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THE OCCUPATION OF CZECHOSLOVAKIA IN 1968 – A SLOVAK PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Abstract: In 1968, the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic experienced an unexpected loosening of its communist regime. Encouraged by the popular communist leader Alexander Dubček, society began addressing pressing issues, including the rehabilitation of political prisoners, economic challenges, and the national question. However, the democratisation process was brutally halted by the intervention of Warsaw Pact forces in August 1968. Despite passive resistance, leaders from Moscow and their Czechoslovak collaborators succeeded in suppressing the liberalisation efforts. Ultimately, the only tangible result of the reformist communists' initiatives was the establishment of a poorly functioning federation.

Keywords: 1968 – Czechoslovakia – Invasion – Soviet Union – Alexander Dubček – Czechoslovak People's Army

The 1968 occupation of Czechoslovakia by the Moscow-led Warsaw Pact forces is regarded as a pivotal moment in Slovak history. It marked a turning point that derailed the country's democratisation process and extended the totalitarian communist regime for another 20 years. Though the invasion, launched during the night of August 20-21, 1968, was executed within hours, its impact was profound and multifaceted. Beyond its political and military significance, the event had repercussions in intelligence,

economics, journalism, and freedom of speech. It influenced high-ranking political figures and touched the lives of ordinary people alike, leaving a lasting mark on Czechs, Slovaks, and even other nations, including its orchestrator, the Soviet Union. The invasion affected the international communist movement, prompted shifts in communist ideology, and shaped European history. Moreover, it triggered one of the largest waves of emigration in Slovak history.

For Slovaks, the 1960s and Alexander Dubček's activities held significant national importance. His speeches on various occasions—such as the celebrations of the Slovak National Uprising and the centenary of Matica Slovenská (1963), as well as the 150th anniversaries of 19th-century Slovak leaders Ľudovít Štúr and Jozef M. Hurban (1965, 1967)—sparked criticism of his views on the intellectual and educational standards of communist cadres. In late 1967, during a speech before the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, Dubček called for democratisation and equal rights for Czechs and Slovaks. This momentum culminated in his election as the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in January 1968. By March, the Slovak National Council raised the issue of establishing a Czechoslovak federation. The regime's liberalisation was outlined in the Action Programme of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, adopted in early April 1968. This reformist spirit resonated with society, particularly through the manifesto *Two Thousand Words*, which called for accelerating the democratisation process.

Meanwhile, Moscow grew increasingly suspicious and began warning Czechoslovak leaders against pursuing liberalisation. At a meeting in Dresden at the end of March 1968, the Czechoslovak delegation was confronted for the first time with the threat of potential military intervention to enforce compliance. Leonid Brezhnev sharply criticised the delegation, while Hungarian leader János Kádár and Polish leader Władysław Gomułka issued verbal warnings, referencing their countries' experiences in the 1950s.[1] Further disapproval from Moscow was evident in the Warsaw Letter (15 July 1968) and during bilateral Soviet-Czechoslovak negotiations held in Čierna nad Tisou at the turn of July and August, as well as the Bratislava meeting on 3 August 1968. These interactions underscored the Soviet Union's firm opposition to the policies of the Czechoslovak Communist Party.

By April 1968 at the latest, the Soviets were actively planning a military intervention in Czechoslovakia, codenamed "Operation Danube." While strategists worked on the operation, Soviet leaders persuaded their Czechoslovak counterparts to host a Warsaw Pact military exercise involving select member states. This exercise, held in the summer of 1968, simulated a joint response to a hypothetical armed attack by NATO forces, allegedly supported by neutral Austria.

When the exercise, codenamed "Vltava," concluded in late June 1968, Soviet forces

1 . Daniel Povolný, *Operace Dunaj*. (Praha : Academia 2018), pp. 28 – 29.

were reluctant to leave the country, with their full withdrawal occurring more than a month after the scheduled end date. During the exercise, Czechoslovakia became host to a significant number of Soviet military personnel, ostensibly part of the training but, in reality, engaged in extensive reconnaissance and intelligence-gathering operations. These efforts provided detailed information on Czechoslovak military installations, unit sizes, equipment, and the morale of officers.

In addition to these both overt and covert activities, Moscow utilized other sources of intelligence, including loyal members of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, security services, and covert operatives. Some Soviet spies operated under the cover of Western journalists or tourists, conducting more delicate missions such as infiltrating organizations deemed anti-communist or provoking local journalists to write "anti-Soviet" articles.

The Soviet leadership feared losing control over Czechoslovakia, even contemplating the possibility of U.S. intervention or an armed conflict leading to Czechoslovakia's withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact. Although the anticipated American intervention never occurred, Soviet intelligence reported the movement of U.S. military vehicles into Czechoslovakia in early August 1968. For the Soviets, this was seen as key evidence of an "imperialist conspiracy." However, the reality was less dramatic: the vehicles were part of the filming for the war movie *The Bridge at Remagen* (1969), which was being shot south of Prague and in other parts of what is now the Czech Republic. [2]

In early August 1968, a group of "loyalists" within the Presidium of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia—Vasiľ Biľak, Alois Indra, Antonín Kapek, Drahomír Kolder, and Oldřich Švestka—submitted a letter to Brezhnev, inviting Soviet intervention to support the "socialist cause" by any means necessary. Despite having invasion forces already prepared, Soviet leaders issued one final ultimatum to Alexander Dubček. They demanded strict measures against the Czechoslovak mass media, restrictions on civic associations, a ban on establishing a social democratic party, and decisive actions to reinforce the authority of the Communist Party's executive bodies.

To briefly summarize the invasion forces that occupied Czechoslovakia: the country was invaded from all directions. Troops entered from the German Democratic Republic, the Polish People's Republic, the Soviet Union, and the Hungarian People's Republic, with additional forces arriving by air. The initial wave of occupying forces included 27 divisions: 12 Soviet tank divisions, 13 mechanized infantry divisions, 2 airborne divisions, and 1 air army. In addition to the Soviet forces, Polish, Hungarian, and Bulgarian ground troops also participated. Over time, the number of occupying forces increased, resulting in a ratio of approximately six occupying divisions for every one division of the Czechoslovak People's Army.

In the eastern part of the country, the territory of present-day Slovakia was occupied

2. Povolný, *Operace Dunaj*, pp. 146 – 147.

by units of the Soviet 38th Army, supported by Hungarian and Bulgarian forces. The 38th Army included the 31st and 15th Tank Divisions, which successfully achieved their objectives by midnight on August 21, 1968. These goals included securing specific locations, occupying Czechoslovak People's Army headquarters, and taking control of key communications and strategic sites.

Slovakia became heavily occupied, with nearly 50,000 Soviet soldiers, 10,000 Hungarian troops from the 8th Motorized Rifle Division tasked with occupying designated areas in southern Slovakia, and approximately 1,000 Bulgarian troops. General Samuel Kodaj, commander of the Eastern Military District, facilitated the smooth progression of the invasion. Acting on his initiative, he issued orders for all military staff to remain at their posts, for troops to stay in garrisons and reinforce guards to prevent weapon distribution, and to avoid any conflict with the occupying forces. Additionally, Kodaj mandated that all military personnel provide assistance to the invading forces upon request.[3]

The invading forces encountered no armed resistance, although their efforts to disarm the Czechoslovak People's Army were unsuccessful. While a few minor incidents occurred between Czechoslovak and Soviet units, none resulted in fatalities. Casualties among the occupiers were limited to traffic and other accidents. In contrast, Czechoslovak civilians suffered fatalities both in accidents and from shootings by Soviet forces.

In 1968, six members of the military died, including at least one death directly linked to the invasion—military doctor Jaromír Chlup, who was killed in a traffic accident caused by a Soviet soldier in October 1968. Additionally, more than 130 Czechoslovak civilians lost their lives in connection with the invasion during that year alone.[4]

Czechoslovak citizens and the majority of military personnel were deeply disillusioned by the occupation. Non-violent resistance emerged almost immediately, with incidents documented and often prosecuted by authorities such as military counterintelligence. Numerous records provide insight into the true sentiments of Czechoslovaks during the invasion.

One example is the *Report on Cases of Misuse of Forces and Equipment of the Czechoslovak People's Army in August 1968*[5], which lists over 200 such incidents. The report highlights that, influenced by media criticism of the Soviet Union and praise for Czechoslovak leaders of the post-January 1968 era, many active-duty soldiers were swayed by the prevailing societal atmosphere.

The documented cases largely involve the "misuse" of signal equipment, including sending messages to Soviet soldiers expressing disapproval of the invasion,

3. Daniel Povolný, *Nejhoršíden československé lidové armády. 21. srpen 1968*. (Praha : Academia 2020), p. 318.

4. Povolný, *Nejhoršíden*, appendix.

5. Vojenský ústřední archiv – Vojenský historický archiv (VÚA–VHA) Prague, fund MNO/Sekretariát ministra národní obrany 1969, box No. 31, 31/1-2, Zpráva o zneužití sil a prostředků v srpnových dnech 1968, sprievodný list, 6. January 1970.

interfering with Soviet communication systems, or providing military transmitters to Czechoslovak Radio employees to continue broadcasting after Soviet troops occupied radio facilities. These acts underscore the widespread opposition to the occupation among both civilians and military personnel.

The situation can be illustrated through a specific incident involving several officers, including Colonel Teodor Šlajchart,[6] commander of the Military Air Repair Works in Banská Bystrica, and officers from the 11th Battalion of Radio-Technical Security at the nearby Sliač military airport. On the first day of the invasion[7], Soviet planes were unable to land at the airport; they only managed to do so on August 22, 1968. When they arrived, Czechoslovak soldiers at the airport "greeted" them with calls to leave the country.

Meanwhile, Šlajchart, Major Štefan Lužica, and other officers organized a covert operation to modify a landing radio beacon, the PAR-8, at the Military Air Repair Works. This device was used to amplify and retransmit broadcasts from Czechoslovak Radio, which remained free from the occupiers' and collaborators' control. For their actions, all the officers involved faced criminal charges in the early 1970s.[8]

The "afterlife" of the 1968 occupation is particularly remarkable. Although the invading forces did not encounter the armed resistance they had anticipated, they faced widespread passive resistance. Individual soldiers were confronted by peaceful protesters who sought to present the reality of the situation in Czechoslovakia, starkly contrasting with Soviet propaganda.

Over the first year of the occupation, numerous events highlighted public dissent against the developments following August 1968. These events also reflected the citizens' determination to reject the intervention and the collaborators supporting the occupying forces. Among the most well-known acts of protest was the self-immolation of Jan Palach in Prague. A similar incident occurred in Košice in April 1969 when Michal Levčík took his life on the evening of April 11, 1969. Although Levčík's motivations are less clear than Palach's, the location of his act was significant, as it had witnessed the most intense clashes between Soviet forces and protesters in August 1968. To date, 29 cases of attempted self-immolation during this period have been documented.[9]

On the first anniversary of the invasion, August 21, 1969, strikes—ranging from partial to full-day work stoppages—disrupted daily life. Central squares in major cities filled with protesters. In response, security forces resorted to using weapons, tragically

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6 .For Further info see: Dušan Halaj, *Generálmajor Teodor Šlajchart*. (Banská Bystrica : Múzeum SNP, 2012), p. 45.

7 .According to the testimony of eyewittnes, col. (ret) Štefan Lužica, Soviet fighters Mig 21 were no table to land and just flew over the airport. During the first day, 21 August 1968, no Soviet plane landed at Sliač.. E-mail of Štefan Lužica to Matej Medvecký, 4 December 2023.

8 . For further information on this particular case see: Matej Medvecký, Stíhanie aktérov udalostí z augusta 1968 na Sliači. *Historie a vojenství*, Vol. 73, No. 3 (2024), pp. 42 – 57.

9 . Petr Blažek, "Slovenský nasledovník? Šest dokumentů k sebeupálení Michala Levčíka v Košicích 11. dubna 1969". *Paměť a dejiny*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (2014), p. 58.

resulting in further deaths. Even during the 20-year period of so-called "normalization" (1968–1989), memories of the occupation endured. Acts of remembrance for its victims in 1988 and 1989 signaled the regime's eventual downfall.

After the fall of the communist regime, Alexander Dubček, a symbol of the Prague Spring, returned to political life in the newly democratic Czechoslovakia. Until his death in 1992, he remained one of the nation's most beloved political figures. Despite the Soviet regime's efforts, their aggression was not forgotten during the communist era. However, it is sobering to note that after three decades of democracy and amid intensified Russian hybrid activities, segments of Slovakia's public appear to have forgotten the hard-learned lessons of 1968.

From the Soviet perspective, the events of 1968 are remembered quite differently. Soviet leaders, who had over 160 divisions of Soviet and other Warsaw Pact forces prepared for deployment in August 1968, anticipated scenarios ranging from armed resistance to a potential escalation into war between East and West. However, misled by their own propaganda and intelligence services, which reported only what the Kremlin wanted to hear, Moscow was unprepared for the widespread and determined passive resistance of the Czechoslovak population that it ultimately encountered.[10]

For both domestic purposes and propaganda, the Soviets adhered to the "big lie" strategy—a concept famously described by Adolf Hitler in *Mein Kampf*: *"...since the great masses of the people in the very bottom of their hearts tend to be corrupted rather than consciously and purposely evil, and that, therefore, in view of the primitive simplicity of their minds, they more easily fall a victim to a big lie than to a little one..."*[11] Unable to find the counterrevolutionaries, CIA operatives, or other "subversive elements" they had anticipated, the occupation forces fabricated them. These fictitious counterrevolutionaries were blamed for incidents such as traffic accidents involving Soviet military vehicles.[12]

Journalists who reported on the actions of the occupying forces or their domestic collaborators were labeled as reactionaries. Intellectuals who voiced their opposition to Soviet policies were denounced as oppressors of the working class. Meanwhile, the masses participating in anti-occupation demonstrations and attempting to reason with ordinary Soviet soldiers were depicted as counterrevolutionaries or, in moments of relative leniency, as merely misguided individuals.

This narrative aligned perfectly with the Brezhnev Doctrine, also known in Czechoslovakia as the Doctrine of Limited Sovereignty. According to this doctrine, socialist countries were nominally free to pursue their own development but were prohibited from making decisions that undermined communist rule in their own country or threatened the interests of any other socialist state—especially those

10 .For further information see: Jozef Pazderka, *Invaze 1968. Ruský pohled.* (Praha : Torst, ÚSTR, 2011).

11 . Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*. (First Mariner Books : New York 1999), p. 231.

12 .Povolný, *Operace Dunaj*, p. 357

of the Soviet Union. The USSR invoked this doctrine to justify the occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and later the invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. The doctrine was ultimately abandoned under Gorbachev, but its echoes resurfaced in 2022 when Vladimir Putin employed a strikingly similar rationale to justify Russia's war against Ukraine.

Within a few months, the Soviets succeeded in imposing their will on Czechoslovakia. A pivotal moment in this process was the signing of the Czechoslovak-Soviet treaty on the conditions for the "temporary" deployment of Soviet troops in ČSSR territory. Approved by the Czechoslovak parliament on October 18, 1968, the treaty's critics highlighted its glaring omissions: it neither defined the duration of "temporary" nor set a date for the withdrawal of Soviet forces. As history would later reveal, "temporary" lasted nearly 23 years. Despite these ambiguities, only four members of parliament voted against the treaty.

Unsurprisingly, the agreement exempted Soviet troops from Czechoslovak jurisdiction, even in cases involving traffic violations, theft, abductions, or killings. By early November 1968, the first wave of invading forces began to withdraw: 25 Soviet divisions and all East German, Polish, Hungarian, and Bulgarian troops left the country. Under the treaty, however, the Soviets retained a force of 75,000 military personnel in Czechoslovakia, including five land divisions and one air division. These units, many of which had participated in the invasion, were integrated into the newly established Soviet Central Group of Forces.

By the 1970s and 1980s, the Soviet Central Group of Forces included approximately 73,500 soldiers and 39,000 family members. Their arsenal comprised over 1,200 tanks, 2,500 armored personnel carriers (APCs), 175 military helicopters, and 105 aircraft. In the territory of what is now Slovakia, these units were stationed in nearly 20 towns.

Returning to 1968 in Czechoslovakia, particularly in the eastern part of the former republic, the discussion extended beyond the broader democratisation process. For Slovaks, federalisation of Czechoslovakia was intrinsically linked to democratisation, representing a critical aspect of their aspirations. Alexander Dubček, a Slovak who became the most influential political figure in Czechoslovakia for the first time, also held significant symbolic value.

The federalisation of Czechoslovakia, approved by parliament in October 1968 and implemented in January 1969, stood out as the sole lasting outcome of the democratisation efforts, even if it endured only in a distorted form following the intervention.[13]

In the armed forces, the democratisation process and the renewed focus on the "Slovak issue" encompassed several military-related aspects. Key discussions revolved around increasing Slovak influence over the military and the country's defense policy,

13 .For further info see: Jozef Žatkuliak, *Federalizácia československého štátu 1968 – 1970. Vznik česko-slovenskej federácie roku 1968.* (Brno : Doplněk, 1996).

raising the representation of Slovaks in central military bodies, and expanding the presence of military units and officers in Slovak territory. In line with federalisation efforts, the Ministry of National Defence developed a model aimed at achieving a more balanced national representation within the officer corps.

In 1968, a sociological survey examined the experiences of Slovak officers stationed in the western regions of the country. It highlighted challenges faced by their families living in culturally different environments, including economic impacts, limited job opportunities for spouses, and issues for children adapting to local schools. With federalisation, the Eastern Military District was restructured to align with Slovak national characteristics, while discussions at the federal level addressed proportional representation of Slovaks in command structures. These plans proposed a framework for achieving balance: implementing parity (50% Czechs and 50% Slovaks) in key departments, the General Staff, and leadership roles; adopting proportional representation based on population percentages for regional and institutional roles; and assigning commanders of the same nationality as the majority of their troops in certain cases.[14]

By 1969, the Ministry of National Defence anticipated implementing parity in departments, directorates, and leadership posts of major units, as well as military schools and special national units. Proportional representation was to be applied in regional military directorates and other institutions. However, this model excluded considerations for Ukraine, Hungarian, German, Polish, and Roma/Gypsy minorities.

As the political situation deteriorated in 1969 and liberalisation efforts receded, these proposals were abandoned in favor of stricter command structures emphasizing "Leninist" approaches to national issues. This perspective prioritized the "self-determination" of the proletariat over national identity concerns.[15] Most initiatives to integrate the outlined ideas into the armed forces were eventually discarded. The establishment of the Eastern Military District as a relatively autonomous regional army unit remained – within the army – the sole lasting outcome of the liberalisation process, persisting for the next two decades.[16]

The year 1990 marked the end of the Warsaw Pact, a symbol of Soviet domination over Eastern and Central Europe, as well as of Soviet expansionism and communist militarism. The dissolution of the pact was swift and met with little resistance, collapsing like a fragile structure. In Czechoslovakia, citizens welcomed the bilateral Soviet-Czechoslovak agreement that outlined the conditions for the withdrawal of Soviet forces. Signed at the end of February 1990, the agreement initiated a 16-month departure process involving 925 transports. This withdrawal concluded in the

14. Alex Maskalík, Nástup nového trendu národnostnej výstavby Československa a jeho limity. *Vojenská história* Vol. 17, No. 1 (2013), p. 79.

15. Compare: Vladimir Lenin, The Right of Nations to Self-Determination. 1914. In: Collected Works, Vol. 20. Available online: https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1914/self-det/index.htm, 23.08.2024.

16. Alex Maskalík, *Nástup nového trendu,* p. 80.

summer of 1991, with General Eduard Vorobyov, the last commander of Soviet forces in Czechoslovakia, departing on June 27, 1991.

In conclusion, significant democratic reforms unfolded in Czechoslovakia during 1968. These included increased freedom of speech and journalism, the initiation of rehabilitating individuals sentenced for political reasons under the communist regime, discussions on addressing the country's economic challenges, and renewed efforts to resolve the Czech-Slovak national question—an issue that had remained dormant since the 1950s. However, these developments were closely scrutinized by anxious leaders in Moscow, who ultimately decided to invade Czechoslovakia, bringing an end to the "socialism with a human face" experiment and its leading figure, Alexander Dubček.

In the end, the only enduring result of the Prague Spring was the federalization of Czechoslovakia, which also introduced more nationally sensitive management of the military. For many years, the invasion was regarded as a national tragedy, and the Soviet Union was widely seen as a force that shattered the dreams of an entire generation. Unfortunately, this historically ingrained view is increasingly challenged by the dissemination of 21st-century propaganda, particularly through social media platforms.

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Photos:

1 – Soviet tanks in Bratislava. Protograph courtesy of the Nation´s Memory Institute, Bratislava.

2 – Soviet tanks and protesters in Bratislava. Protograph courtesy of the Nation´s Memory Institute, Bratislava.

3 – Soviet troops in Banská Bystrica. Protograph courtesy of the Nation´s Memory Institute, Bratislava.

4 – Soviet military vehicle in Bratislava. Protograph courtesy of the Nation´s Memory Institute, Bratislava.

5 – Soviet troops in Prešov. Protograph courtesy of the Nation´s Memory Institute, Bratislava.

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