Fifty years since the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia: Part two

The Prague Spring

By Clara Weiss
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This is the second part of a four-part series. Part one was posted on August 28.

The next stage in the crisis of Stalinism erupted in the context of the deep economic and political crisis of imperialism that marked the 1960s. Throughout the 1960s and until about 1975, the major imperialist countries were rocked by major strikes, culminating in the general strike of French workers in May 1968, the biggest such strike in Europe since the end of the war and the most significant revolutionary situation in decades. The US, the center of world imperialism, was the scene of mass struggles against social inequality and for equal rights for the African-American population and a growing movement against the criminal war of aggression in Vietnam.

In the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, the nationalist program of the Stalinist bureaucracy increasingly produced economic crises, food shortages and discontent within the working class. National and economic tensions in Eastern Europe had been rising throughout the 1960s, providing the basis for splits and cracks within the national bureaucracies and growing infighting between the different Warsaw Pact states, virtually all of which had unresolved ethnic and border disputes, and the USSR.

The response of the Stalinist bureaucracy to its growing crisis was a combination of repression (such as the brutal crushing of workers in Novocherkassk in 1962), limited concessions to demands for freedom of speech, the conscious promotion of nationalism and racism, and steps toward the reintroduction of capitalist relations in the economy. The latter included “economic experiments” proposed by Liberman under Nikita Khrushchev’s “thaw” in the Soviet Union, and reforms proposed by Ota Šik in Czechoslovakia, which provided for a decentralization of the economy, greater autonomy for enterprises, a recalculation of the pricing and wage systems, and the introduction of commodity money relations.

It is under these conditions that the “Prague Spring,” which shared many of the dynamics of “perestroika” in the Soviet Union some 17 years later, was initiated by the KS? in 1968. This was an attempt to appease growing discontent within both the intelligentsia and working class, and simultaneously control this development and subordinate it to the interests of the bureaucracy.

The “Prague Spring” did not come out of the blue. Already in 1962-1963, travel restrictions had been considerably softened, allowing tens of thousands of people from Czechoslovakia to visit capitalist states in Western Europe, often through academic exchange programs, while thousands of tourists from the West flocked to Czechoslovakia. In 1964, Ota Šik was named the head of a government commission for economic reforms.

The first signs of the seething social and political discontent emerged, as is often the case, within the intelligentsia. Much like the temporary flourishing of Soviet cinema under the “thaw,” the “Czechoslovak New Wave” in cinema made use of the new political liberties (and funding from the West) to advance social, cultural and political criticisms of the status quo.

In 1963, the major German-Czech writer Franz Kafka was officially rehabilitated (his writings had earlier been banned), and in June 1967, the Fourth Congress of the Writers’ Union openly attacked the party and demanded far-reaching reforms. While sections of the intelligentsia were advancing left-wing criticism of the bureaucracy, there were also strong nationalist tendencies, both among Czech and Slovak intellectuals, which could relatively easily be exploited by the bureaucracy.

The champion of sections of the bureaucracy most aggressively pushing for “reforms” in anticipation of working class struggles was Alexander Dub?ek. He replaced Antonín Novotný, who had headed the KS? since 1953, in January 1968. Dub?ek had joined the KS? during the war and steadily rose in its ranks as the old leadership and thousands of workers were purged during the late 1940s and early 1950s.

In the 1960s, Dub?ek played a prominent role in the growing inner-bureaucratic struggles. As head of the Slovak party, he was the main advocate of political and economic reforms in Slovakia, which were combined with far-reaching concessions to Slovak nationalism. His appointment as party secretary was part of an attempt in both Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union to appease the growing demands for more Slovak autonomy within a federalized state.

Throughout the first months of 1968, Dub?ek’s push for reforms remained relatively moderate. However, on April 1, 1968, the Czechoslovak Politburo under Dub?ek approved the so-called “Action Program.” The Action Program made significant concessions to demands for political liberties: It promised freedom of speech and movement, including the right to travel to Western countries, freedom of debate and association, and an end to arbitrary arrests. It encouraged a virtual explosion of political, charity and religious associations and groups that immediately sprang up all over the country.

On an economic level, the Action Program envisioned reforms along the lines of those proposed by Ota Šik, with greater autonomy granted to individual enterprises and a decentralization of the economy as a whole. The Action Program, furthermore, argued for equal economic relations with the Soviet Union and demanded the withdrawal of Soviet economic advisors.

In an important concession to rising Slovak nationalist sentiment, the Action Program also proposed the federalization of Czechoslovakia, with equal rights and representation for Slovakia and the Czech lands. Finally, the program called for the recognition of the State of Israel and a cut in arms deliveries to Egypt and Nigeria. The Action Program thus combined the promise of greater political liberty with economic and foreign policy

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proposals that signified steps toward the restoration of capitalism and better relations with imperialism.

The ideology of "socialism with a human face," advanced by Dub?ek and theoreticians of Czechoslovak Stalinism such as Radovan Richta, was a fraud. From the standpoint of the Czechoslovak bureaucracy, it was a variation of "socialism in one country." It dressed up as "humanist" a program that essentially pushed for pro-capitalist reforms and greater independence from the Soviet bureaucracy under the control of the Czechoslovak Stalinist bureaucracy.

At the same time, albeit in a distorted and fraudulent way, the formulation of "socialism with a human face" was designed to appeal to the striving of the working class and significant sections of the intelligentsia for genuine socialism, which they correctly felt did not exist in either the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic or the Soviet Union. In particular, it gave expression to the revulsion that millions of workers and intellectuals felt about the bloody terror that had descended upon them over the previous decades of Stalinist rule.

Anti-capitalist sentiments were overwhelming, with millions of workers and intellectuals remembering all too well the horrors of fascism, the war and the corrupt and right-wing role of the Czechoslovak bourgeoisie. Whatever the drive of the bureaucracy to solve its crisis by capitulating to imperialism, there was no support within the working class for a restoration of capitalism, as virtually all observers noted at the time. Rather, there was overwhelming hostility to Stalinism from the left.

It is this aspect of "socialism with a human face," a notion that would later be picked up by Mikhail Gorbachev in his propaganda for perestroika and capitalist restoration in the USSR, that provoked the most anxiety and anger within the bureaucracies throughout Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. It was perceived as dangerous in as much as it could encourage tendencies toward a genuinely socialist challenge to Stalinism. In May, Soviet party leader Leonid Brezhnev angrily said to Dub?ek, "What's with this human face? What kind of faces do you think we have in Moscow?"

A particularly vile role in advocating for a violent crackdown was played by W?adys?aw Gomu?ka, the head of the Polish party, who was at the time overseeing a filthy anti-Semitic campaign against the student protesters of March 1968. He was seconded by Petr Shelest, the head of the Communist Party in Ukraine, who accused the Czechoslovak party leadership of seeking to annex the long-contested region of Carpatho-Ukraine. In some respects, Gomu?ka, Ulbricht, the party leader in East Germany, and the head of the Bulgarian party, Todor Zhivkov, were even more militant in their insistence on a crackdown on the Prague Spring than the leadership in Moscow.

Already in March, at a Dresden gathering of Eastern European leaders, Gomu?ka, whose government had just been challenged by mass student protests, insisted on a "forceful counter-offensive" in Czechoslovakia, comparing the situation to Hungary 1956. Hungarian party secretary János Kádár , who had taken over the rudder after the crushing of the 1956 revolution, also insisted on resolute measures in this "critical" situation.

Historians have noted that the move toward military intervention was prompted above all by the release of the "Manifesto of 2000 Words" on June 27, 1968. It was drafted by a leading Czechoslovak intellectual and called for a break with the party. However, the fact that this manifesto was perceived as such a threat by the bureaucracy was due to the growing movement within the working class.

The biggest fear of the bureaucracy was that the concessions of the KS? to demands for political liberties would create the basis for a powerful intervention of the working class. If the industrial working class had remained relatively silent during the first months of 1968, the situation changed quite dramatically starting in the spring, coinciding with the mass movement of French workers against De Gaulle's government. During these months, the Dub?ek leadership was forced, as a contemporary think tank analyst observed, to make far more concessions and move far more rapidly than it had wanted.

One historian notes:

> Many [workers] were unmoved by the notion of political democratization espoused by a reshuffled set of party leaders and a few radical intellectuals—'we've seen it all before.' For most blue-collar workers, the prime issues were higher living standards and wages and reduced state price controls. ... However, by spring and summer there were signs of movement. The central trade union leadership was revamped and its mission of defending members' interests was restated; there was much discussion about the formation of Yugoslav-style 'workers' or 'enterprise councils' and the possibility of worker 'self-management' in the factories; several short strikes were held; and even a few workers' committees to defend press freedom were spontaneously created. [1]

It was at this point that discussions among the Stalinist leaders became ever more heated and frantic. There was a series of meetings, especially between June and August, in which the Soviet, the Polish and the Yugoslav leaderships urged Dub?ek and the Czech Politburo to get the situation back under control, reestablish full control over the media and crack down on the working class.

In May, the Soviet Politburo established a nine-member commission to follow developments in Czechoslovakia on a daily basis. They were also receiving regular reports from the Soviet embassy in Prague.

In June and July, the Warsaw Pact states conducted large-scale military maneuvers on Czech soil in an unmistakable threat to the Dub?ek leadership and the Czechoslovak working class.

In another series of talks from July 29 to August 1, the Dub?ek leadership was pressured into making a series of oral promises to crack down. Finally, on August 13, Brezhnev and Dub?ek had a phone conversation that was described by one historian as follows:

> An exacerbated Brezhnev accused a defensive Dub?ek of 'deceiving us' by his prevarication and lame excuses for delaying the overdue crackdown in Prague, to which Dub?ek abjectly responded: 'if you believe we are deceiving you, then take the measures you regard as appropriate...by all means go ahead.' He even offered his resignation as first secretary, but ended with the words: 'I promise you, Cde. Brezhnev, that I'll do everything necessary to fulfill our agreement.' [2]

On August 17, the Soviet Politburo, the highest executive organ of the party, resolved to send the military into Czechoslovakia. Historians today believe that the United States had already, a month before, signaled that it would not intervene in the situation, essentially giving the green light for a military solution.

On the night of August 20-21, 1968, some 165,000 soldiers and 4,600 tanks from four Warsaw Pact states—the Soviet Union, Poland, Hungary and Bulgaria—accompanied by military advisors from East Germany invaded. Within a week, the number of troops occupying the country had risen to half a million.

At least 137 Czechoslovak civilians were killed in the first days. Hundreds were wounded, and the total death toll from the occupation is estimated at about 500.

In an indication of the lack of political support for the invasion within

the Soviet Union itself, many of the Red Army soldiers had been drafted from Central Asian countries and had not been informed where they were stationed. Many thought that World War III had begun and they were in West Germany.

The offices of the Czechoslovak Communist Party were raided, and Dub?ek's leadership was arrested. He himself and several of his allies were flown to Moscow and interrogated. They were released, flown back and reinstated only after they had signed the secret "Moscow Protocol." This provided for the stationing of foreign troops in Czechoslovakia until "the threat to socialism" had passed, key personnel changes, the reinstatement of party control of the media, the banning of "anti-socialist" organizations, and the reversal of key elements of the Action Program.

According to historians, it was the working class that emerged as the main social force in the opposition to the occupation. It responded to the invasion with a series of general strikes on August 21, 22 and 23. Workers' councils were formed at hundreds of enterprises.

The resistance to the occupation encompassed virtually all other social layers, including sections of the bureaucracy. There were instances of non-armed resistance by elements of the army, police and departments of the Ministry of the Interior. Students also protested the occupation with many demonstrations and sit-ins.The streets were plastered with graffiti calling upon the Red Army to go home. One graffiti read: "Lenin! Wake up! Brezhnev's gone mad!" Hundreds of thousands of Czechoslovaks left the country, fleeing for the West.

On January 19, 1969, the 21-year-old student Jan Palach set himself on fire and died. His funeral turned into a mass demonstration of hundreds of thousands against the occupation. As late as March 1969, half a million people demonstrated in 69 towns and cities, attacking offices of the Soviet airline, Aeroflot, and nine Soviet garrisons.

Taking the latest mass demonstrations as a pretext, Dub?ek was removed from his post in April 1969 in a vote by largely the same Politburo that had voted him in office in January 1968. He was replaced by Gustáv Husák. The mass opposition, bereft of a clear political program and leadership, eventually petered out, and the so called "normalization" set in.

Significantly, the only aspect of the Action Program that the bureaucracy continued to pursue, with encouragement from Moscow, was the federalization of Czechoslovakia. On October 27, 1968, a constitutional law was adopted turning the previously unitary state into a federation. Over the following two decades, the promotion of nationalism, and the pitting of the Czech and Slovak Communist parties, and, above all, of Czech and Slovak workers, against each other was to form a critical component of the bureaucracy's suppression of the working class and drive toward capitalist restoration.

A similar process took place in all of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. In Poland, Gomu?ka responded to protests by students and workers with an anti-Semitic campaign in 1968-1969 in which he worked closely with the nationalist interior minister, Mieczys?aw Moczar, and Boles?aw Piasecki, who had been a member of the fascist Falange in the 1930s.

In the Soviet Union, the Brezhnev leadership responded to 1968 by directly promoting leading nationalist figures into high-ranking cultural and political positions. So-called "thick journals" of the nationalist intelligentsia, which promoted anti-Semitism and vile Russian nationalism, received state funding and could thus be circulated with monthly copies numbering in the hundreds of thousands, sometimes even millions.

In many respects, the response of the Stalinist bureaucracies to the movement of the working class in 1968 lay the ground for the final breakup of Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union as part of the full reestablishment of capitalism in the region in 1989-1991. That the bureaucracy could pursue this course was, in large measures, the result of the conscious intervention of Pabloism, which enabled the bureaucracy to solve its crisis at the expense of the working class.

To be continued

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End notes

[1] Kevin McDermott, *Communist Czechoslovakia, 1945-89. A Political and Social History*, Palgrave 2015, pp. 130-131

[2] Ibid., p. 144

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