

Address given by Pietro Nenni on the military intervention in Czechoslovakia (Rome, 29 August 1968)

Caption: On 29 August 1968, addressing the Italian Chamber of Deputies, the Socialist leader, Pietro Nenni, strongly criticises the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Soviet troops and emphasises the need for the Six to pursue a determined policy to achieve European unity.

Source: Pietro Nenni. Discorsi parlamentari (1946-1979). Roma: Camera dei deputati. Ufficio stampa e pubblicazioni, 1983.

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[...]

Honourable Members, at this point my speech necessarily moves on to the nature of the events in Czechoslovakia, without which everything is devoid of any substance, including the ‘no’ to the invasion. This time the opposition has also been backed by Communists in the West, displaying a high sense of responsibility; these were mainly Italian Communists, together with Communists from countries such as Romania or Yugoslavia itself, who undoubtedly have more to fear than we do when we freely and openly voice our criticism.

The events in Czechoslovakia revolve around what I described to the Foreign Affairs Committee as ‘the heresy of freedom’, in other words the voiceless struggle of a people for freedom, freedom which, honourable Members, is neither proletarian nor bourgeois, but merely human in nature (*applause on the left and in the centre*), against every form of repression; those events revolve around the attempt being made today in many countries and by many Communist parties to seek a power system that has the people as its foundation rather than the mechanisms of bureaucracy, a police state or the military.

Such has been the goal of the Czechoslovak people and their leaders in 1967, all the more since the beginning of 1968 until now. Behind the events that have so radically disrupted the torpor in which Czechoslovak public life was stagnating there has been a slow, laborious, contested process of underground criticism which has worn away not only a few men but also the dogmas and myths that have been the fabric of Communist power over the last two decades.

The initiative in Prague came from intellectuals and university students, as, I might add, has been the case in other countries of either system, before spreading to the working classes and thereby becoming a movement of the whole people.

The fall of Antonín Novotný and his group in January and the election of Alexander Dubček as First Secretary of the Communist Party formally celebrated a turning point that had already been reached in the minds of the people.

A whole series of measures has been adopted since then: the campaign for the rehabilitation of victims of the Stalinist period; the official dedication of the clubs that have sprung up, Jacobin in their spontaneity, such as the ‘231 club’, the ‘critical thought club’ and the ‘new freedoms club’; the authorisation of intellectuals to publish the weekly journal *Literarni Listy*; the abolition of censorship. All this has come about as if in a forum open to input of all kinds, driven by the young generations and under the control of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, which — now as in the past — has the merit of understanding the idealistic and political values behind this pressure from intellectuals and the people.

It was against this change of course, not against a counter-revolutionary danger, that Moscow intervened with the massive might of its military divisions and tanks. It was, therefore, not an error that can be put down to random contingencies, but to genuine incompatibility, and the only forces that can intervene to dispel that conflict are the forces of renewal which exist, although only potentially, in the Soviet Union, in Poland, in East Germany — the forces that have already tragically played a part in the history of Hungary, only ultimately to be contained or crushed, just as such forces in Prague have been subject to attempts to crush them.

Such is the context in which the Soviet intervention should be viewed and condemned, not only for the brutal method of invasion that has been deployed, but also for the precedents to the invasion. What is done is done, and at the root of the events is Moscow’s refusal to accept a political direction based on freedom.

Honourable Members, tracing events back to their roots is still the problem and to a certain extent the obstacle encountered by those Communists, including Italian Communists, even their leaders, who by condemning the Soviet intervention have adopted a position that has had and still has a positive influence on

the course of events; but these cannot be wholehearted in their opposition to the invasion unless they also adjust their assessment of the reasons underlying this new concept of power and the developments in that concept.

The other fundamental point of what needs to be said about the tragic events in Czechoslovakia concerns the political and ideological factors that paved the way in Prague for the new political direction taken by the leading players. Those factors are, in our opinion, essentially two in number: the thaw in relations between States, and Communist ideological revisionism.

Détente, that delicate plant to which our Minister for Foreign Affairs referred this morning, has undoubtedly acted broadly as an encouragement to the process of democratic development within the Communist bloc.

Any voice, any act that helps to dispel the mystique of the blocs, any act of trust that has vaulted over the fences and walls of isolation between States and peoples has contributed not only to peace but to establishing the movement for democratic renewal.

We must therefore move forward and work towards overcoming the blocs by taking practical action to create the conditions that make that possible.

The truth of the current situation is that the contrast is within the blocs themselves rather than between two blocs and the military balances they have attained. The latest example is in fact Czechoslovakia; a latent case is Romania, which risks having to defend its autonomy by the force of arms within the Communist system, an autonomy of which it availed itself not in order to threaten other people's security but to uphold its own; the case of Yugoslavia has arisen once again, and there the consequences would be nothing short of tragic because of the upheaval they would cause to the system of frontiers on which the precarious peace of Europe rests.

[...]