all the Warsaw Pact troops, accompanied by their political adviser, General Yepishev. For them, the political reversal on the Vltava constituted the collapse of a military front-line position, and Yepishev therefore immediately threatened: 'If our reliable friends in Prague call upon us, we will hasten to their aid without delay.' However, the army officers have the ear of the party leader, Brezhnev, who was once himself the political commissar on a section of the wartime front with the rank of general.

A party conference is averted

When one of the reformers in the leadership of the Czechoslovak army, Lieutenant-General Prchlik, went over to counterattack at the height of the conflict and called for reform of the Warsaw Pact organisation, the dictators in Moscow were already so clearly unable to contain their anger that Dubcek, the party leader in Prague, was obliged to remove his military adviser from the political front line. However, the mistrust of the men around Brezhnev could no longer be appeased. The Czech contingent in the Warsaw Pact troops subsequently seemed unreliable to them, and, in the end, they decided it would be better to occupy the Bohemian front bordering on the Federal Republic of Germany themselves.

Great powers with land-based military forces have no use for voluntary allies; they need only obedient followers. This was once demonstrated by the German legal historian, Triepel, in a study of world history spanning the periods from the Assyrians and the Romans to the France of Napoleon; and this applied equally to Hitler's Germany and to Stalin's Russia. As we now see, it still applies today to the greatest military power of our continent.

It is not hard to see why the blow was struck at this particular moment. It has nothing to do with the 'persecution' of pro-Soviet workers in Czech factories, as the Russian press has been pretending, but a lot to do with the approaching date of the conference of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, which had been convened for early September. This conference would certainly have ejected the last remaining supporters of Moscow from their seats on the Prague Central Committee. Brezhnev wanted to prevent such a public disgrace of his policies. He therefore went on the offensive, without bothering about the nasty side-effects to be expected in East and West.

Setbacks in international politics

For Suslov, the atmosphere for his Communist 'World Conference' in November has now been completely spoilt. However, among the Western opponents of Soviet policy, there must now be some encouragement for all the forces that have warned against any kind of accommodation with Communist governments from the outset. We can just imagine the position now of presidential candidates in the USA, men such as the Southerner, Maddock, or the racist fanatic, Wallace, who stir up the voters with fanatical slogans claiming that the only way to deal with Communists and negroes is to use force. How can the Republican, Nixon, continue to keep his promise that he will visit Moscow as a presidential candidate? And is it not likely that his Democratic opponent, Humphrey, will see all his hopes dashed if he still continues to promote policies of détente and of trust in the good sense of the second largest world power?

There is no comfort in the fact that the Russians will damage themselves in the eyes of the entire world with their brutal policy of violence. They have also destroyed so much of the already unstable structure of international peace with this policy that it will ultimately be not only Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union that will suffer, but all of us.