

The BBC Monitoring Service and the Prague Spring, 1968

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The Prague Spring was an ambitious attempt by Czechoslovak communist reformers to marry democracy and socialism. In the context of a bi-polarised Cold War Europe, the undertaking proved to be an extremely arduous task. Its defining slogan - 'socialism with a human face' - was epitomised by Alexander Dubček, the leader of the Czechoslovak party from January 1968, and inspired a generation of leftists and 'Euro-communists' to seek an alternative 'third' path to modernity between capitalist democracy and Moscow-style state socialism. More relevant, twenty years later it informed Mikhail Gorbachev's liberalising *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (reconstruction) policies, which aimed to democratise and modernise the Soviet state, society and economy. In 1968, however, the reforms mooted by the Czechoslovak communists were deemed 'counter-revolutionary' in Moscow and the Prague Spring was rudely squashed by Warsaw Pact tanks on the night of 20–21 August 1968 and by the 'normalisation' process that followed rapidly in their wake.

My original interest in the BBC Monitoring sources was to find out if they contained useful material for a broader project I am involved in on 'Eastern Europe in 1968', specifically on Czech and Slovak popular opinion during the Prague Spring.¹ I consulted over 300 pages of Czechoslovak radio transcripts from May, June and early July 1968 and also around 100 pages from the time of the Soviet-led invasion in late August. From this preliminary reading, I have identified five themes which seem most relevant for expanding our historical understanding of the Prague Spring.

First, the BBC materials shed much light on the crucial issue of censorship in Czechoslovakia during 1968, or more accurately the lack of censorship. It is well known that the Soviet leadership under Leonid Brezhnev was greatly agitated by the Czechoslovak Communist Party's controversial decision in March to effectively ban primary censorship of the means of mass communication. This resulted in basically free media, which already from early spring 1968 began to explore all kinds of hitherto taboo political, social and historical subjects, including Stalinist terror, the fraught Czech-Slovak relationship, the Masaryks and the democratic First Republic. The media also regularly deliberated on such fundamental and hotly contested concepts as democracy, socialism, power, freedom and identity. Hence, the opportunity for scholars to study uncensored radio and TV transcripts from 1968 is an unprecedented luxury in the field of Soviet studies allowing us to assess the extent to which Czechoslovak media over-

¹ K. McDermott and M. Stibbe, eds., *Eastern Europe in 1968: The Impact of the Prague Spring*, (Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming 2018).

stepped established Soviet norms of behaviour. The BBC materials provide at least two telling examples of this pivotal transgression:

- first, the attitude of Czechoslovak journalists to the extremely sensitive topic of direct Soviet involvement in the Stalinist show trials and mass repressions that swept Czechoslovak state and society in the late 1940s and early 1950s. For example, one radio bulletin on 19 May 1968 spoke of a 'group of adventurers...in the Soviet security organisation', which had 'caused immense harm' to Czechoslovakia and the USSR.²

In the same month, a leading radio commentator called for a purge of communists responsible for the Stalinist trials and held the entire Czechoslovak Party Politburo guilty for the depredations of the past.

- second, on many occasions Czech journalists confidently and rather stridently refuted articles and press reports from Moscow which were critical of aspects of the democratisation process in Czechoslovakia. In short, they accused their Soviet counterparts of being subjective and blinkered in their reporting of events in Czechoslovakia. This was particularly the case of the Czech Radio correspondent in Moscow, Luboš Dobrovský, who took real umbrage at the tone of what he considered anti-Czechoslovak articles being published in the USSR, concluding that they were 'fully in accordance with the designs of the Soviet leadership', and not the isolated views of a single author.

A key conclusion here is that the 'radio wars' of the 1950s, 1960s and beyond not only spanned the Iron Curtain pitting East versus West, but were also indicative of strained relations *within* the ostensibly monolithic Soviet bloc. Thus, given these and many other manifestations of Czechoslovak independence, even insolence from Moscow's point of view, it is not surprising that the Kremlin was sorely affronted and repeatedly insisted on the removal of the bosses of Czechoslovak Radio and TV, a purge only achieved after the invasion.

The second main theme is the vivid portrayal of the invasion itself – the BBC reports provide an almost minute-by-minute account of how the tanks are drawing near, how Soviet troops are trying to locate the underground radio stations, how they are arresting leading Czechoslovak communists. We already have an inkling of the daily consequences of the invasion from the so-called *Czech Black Book*, published in Prague in autumn 1968, but the BBC materials are far more extensive and impart a real immediacy to the events. Moreover, although the majority of broadcasts are from Prague, some are from smaller provincial towns and cities and this local and

² Czechoslovakia (Home) Prague: in Czech, 06:00 on 19 May 1968, BBCM EE.B.137, May 1968.

regional input is potentially very useful for historians. However, in the materials I have seen there is little coverage of developments in Slovakia – the focus is very much on the Czech lands. It must be said too that the broadcasts are rather fragmentary, but nevertheless we learn of workers' strikes, of deaths of citizens, of widespread appeals to Soviet troops to 'return to your country'. We are even told that local Czech functionaries have 'achieved the withdrawal of [Warsaw Pact] troops from the centre' of their towns, which, if true, I assume was a temporary concession on the part of the invaders. In addition, there are one or two short reports from 'Radio Vltava', the Soviet-controlled station which sought to justify Moscow's 'fraternal assistance to the Czechoslovak people'. It is good to get an impression of the Soviet perspective on events.

Third, the reports confirm over and over again the Czechs' and Slovaks' essentially non-violent response to the invasion, or more exactly the official appeals to maintain peace and stability. Radio announcers repeatedly exhorted their fellow citizens to 'remain calm', to engage in 'comradely dialogue' with the occupiers, 'Slav with Slav', because 'bloodshed is senseless'.³

All this was in line with Dubček's brief message to the nation on the morning of the invasion: 'remain calm' and 'dignified'.⁴ But how far citizens, especially youth, actually adhered to these appeals is another matter. Certainly, there was no mass armed resistance as in Budapest twelve years earlier, but there was more than a measure of violence. We know for sure that around one hundred Czechs and Slovaks, and several Soviet soldiers, died during and soon after the invasion – it was not totally bloodless. The BBC materials may offer new information on this intriguing aspect of the Prague Spring.

Fourth, the BBC reports also include a large number of speeches and interviews by well and lesser known Czechoslovak political figures and intellectuals, which significantly supplement the few published texts that we have. Read carefully, they demonstrate quite clearly the nuanced differences that divided the Czechoslovak leaders, differences that Moscow was keen to exploit in its quest to identify so-called 'healthy forces' in the Czechoslovak party. One interesting point is that even those 'hard-line' Czech and Slovak communists, who invited the Soviets to intervene in August, claimed to be broadly supportive of many of the changes introduced under Dubček since January 1968 and there is little indication in their speeches of their subsequent traitorous behaviour.

Fifth, paradoxically and controversially, the BBC sources suggest that what was happening in Czechoslovakia in 1968 was indeed a 'counter-revolution' and that the Soviets, *in their own terms*, were quite justified in taking the ultimate step of armed intervention. What could Moscow, and East Berlin and Warsaw for that matter, think of demands in Slovakia for the rehabilitation of the

³ Czechoslovakia (Home) Prague: in Czech, 06:50 on 21 Aug 1968, BBCM, August 1968.

⁴ Czechoslovakia (Home) Prague: in Czech, 06:21 on 21 Aug 1968, BBCM, August 1968.

war-time Hlinka Guards, the paramilitary organisation of the pro-Nazi Slovak People's Party? What could Moscow think of the official investigations into the death of Jan Masaryk, the post-war 'bourgeois' Foreign Minister who most Czechs believed was defenestrated by Soviet secret police agents? What could Moscow think of the insistence of some Slovak workers that 'if the old [communist] dogmatists and dictators do not want to go, they should be pushed out with bulldozers'?⁵

... they are now using the language
we are using. They say frankly into the microphone, giving ^{their} ~~the~~ ^{views} ~~the~~
that if the old dogmatists and dictators do not want to go,
they should be pushed out ^{with} ~~by~~ bulldozers....

By mid-August, Brezhnev and the Soviet Politburo, having lost all patience with Dubček's prevarication and 'deceit', decided that only an armed occupation could prevent these dangerous potentialities and launched 'Operation Danube', the largest military campaign in Europe since the Second World War.

Finally, one or two imponderables and problems emerge from the reports I have looked at:

- It is not apparent what use they were put to at the time – did they in any way inform the policies and responses of the British government?; were they used in BBC coverage of the Czechoslovak events?; or have they languished in the BBC's vaults until now?
- Translations from the Czech and Slovak are not always of a high standard – they are comprehensible, but all too often not in idiomatic English. Also, the materials are sometimes fairly difficult to read, especially online, and several pages are missing entirely or are partly blacked out. It is not clear if this is an issue with the originals or with the scanning.

In sum, I would say that the BBC Monitoring sources are without doubt valuable for historians of the Prague Spring, including undergraduate and postgraduate students. In particular, the transcripts of uncensored radio and TV broadcasts offer a fascinating insight into the tensions that wracked the Czechoslovak and Soviet leaderships during 1968. Of course, scholars would need to consult far more material in order to gauge their precise worth, notably for pre-invasion developments. There is a huge amount of undigested reporting available from 1968 – perhaps as many as fifty files – and there are bound to be important insights to be gained from this abundance of riches.

⁵ Czechoslovakia (Home) Bratislava: in Czech, 21:00 on 22 June 1968, BBCM EE.B.141, June 1968