The Prague Spring and Warsaw Pact Invasion, 1968

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In January 1968 I was six months into a post-graduate studentship at Leningrad University, doing research for a DPhil degree. Events in Czechoslovakia had been very much in the minds of people I met even when I arrived in the city, and the reforms Dubček and his government were trying to put into place were the sort of changes many Soviet citizens, and particularly Soviet intellectuals, wanted to see in the USSR. January 1968 and the policy of ‘socialism with a human face’ was becoming a reality with the introduction of democratic reforms and the devolution of many powers from the centre to regional administrations. The Czechoslovak Government put great efforts into explaining its reforms and there were many meetings with Soviet officials to thrash out compromise positions. In addition there were big conferences of fellow communist parties, and agreed statements of policy.

It was relatively easy for Soviet citizens to travel to Czechoslovakia and there were many contacts between institutions, which meant much more information was circulating than usual. However, all this was poorly reported in the USSR and we foreign students were much in demand, with our access, albeit limited, to western media. Our ancient copies of western newspapers and their weekly editions found many readers. The western broadcasters (BBC, Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty, Voice of America and other European stations) also gave detailed accounts of these events. From their own media the Soviet citizens picked up the official suspicion of the reforms and some detected the deliberate falsification of the goals of the Czechoslovak reform movement. Nevertheless, they placed considerable hope in the success of the changes, which might presage better things in the USSR as well.

Reading through the translated transcripts and the transcripts of Czechoslovak broadcasts in English, this situation is rendered with extraordinary sharpness. Even the physicality of the documents – typescripts full of typos and corrections, sometimes awkward English (the monitors were usually native speakers of the country being monitored) and the stamp indicating the document was to be archived, all this gives a sense that everyone knew how much was riding on the Czechoslovak experiment, particularly after the Hungarian experience of invasion, brutal repression, deaths and the execution “for treason” of the Hungarian Prime Minister Imre Nagy. In retrospect what also emerges clearly from these documents is the cynicism of the Soviet authorities, talking, talking, apparently listening, suggesting to the world that a deal could be reached with the reformers when in fact plans were being laid for the invasion.

In Leningrad we were less aware of the range and support for Dubček across the world, from both communist parties and other political leaders, although the support of the USA and west European countries, we immediately understood, was unlikely to be very helpful. The monitored broadcasts show that many people in Czechoslovakia were anxious about the response of the USSR. The reports of endorsements by fellow communist parties in neighbouring countries and elsewhere in the world were reported in detail, as evidence that the world approved of what Czechoslovakia was doing. One can trace through the different reports and commentaries the responses Czechoslovakia must have been making to its Soviet inquisitors when the Czechoslovak leaders were summoned to Moscow for yet another meeting. For anyone writing a history of these events, this detail is invaluable.

In July 1968 and early August there were worrying hints of trouble with some major attacks in the press and on Soviet television on individuals and the policies of the Czechoslovak Government. One transcript describes in detail, with citations from the original papers, how Soviet newspapers were printing falsified reports of what the reformers were proposing, in order to denounce them. However, a fresh conference was scheduled for September and meetings between fellow Warsaw Pact countries and the USSR intensified. Many people felt that the Soviet Government had given the Czechs and Slovaks time to show their reforms were not a threat. The BBC Russian Service’s most respected commentator, Anatole Goldberg, even argued that it was unlikely there would be military intervention, as there had been in Hungary in 1956, because it
was not in the interests of the USSR to do so. In Leningrad many people were departing for holidays or days at their dachas and institutions were operating a summer schedule.

Warsaw Pact military manoeuvres had taken place in early summer, and the troops had remained close to the border. While this was known, it was not felt to be especially threatening. When the invasion took place on 21 August the shock was terrible. Condemnation was almost universal.

After the invasion began, in the early hours of 21 August, the Soviet Union immediately went on to a war footing: borders were closed and all international phone lines were shut down. This meant that we foreign students were unable to telephone home to reassure our families. The Soviet media put out the official line twenty-four hours a day: there had been an attempt at counter-revolution, the revanchist West Germans wanted to take over and the Warsaw Pact armies had jointly gone in to save the situation. The western broadcasters were jammed so comprehensively that none of the usual Russian programmes could be heard. The BBC in English, on the other hand, was not jammed. Many of my friends knew English, but not well enough to follow a broadcast. I found myself much in demand to translate the latest news from the BBC’s English programme. Most people had radio sets, but they were not usually very good ones, and reception of the transmissions in English left a lot to be desired. At one location the radio had to be on the floor, pointing in a certain direction, in order to hear the news. With my ear pressed to the radio on the floor I kept up a running commentary on what was being said. Each detail was seized upon and debate about the likely evolution of events was intense.

The news was heartrending and much of it is captured in the transcripts which read like a blow-by-blow account of the first days. The Czechoslovak leaders had been rounded up and taken no one knew where; their fate was unknown but history suggested they could be murdered. The parliament was surrounded; mass demonstrations were dispersed with considerable brutality, ringleaders were arrested and there were deaths. Soviet reports, on the other hand, spoke of troops being met with flowers and grateful smiles, and of finds of caches of guns - proof that the counter-revolutionary plot was real. The government representatives - initially President Svoboda, then after his arrest, other leaders, urged everyone to avoid confrontation and to stay calm. Some people were not to be deterred: if they could not resist they could show their hostility by self-immolating, like Jan Palach, or at least by painting over or moving all the signposts so that the invasion forces would get lost. It seems at least one Polish unit found itself directed back to the border by this device. Other units certainly found movement round the country much more difficult. The local population refused to provide food for the troops and there were reports of famished soldiers taking food from houses and passers-by and immediately eating it. Many people simply stayed at home, others stood silently watching, still others shouted abuse and “Go home!” to the troops. Hostile graffiti appeared, in spite of a semi-official curfew. It was said, and widely believed in Leningrad, that the first units of Soviet troops were so demoralised by the realisation that they had been lied to about the situation in Czechoslovakia that they had to be quickly withdrawn, and were then sent off to serve out their national service on the Chinese border. This too is captured in the transcripts.

The free Czechoslovak radio stayed on the air, warning listeners when different studios and transmitters were taken over by the invaders, until troops took over its offices. It then continued broadcasting from a secret location and continued to transmit all the news it received. The tone of desperation can be heard very clearly in the transcripts of the last broadcasts. The indication of how often they managed to broadcast and the repeating of key messages are also important for understanding the last hours of free radio. All this was reported in English to the world, and large chunks passed on by me in not very polished Russian from the floor of a Leningrad apartment.

One important development which is reported by free Czech Radio but without much detail, was the demonstration in Red Square against the invasion. Five young people, shocked by the invasion, went to Red Square with home-made banners and raised them, shouting out their opposition to it. The demonstration was over in minutes: the KGB had been alerted to their plans,
probably by phone taps, and was waiting for them. One, Pavel Litvinov, was the grandson of the former Soviet Foreign Minister Maxim Litvinov and nephew of a good friend. Through the family I had detailed accounts later of the trial and sentence - all published in book form in the West shortly after.

In Leningrad (and elsewhere) after a few days telephone lines with the outside world were reopened and daily life returned to almost normal. The Soviet media onslaught, however, continued unabated and jamming remained. An official “White Book” was published, purporting to demonstrate the correctness of the Soviet position. In support of its media campaign the Soviet authorities put out a long newsreel in cinemas “demonstrating” how happy the Czechs and Slovaks were to see the troops, come to rescue them from their counter-revolutionary plotters and the revanchist Germans and other western subversives. When the film was screened you could have heard a pin drop, concentration was total. People watched in silence and left in silence. Discussions started outside. The crowds throwing flowers had been unconvincing - obviously staged, some thought, old film from some other occasion, cut into film of tanks, thought others; the piles of guns could have come from anywhere. But the long lines of tanks were real enough and the message was not lost on the Soviet public: socialism with a human face is dead, might has triumphed.

A new buzz-word soon emerged: normalisation. This too is caught in the post invasion transcripts of the official Czech and Slovak media. It wasn’t long before “normalisation” became used ironically in conversation in Leningrad, its original meaning subverted by the events in Czechoslovakia.

Censorship reappeared, new leaders were appointed to the government – Dubček was stripped of his post of General Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and sent off to run a forestry in a distant part of the country. Other members of his team suffered a similar fate. Some top party members who had kept away from obvious support of Dubček or clearly supported the USSR’s position were rewarded with government posts. They were viewed as traitors by many. Opponents of the invasion were arrested, supporters of reform were arrested or lost their jobs, dissidence of any kind was repressed. The return to “normality” was a long, dark process, and, some would argue, was not really achieved until 1989 and the dramatic end to the Soviet empire in Central Europe.