

**NATIONAL WINNER
QLD YOUNG HISTORIAN**



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**THE PRAGUE SPRING: A TRIUMPH OR A
FAILURE**

The Prague Spring

A TRIUMPH OR A FAILURE?

National History Challenge

Abstract

The 1968 Prague Spring remains one of the most prominent and symbolic movements for reform within the Soviet Bloc.

Nonetheless, the question remains – did it leave a legacy of change and hope, or was it merely a surge of idealism destined for failure? This essay will argue that the Prague Spring was instrumental in revealing and instigating the decline of Soviet power, as well as exploring various points of contestability: including the representations of protestors and radical elements within the movement.

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“They may crush the flowers, but they cannot stop the Spring”.

- Alexander Dubček, 1968 (as cited in Stoneman, 2015)

Despite its sudden dissolution, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 can largely be attributed to deep-seated political and ideological weaknesses within the USSR and its sphere of influence. Throughout the Cold War, power in the USSR was largely contingent upon suppression and ideological domination. Though effective, such control ultimately proved unsustainable in maintaining support among Warsaw Pact nations. Arguably, this growing resentment is embodied by the events of the 1968 Prague Spring within Czechoslovakia. Led by reformist Alexander Dubček, the Prague Spring was a grass-roots movement designed to pursue liberty, democracy and nationhood. Nonetheless, due to fears of potential counter-revolution, the movement was suppressed when the USSR invaded Czechoslovakia in August 1968. Given that it was so short-lived, the significance of the Prague Spring, both as a symbol of the decline of the USSR and a political movement in of itself, remains a significant point of contention. While it is often described as a failed domestic reform initiative with few geopolitical connotations, others argue that it left a legacy far beyond the streets of Prague. A review of these perspectives indicates that the Prague Spring was pivotal in revealing the growing decline of Soviet power within the Eastern Bloc. Not only did it manifest from widespread discontent and challenge Soviet dominance in the region, it would come to symbolise the stagnation of the USSR and foster disillusion across the coming decades.

In response to an increasingly oppressive Soviet regime, the Prague Spring was borne from ideological disillusionment within the Eastern Bloc. Following the end of the Second World War, a Soviet-endorsed dictatorship was installed in Czechoslovakia. Under the KSČ (Communist Party of Czechoslovakia), Czechoslovakia suffered under an autocratic Soviet rule, where dissidents were quashed, and cultural and economic stagnation occurred (Stoneman, 2015, p.104). Much of the reformist primary literature cites the failure of the Soviet dictatorship as the principle catalyst for reform. Specifically, the Two Thousand Words manifesto, by Czech writer Ludvík Vaculík, argues that though the “socialist program [was

welcomed] with high hopes... the communist party... bartered this confidence away for office" and their "mistaken policies transformed a political party and an alliance based on ideas into an organization for exerting power" (Vaculík, 1968). Vaculík explicitly criticises autocratic Soviet leadership for corrupting socialist ideology, implying that structural reform was necessary to rectify KSC's 'mistaken policies'. The prevalence of dissent is also corroborated by contemporary authors. Karabel, an American sociologist, noted that before the Spring, "the grievances of the intellectuals were cumulative and profound... The Prague Spring was a frank acknowledgement that Czechoslovakia was suffering from a profound social crisis." (Karabel, 1990, p.46). As a credible academic, Karabel's perspective is reliable in revealing the discontent preceding the Spring. However, anti-reformist Soviet perspectives often argue that, rather than resulting from genuine disillusionment with the Soviet regime, the movement's impetus was derived solely from counter-revolutionary capitalist forces. A 1968 Pravda article, serving as the official organ of the USSR, argued that "socialist Czechoslovakia is the target of fierce attack from internal reactionaries and foreign imperialists" ("Consolidating Socialism and Peace", 1968). The extract explicitly condemns the Spring as the product of anti-socialism, rather than widespread disillusionment. Given its Soviet audience, the article is likely motivated to positively represent the USSR and condemn legitimate complaints as counter-revolutionary, undermining its reliability. Hence, the prevailing historiography suggests that the Prague Spring represented rising resentment within Czechoslovakia towards the USSR, indicating decline in Soviet control. It was on this basis that the Spring's reforms were founded, cementing a growing threat to the Soviet regime.

Through widescale reform, the Prague Spring inadvertently challenged the USSR's authoritarian dominance within the region. Following his election as First Secretary of the KSC in January 1968, Dubček instigated a process of liberalisation and democratisation, known as 'socialism with a human face' (Kramer, 2010). This sweeping reform initiative was perhaps most evident in the legislative changes of the Action Program, including press freedom and a multiparty government system (Karabel, 1990). Launched in April, the program put forward its goals as the "creation of an advanced socialist society, rid of class antagonisms... characterised by

comradely relations of mutual cooperation among people and free scope for the development of the human personality” (Central Committee of the Communist Party, as cited in Karabel, 1990, p.60). As an official proclamation from the KSC, the excerpt provides valuable insight into the democratic motivations of the Spring. Considered contextually, the source implicitly captures how the Spring’s progressive reforms diverged from the stolid authority and draconian censorship of the Soviet Bloc. American historian Mark Kramer affirms the nature of Dubček’s reforms, arguing that “Czechoslovakia embarked on a dramatic, but entirely peaceful, attempt to change both the internal complexion, of communism and many of the basic structures of Soviet-East European relations” (Kramer, 2010, p.285). Kramer’s perspective is valuable in highlighting how the Spring changed the structures of the Soviet regime through the pursuit of self-determination and liberalization. Likewise, British commentator Robin Shepherd, who believes that the Soviet invasion was inevitable, expounds upon how the Prague Spring threatened the Soviet hegemony:

“Pluralism, democratisation, market reform and the abolition of censorship in Czechoslovakia ... represented the antitheses of Soviet style rule at home; they posed a real threat to the stability of other Communist states in the region whose people would undoubtedly be encouraged to do the same” (Shepherd, 2000, p.34)

Shepherd provides a useful insight into the radical disparity between Dubček’s reform and the authoritarian control of the USSR. While Dubček did not anticipate how his reforms would threaten Soviet dominance, Shepherd explicitly explores the consequences of his policies, namely their capacity to proliferate and further weaken Soviet control within the Warsaw Pact. Thus, the reforms of the Prague Spring challenged the Soviet hegemony within their sphere of influence. These concerns about the movement, coupled with an increasingly intransigent and paranoid Soviet leadership, would ultimately lead to the Spring’s end.

Fueled by concerns over their continued control over Czechoslovakia, the Soviet invasion reflected an inability to enact structural reform and change within an increasingly dictatorial USSR. Despite little provocation, a Warsaw Pact force, comprised of approximately 250 000 troops and 2000 tanks, invaded and occupied

Czechoslovakia in August 1968, later replacing Dubček with Soviet hardliner Gustáv Husák (Kramer, 2010). The historical discourse remains divided on the extent to which this response was proportional; orthodox perspectives condemn the invasion as an autocratic violation of international law, whilst pro-Soviet perspectives claim that the Prague Spring was an ideological threat to Communism, hence justifying the intervention. Notably, when the USA released a proclamation to the UN “protesting against the occupation of Czechoslovakia” (Ball, as cited in Vaughan, 2012, 1:56), Soviet ambassador Jacob Malik (as cited in Vaughan, 2010, 1:11) argued that it was an act of “fraternal assistance against anti-socialist forces” and that “attempts by the forces of imperialist reaction... will not be tolerated”. Given the hostility between the two nations, and the USSR’s desire to positively represent their actions on an international stage, both perspectives are subject to an inherent bias. Nonetheless, the source is useful in representing the Soviet’s justifications for the intervention and their concerns about the movement. However, while there were certainly counter-revolutionary elements within the movement, much of the contemporary historiography argues that the response was disproportional, given that its leaders continued their professed desire to maintain “alliance and cooperation with the Soviet Union” (Dubček, as cited in Crump, 2015, p.221). Notably, Mikhail Gorbachev, a reformist and the last leader of the USSR, provides a unique insight into the reasons for the invasion: “the scope and dynamic development of the reform process in Czechoslovakia had frightened our leaders into scrapping their own timid attempts at economic reform and tightening the political and ideological screws” (Gorbachev, 1996, p.101). The excerpt explicitly highlights how the USSR rejected the reforms of the Prague Spring due to their radical nature, continuing to repress political expression in its satellite states. Having a first-hand perspective on the USSR during the crisis, Gorbachev provides a valuable representation of Soviet leadership. Likewise, revisionist historiography predominantly supports the notion that the military occupation represented an inability to enact change. Stoneman, a supporter of the liberalisation process, argues that the heavy-handed reaction demonstrated “the true nature of the Soviet Union... that the Soviet Communist system could only function when individual liberties were severely curtailed” (Stoneman, 2015, p.109). Implicitly, Stoneman suggests that the USSR were consigned to a specific brand of Communism; due to their authoritarian nature, they were unable to countenance the Spring’s liberalisation and reforms. Consequently, the USSR failed to respond

proportionally to the movement, highlighting an inability to enact change and their authoritarian nature. Over the coming decades, this perception would fuel a growing discontent within the Warsaw Pact.

Though the Prague Spring did not achieve its objectives in the short-term, it generated surviving ideas and fostered dissent within the Soviet Bloc. Throughout the invasion, the Soviet troops were met by popular opposition from civilians. Tad Szulc, a foreign correspondent for The New York Times in Czechoslovakia at the time, recalled witnessing “young people... [fighting] the tanks with their bare hands, setting them on fire with flaming torches and hitting at them with branches” (Szulc, 1971, p.394). Szulc’s perspective explicitly reveals the generalised resistance which was triggered by the Soviet military occupation and is useful in showing how the invasion embittered Czechoslovakian nationalists. This response is supported by the reaction of international governments within the Warsaw Pact. In a speech by Nicolae Ceaușescu, General Secretary of the Romanian Communist Party, on 21 August, he publicly denounced the invasion and expressed solidarity with the people of Czechoslovakia: "It is inconceivable...that a socialist state should violate the freedom and independence of another state. There is no justification whatsoever... of military intervention in the affairs of a fraternal socialist state" (Ceaușescu, as cited in Hebert, 2014, p.43). Ceaușescu has implicitly portrayed the invasion as a betrayal of socialist relations, perceiving it as a fundamental challenge to the Warsaw Pact and the nationhood of a socialist state. Given that is a direct message from the Romanian leader, the speech is useful in showing how the Spring sparked international outcry and engendered resentment within the broader Soviet Bloc. To corroborate this sentiment, revisionist American historian, Jeremi Suri, a proponent for ‘developed socialism’, provides greater insight into the ideological ramifications of the invasion:

“‘Developed socialism’ became stagnant socialism, and the promises of a dynamic and ‘mature’ communist society gave way to the greyness of *zastoi*. Thus emerged the bleak but stable post-1968 Soviet bloc. With the failure of ‘developed socialism’, the Soviet Union could offer its people few promises of social progress” (Suri, 2006, p.158).

The explicit message of this excerpt reveals that the collapse of the Prague Spring contributed to the stagnation, or *zastoi*, of the Soviet Bloc; it represented a rejection of social progress, propagating cynicism within the Eastern Bloc. Hence, Suri highlights the inherent flaws in Soviet foreign policy; despite providing short-term stability, it ultimately failed to maintain their popularity. This sentiment is affirmed by Mikhail Gorbachev, who claimed, upon reflection, that “the defeat [of the Prague Spring]... represented nothing less than the beginning of the end for the totalitarian system” (Gorbachev and Mylnár, 2002, p.199). Due to his credibility and unique perspective on the rise and fall of the USSR, Gorbachev is useful in highlighting how the end of the Prague Spring was a turning point in the decline of the USSR. Therefore, the events of the Prague Spring generated widespread disillusion within the Soviet Bloc, an affliction from which it would never truly recover.

The events of the 1968 Prague Spring, both in its inception and demise, provided hallmarks for the decline of Soviet influence within the Eastern Bloc. Specifically, it was a manifestation of public disillusionment and challenged Soviet hegemony. Similarly, the invasion highlighted the USSR’s intransigence and generated dissent in the Warsaw Pact. Indeed, it was this policy of coercion that would dictate Soviet foreign policy for the coming years. When Gorbachev proposed similar reforms in 1989, he would be unable to abscond the preceding years of oppression. Though ironically designed to maintain its authority, the USSR’s authoritarian regime, epitomised by the Prague Spring, would ultimately spell its demise. Thus, in this regard, the Prague Spring remains a triumphant failure. Though it undoubtedly failed in its initial objectives and it would take years for the actuality of its legacy to be fully realised, the movement showed to all the stagnation of the USSR. In the bleak midwinter of the Cold War, the Prague Spring planted a seed of hope for a broken Czechoslovakia: the assured promise that spring would come again.

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Szulc recounts his personal experiences in Czechoslovakia and explores the foreign policy and politics of events in Czechoslovakia across the latter half of the 20th Century. Though the Prague Spring only encompassed a small part of its content, the book is useful in showing the representation of protestors and generalised resistance which was present following the Soviet invasion. Szulc was an American reporter and foreign correspondent for the New York Times in 1968. Given that it is a personal account, it may only reflect his personal experiences and viewpoint. Similarly, as an American reporter, the reliability may be limited due to a desire to further a narrative of further a narrative of Soviet oppression. Nonetheless, his perspective is supported by modern historiography and the opposition shown by other parties.

Vaculík, L (1968). *2000 Words to Workers, Farmers, Officials, Scientists, Artists, and Everyone* [Manifesto]. Digital History Reader.

https://www.dhr.history.vt.edu/modules/eu/mod05_1968/evidence_detail_13.html

Vaculík was a prominent Czech and samizdat writer and a strong advocate for the reforms of the Prague Spring. Signed by many of his contemporaries, the 2000 Words Manifesto is generally considered a staple work of the Spring. While Vaculík's perspective as a progressive intellectual will certainly not reflect the opinions of everyone in Czechoslovakia, it serves as a reliable barometer of disillusionment towards Soviet rule amongst intellectuals and public representatives.

Vaughan, D. (Presenter). (2012, March 3). Words, words, words... The United Nations and the 1968 invasion. [Audio radio episode]. In *From the Archives*. Radio Prag0075e International. <https://english.radio.cz/words-words-words-united-nations-and-1968-invasion-8556192>

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Gorbachev, M. S., & Mylnár, Z. (2002). *Conversations With Gorbachev On Perestroika, the Prague Spring, and the Crossroads of Socialism*. Colombia University Press.

As the last leader of the Soviet Union, Gorbachev provides a unique insight into the Kremlin and the downfall of the Soviet Union. Given that Gorbachev is both a proponent for socialism and reformation, he likely sympathises with the objectives of the Prague Spring and provides a more balanced viewpoint than his predecessors. Thus, Gorbachev's post-USSR publications are very useful in analysing the factors which contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union, specifically in terms of the Prague Spring.

Kramer, M. (2010). The Kremlin, the Prague Spring, and the Brezhnev Doctrine. In V. Tismăneanu (Ed.), *Promises of 1968: Crisis, Illusion, Utopia* (pp. 285-370). Central European University Press.

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Suri, a contemporary American historian, examines the Soviet regime under Brezhnev, specifically focussing on the social stagnation and political stability of this period. This journal article is very credible and is based on analysis of a range of historical evidence. Thus, the source is useful in giving important context to the Prague Spring and its influence across the following years.