

'The Iron Curtain has come down once again' from Le Figaro (22 August 1968)

Caption: On 22 August 1968, the day after the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact troops, the French daily newspaper Le Figaro outlines the international and political consequences of the Soviet aggression and speaks of a return to the darkest days of the Cold War.

Source: Le Figaro. 22.08.1968, n° 7.459; 142e année. Paris: Le Figaro. "Le rideau de fer est retombé", auteur:Massip, Roger , p. 1; 5.

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The Iron Curtain has come down once again

The use of military force against Czechoslovakia came as a total surprise, firstly, because it happened less than three weeks after the ‘reconciliation’ in Bratislava, and the publication of the formal Declaration of 3 August that guaranteed respect for Czechoslovakia’s sovereignty and its right to conduct its internal affairs as it saw fit, and, secondly, because it was fraught with risks at international level which, we might have thought, the Soviet Government would have wanted to avoid.

If we consider just this second reason — the shock waves sent around the world by the invasion of Czechoslovakia — the Soviets must have spent some time weighing up the pros and cons of a military intervention by Warsaw Pact troops before taking the fatal decision. Apparently, the pros outweighed the cons.

The first effect of the event will be to destroy a certain image of Soviet Russia that had developed over recent years to the point where people throughout the world had come to believe that the Budapest ‘coup’ of 1956 would be unthinkable today.

The second effect is that the entire policy of closer ties with the West is now in jeopardy. Here, we are thinking not only of Russian-American contacts and the nuclear agreements which embody the attempts by the two Powers to find ways to enhance peaceful coexistence but also of General de Gaulle’s efforts to bring about what was unfortunately just a dream, i.e. lasting détente with the East, understanding and cooperation.

For a long time to come, it will be impossible to speak of Russia as the ‘essential pillar for Europe’ as the President of the Republic did in Bucharest on 15 May or to denounce, as he did on the same day in the same speech, the existence of countries that are ‘subservient to a political, economic and military influence from outside and accept the permanent presence of foreign troops on their territory’, without targeting the Russians and the Warsaw Pact rather than the Americans and NATO.

The third effect is that the USSR will now no longer be able to attack the ‘imperialists’ in Washington and the ‘aggressors’ in Vietnam without provoking mirth. Its traditional propaganda themes will have to be mothballed.

So, given the scale of the negative impact of the operation, one question remains. Why did Moscow decide to invade?

The answer lies entirely in the very substance of the agreements reached in Cierna and Bratislava. The Czechs made no significant concessions. The liberalisation process was to be pursued. There was to be no reintroduction of censorship, and there was no question of Soviet troops continuing to occupy Czech soil on a permanent basis. That represented a loss of face and a real capitulation that was unacceptable for the Soviet leadership and, in particular, for Leonid Brezhnev. After some reflection, the General Secretary of the Communist Party managed to convince most of his colleagues that tough action had to be taken. He pointed out that, were it to continue, the movement that had begun in Czechoslovakia would inevitably challenge the political and economic structures in the other countries in the Soviet buffer zone, beginning with Poland and East Germany.

There was enough nostalgia in Moscow for the Stalinist era, and enough officers concerned about keeping the Warsaw Pact intact and maintaining the efficiency of the Communist bloc’s military organisation, to ensure that the motion calling for intervention secured the most votes.

While it considers that ideology all-important and wants to protect it from any deviation, Russia also considers it to be the most merciless instrument of imperialism. That imperialism now applies to maintaining the Soviet protectorate over the countries which constitute the European buffer zone.

At all events, we are once again reliving the darkest days of the Cold War at a time when we thought that talk of the Iron Curtain no longer evoked a dreadful reality. Having risen a fraction, the Curtain has come

down again on a people who, while not renouncing Communism, wanted to enjoy a little more freedom. It has been demonstrated once again that, for Moscow, the two are incompatible.

Roger Massip