

WALTER CRONKITE – IMAGE #8

In the early months of 1968 a reform faction of the Czechoslovak Communist party set about liberalizing life in that small nation, democratizing its government, and loosening the country's association with the USSR. This movement became known as "the Prague Spring." Its leader was Alexander Dubcek.

Dubcek was born in 1921 in Uhrovek, Slovakia. When he was four years old, his family moved to the Soviet Union, where he grew up under the rule of Joseph Stalin. Dubcek became a product of the Soviet education system and a loyal communist.

In 1938 he returned to Slovakia and secretly joined the Communist party in 1939. Six years later he joined the Slovak resistance to the German Nazis. The end of the war brought huge changes to Eastern Europe. According to Stalin, the Cold War necessitated the erection of an effective barrier around the Soviet Union so that, if war in Europe occurred, countries like Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Romania would take the brunt of an attack before it reached the Soviet border. Above all else, Stalin wanted to avoid the horrific devastation suffered by the Soviet Union during World War II.

Immediately after the war, the KGB – the Russian secret police – removed anyone who was considered to be a problem in Eastern Europe nations under Soviet control. Loyal communists were installed into government positions so that the Eastern bloc countries would remain unquestionably loyal to Moscow.

Dubcek was appointed a Communist party official in 1949. He was sent back to the Soviet Union in 1955 to receive "political education." By 1958 his success in this endeavor propelled him to higher government posts, because he was regarded as a good, reliable communist, who would support the leadership in the Kremlin.

When he returned to Czechoslovakia, Dubcek was appointed Principal Secretary of the Slovak Communist party in Bratislava, Slovakia. He gained a reputation for effective leadership in Slovakia and as a man who did not want to "buck the system."

In the mid-1960s dissent mounted against Antonin Novotny, the party's leader in Czechoslovakia. The first signs that all was not well in Czechoslovakia occurred in May, 1966, when complaints arose that the Soviet Union was exploiting the people of that country. Slovaks criticized the Czech government in Prague for imposing its rules on them and overriding local autonomy. A weak economy exacerbated the situation, and none of Novotny's reforms worked to solve the nation's increasingly difficult economic problems. Urban workers remained in poor housing and led the most basic of lifestyles. The same occurred in rural Czechoslovakia where farmers had to follow party lines regarding cultivation. Innovation in agriculture was discouraged and frowned upon.

In June, 1967 at the Writers' Union Congress open criticism of Novotny arose. Four months later in October students demonstrated against him. Dubcek had not courted leadership of the anti-Novotny movement. But as the man who had submitted a long list of complaints against him in September, 1967, Dubcek was the obvious choice. He allowed himself to be nominated as the man to succeed Novotny. On January 5, 1968, the Czechoslovak Party Central Committee passed a "no confidence" vote against Novotny and nominated Dubcek to replace him as First Secretary of the Party.

What happened next must have come as a great surprise to the Communist leaders in Moscow. On April 5th Dubcek embarked on a program of reform that included amendments to the constitution of Czechoslovakia that would bring back a degree of political democracy and greater personal freedom. Dubcek announced that he wanted the Czech Communist Party to remain the predominant political party in Czechoslovakia. But he also wanted to reduce the totalitarian aspects of the party. Communist party members in Czechoslovakia were given the right to act "according to their conscience." In what became known as the "Prague Spring," Dubcek soon initiated a series of reforms that centered on the right of Czech citizens to criticize the government, increased public debate, and promoted intellectual freedom with no more censorship of the press. He called this program "Socialism with a Human Face." His wide-ranging democratic reforms gathered pace in the face of Soviet disapproval. The rebirth of social and political freedom became known as the "Prague Spring."

Newspapers took the opportunity to produce scathing reports about government incompetence and corruption. The state of housing for the workers became a very common theme. Dubcek also announced that farmers would have the right to form independent co-operatives so that they themselves would direct the work that they did rather than receiving orders from a centralized authority. Trade unions were given increased rights to bargain for their members.

At the same time, Dubcek made a crucial decision by assuring the Soviet Union that Czechoslovakia had no intention of leaving the Warsaw Pact (the alliance of Eastern European Communist nations) and that what he was trying to achieve would have no bearing on the ability of the Warsaw Pact to compete with NATO. Dubcek was trying to avoid that mistake made by Hungary in 1956. He repeated the same message to all members of the Warsaw Pact on August 3, 1968. During July and August of that year, Dubcek met with senior Soviet leaders on the Slovakian-Ukraine border and told them that they had nothing to worry about regarding the reforms that his government was undertaking.

This did nothing to reassure Leonid Brezhnev, the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Dubcek was informed by Moscow that the Russians had discovered evidence that West Germany was planning to invade the Sudetenland and that the Soviet Union would provide the Czechs with the necessary troops to protect them from invasion. Dubcek refused the offer, but he must have known that this would count for nothing. His reassurances about not leaving the Warsaw Pact were ignored.

On the night of August 20th and 21st troops invaded and occupied Czechoslovakia to reassert the authority of the Kremlin. The bulk of this force came from the Soviet Union. But to give the impression that these soldiers represented all the Warsaw Pact nations, who were united in disapproval of what Dubcek had done, token contingents from East Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Bulgaria were involved in the attack.

In the capital city of Prague crowds of people gathered in the streets and chanted support for Dubcek. They implored the foreign troops to go home. Much of the resistance was centered around the Prague radio station. As the day progressed, Czech and Slovak youths threw homemade missiles and even tried to take on Russian tanks. Some tanks and ammunition trucks were destroyed, but Soviet troops responded with machine gun and artillery fire. At least four people were shot dead. In Wenceslas Square and Old Town Square hundreds of youths made barricades out of overturned lorries (low horse-drawn wagons) to try and halt the advance.

Soviet and Eastern bloc military commanders imposed an overnight curfew and threatened to shoot on sight anyone caught breaking it. All railroad, highway, and airline routes out of Czechoslovakia were closed as Warsaw Pact troops continued to enter the nation. Their number was estimated at 175,000. The Czech military had no ability to stand up to such a force. The authorities in Czechoslovakia ordered their vastly outnumbered army not to fight and appealed to the people for restraint. In the end, however, dozens of people were killed in the massive Soviet military clampdown. Yet this invasion was relatively bloodless – in stark contrast to the 1956 uprising in Hungary.

The Soviet news agency, Tass, claimed “assistance” was requested by members of the Czechoslovak government and Communist party leaders to fight “counter-revolutionary forces.” But in a secret radio address Czechoslovak President Ludvik Svoboda condemned the occupation by Warsaw Pact allies as illegal and committed without the consent of the government in that nation.

President Lyndon Johnson said the invasion was a clear violation of the United Nations charter. He emphatically stated that the excuses offered by the Soviet Union were “patently contrived.” Johnson contended, “It is a sad commentary on the communist mind that a sign of liberty in Czechoslovakia is deemed a fundamental threat to the security of the Soviet system.”

The invasion drew condemnation from across the globe. Significantly, many Western communist parties as well as communist Yugoslavia and communist Romania dissociated from the actions of the USSR.

As with Hungary in 1956, however, the West took no action. The Soviet defense minister reportedly recommended invading even if it meant a third world war. Moreover, the United States was in the middle of the 1968 presidential election campaign and was entrenched in its war in Vietnam.

Dubcek and several other members of the liberal Czechoslovak leadership were arrested. Dubcek was sent to Moscow. There he was told what the Soviets expected of Czechoslovakia. Then he was released and sent back to Prague. He did as he was required by announcing that the talks in Moscow had been “comradely” and that he was discontinuing his entire reform program. All of the Dubcek reforms were annulled or abandoned. Dubcek returned as First Secretary of the Party. But his days of leadership were numbered. In April, 1969 he was removed from that office and appointed Speaker of the Federal Assembly. Gustav Husak replaced him as head of the Communist Party in Czechoslovakia. His regime was a repressive one.

In 1970 Dubcek was expelled from the Communist Party. His fall from grace and power had been swift. He was banished to Bratislava where he worked in a timber yard. For the next 19 years he was, and had to be, politically dormant.

The “Prague Spring” proved that the Soviet Union was unwilling even to contemplate one member of the Warsaw Pact leaving that arrangement. The tanks which rolled through the streets of Prague reaffirmed to outsiders that the people of Eastern Europe were oppressed and denied the democracy that existed in the West. Soviet leaders, meanwhile, were content that what they had ordered ensured the maintenance of the Warsaw Pact – something they considered vital to the survival of communism in Europe.

When the Cold War ended in 1989, however, Dubcek enjoyed a political renaissance. The Communists were ousted in Czechoslovakia on November 24, 1989, and Dubcek made a triumphant return to Prague. Near the end of that same month he was once again appointed Speaker of the Federal Assembly and became chairman of the new post-Communist administration in what became known as the “Velvet Revolution.” He fiercely opposed the split between the Czech Republic and Slovakia, because he believed that a continued union of the two benefitted both.

Dubcek, however, never got to see the ultimate development and outcome of the “Velvet Revolution” of 1989. In July, 1992 he was badly injured in a car accident. He died from his injuries in November, 1992.