

Invasion or own goal?

The Soviet tanks that pushed into Prague 20 years ago remain the potent symbol of crushed hopes in Eastern Europe. But the invasion is not the end of the story; developments within Czechoslovakia itself helped to define how hard the backlash would be against the Prague Spring.

Jaroslav Sabata, a prominent member of the Czechoslovak Communist Party Central Committee in 1968, is a Charter 77 signatory. He has spent almost eight years in prison and still undergoes intense police surveillance and harassment at his home in Brno. He is a cautious supporter of Mikhail Gorbachev's reform efforts in the Soviet Union.

Sabata was one of the new Central Committee members elected in a wave of defiance at the "Vysocany" party congress

on August 22, a day after the Soviet invasion. This congress was immediately denounced by Moscow and it was the old one which was reconvened on August 31 to put the seal on Dubcek's reluctant capitulation in Moscow. Sabata, although not coopted onto the committee, was invited to speak there.

His testimony, in an interview with Charter signatories **Jiri Kratochvil** and **Milan Uhde**, provides rare details of the Czechoslovak leadership's step-by-step choices which ensured the success of the Kremlin. "It wasn't the invasion that defeated the reform movement," he argues. It is an uncomfortable argument which raises important questions about the process of change in East Europe today.

If I understand you correctly, you regard the Prague Spring as something of which Czechoslovak communists may be proud?

They should be proud of their Vysocany Congress, which rejected the Warsaw Pact invasion in impressive, truly statesmanlike style. But the Czechoslovak 1968 reformist communists can be far from proud of the fact that everything connected with this congress – everything that had been learnt, all the resolve – was soon scattered to the wind and they themselves greatly contributed to the scattering.

I experienced 1968 in the streets as a young man. That's why I would now be interested in a look behind the scenes...

My look behind the scenes will take you to the flood-lit Spanish Hall of the Prague Castle on the last evening of August 1968. I was sitting on a bench at the back, dejectedly waiting for the meeting of the old CP Central Committee to start. An accumulation of anger had built up within me over the past five days for which I had no outlet.

It all started early on Tuesday, August 27. During the previous night Dubcek's leadership had returned from Moscow. Zdenek Mlynar, who was among them, was sent to bring along a few people representing the Vysocany 'grouping' – the official party leadership (or at least some of them) wanted to talk things over with us... (On the way) Mlynar was sitting behind me. When the car moved off, without turning my head, I asked, 'Well?' Zdenek knew what I was asking about. Three days earlier, before his departure for Moscow, we had agreed that the Czechoslovak side could accept any compromise, but it could not allow the Vysocany Congress to be invalidated. Mlynar answered, 'You won't like it. We had to sell out the Congress.'

We had to wait (at Prague Castle), I didn't know for whom we were waiting. Then Josef Smrkovsky [Chairman of the National Assembly and a member of the Presidium of the CP Central Committee] arrived. He sat down as though his back had been broken. When he tried to

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After the main speeches I mounted the podium as one of the first to be given the floor. [...] I reacted directly to what had been said to that point. In particular I rejected the view of General Rytir, who had eloquently praised the [Soviets'] 'internationalist assistance' and expressed lack of confidence in Dubcek's leadership.

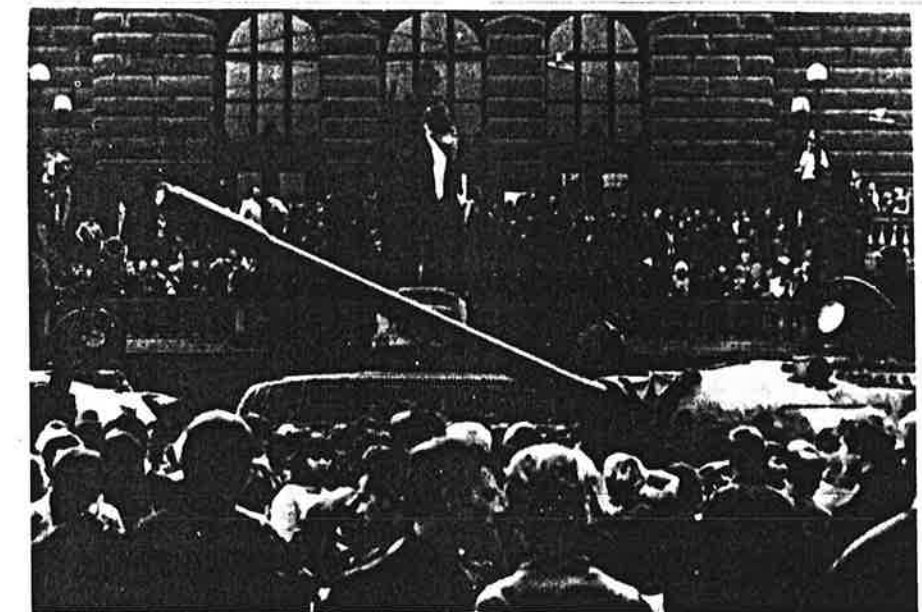
I only articulated what must have been clear to everyone: the troops had not come in order to bring the political life of Czechoslovakia back to normal. There could be no normality unless the troops left, because it was their presence in this country – and the reason why they had

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People v. tanks, Wenceslas Square, 1968

Dementi



Warsaw Pact soldiers patrol Prague, August 1968

Dementi

been sent here – that was completely abnormal. I told those who supported the notion of 'practical realism' – they numbered quite a few – that the only realistic policies were those that reflected people's interests and aspirations.

I didn't say anything unexpected. I'm sure the party leadership was fully prepared for such an eventuality ... (but even Mlynar snubbed me. Gustav Husak used my speech to demonstrate the harmful views of those who allowed themselves to be carried away by a "wave of nationalism"...

(The official summary of proceedings stated that the 'overwhelming majority of participants' rejected the views of both those who cast doubt on the very foundations of the Spring reform policies, such as General Rytir, and those who advocated "the breach of the conclusions of the Moscow Talks and "an adventurous, irresponsible policy".)

So, my 'look behind the scenes' could be given the title 'How I became a political adventurer'.

Political adventurer isn't a very attractive description.

Oh, you don't have to tell me that. But it can be modified – and then it doesn't sound so bad. The most frequent is to 'political romantic'; that's what even very close friends would call me and some of them tell me I've remained a romantic to this day. But I understand my stance

today as being a logical continuation of my speech at the Prague Castle on August 31 (and of) the journey I began towards the end of the Second World War...Even now I've got good reason to stick to my guns. I regard Mlynar extremely highly, I'm not at all disparaging of his anti-romanticism. But by 1982, even he was describing the events after the signing of the Moscow protocols as an 'embarrassing theatre'.

Even he has come to the conclusion that it was Dubcek and his group themselves that implemented the most difficult stage of the so-called 'normalisation', thus helping to break society's resistance to the invasion and its consequences. Dubcek and his group made it possible for the reforms to be stopped and reversed – something that originally seemed inconceivable. Mlynar adds what must have occurred to practically everybody: having cut off the branch on which they were sitting, Dubcek and his group also fell victim of the purges.

I'm convinced there are now serious reasons why all the sides involved in the August 1968 crisis should reassess their attitudes in the light of the completely new political situation. If we are at all 'realistic' and 'responsible' we must all set out on a path of intellectual adventure. It's no good trying to frighten people with the spectre of the so-called 'political adventure of 1968'. Without intellectual adventure capable of

destroying the old dogmas there will be no new policies, no openness, no democratisation. [...]

Do you really believe there existed a satisfactory and yet realistic way out of the August 1968 crisis?

Of course [...] The Czech congress should have been convened immediately, regardless of circumstance. (The August 31 Central Committee meeting voted to convene a congress of the Czech – as opposed to Slovak – Communist Party with a view to setting up a regional Czech party organisation. Such an organisation has still not been created. Moscow's repudiation of the defiant Vysocany congress was confirmed by the Central Committee on August 31 on the grounds that it represented only Czechs and not Slovaks. The Slovak party did meet separately, but the mainly reformist Czech section of the party did not.)

This was the only way to put a stop to the plans of the conservatives, who were bent on invalidating ... the extraordinary congress of Vysocany (and) breaking the back of the whole reformist movement. Had the Czech Congress been convened the reformists could have retained their influence throughout the entire party structure. Then an honorable compromise would have been possible. Such a compromise was what Dubcek obviously had in mind when he spoke on August 31 about implementing reform

within a constricted space.

In other words: a Congress of Czech communists would have created the preconditions for a much more satisfactory solution to the profound conflict within the Warsaw Pact. That would have encouraged immensely all the reformist forces in the Soviet Bloc – and in the Soviet Union itself.

But surely such a Congress could not have been held, the Moscow protocols prohibited it?

This is a very widely held belief, but it is wrong. The decision to convene the Czech Congress was taken after the Moscow protocols had been signed... (It did not happen) because a majority in the leadership decided against it and substituted it with a Bureau for the Czech Lands. [...]

Josef Spacek [a member of the Presidium; as of August 31 also head of the commission preparing the Czech Congress] believes the fateful turnabout began during top-level Soviet-Czechoslovak talks at the beginning of October 1968. The documentation for these talks, prepared for Dubcek by Spacek, Mlynar and Stefan Sadovsky, was based on the proclaimed conclusions of the August plenary meeting.

In Moscow, though, everything turned out differently. Apparently, the Soviet side had been well prepared for a rejection of Dubcek's line. It's almost certain that Dubcek's colleagues Ludvik Svoboda [President], Gustav Husak [Deputy Prime Minister] and Oldrich Cernik [Prime Minister] were also ready for this eventuality. [...] Husak – who had still been supporting Dubcek as late as the extraordinary Congress of the Slovak party, which took place in August – later explained that he had changed his mind because of what he had learnt at the October talks. [...]

Those talks set in motion a critical chain reaction. Mlynar gave up his post of Secretary to the Central Committee... Josef Spacek willy-nilly agreed to the setting up of the Party Bureau for the Czech Lands. Thus the plan to hold a Congress of Czech Communists was buried for ever. Spacek also agreed that the new Bureau should not be headed by himself but by Lubomir Strougal, who was more trustworthy from Moscow's viewpoint. In November, during the students' strike, Smrkovsky managed to persuade a delegation of Kladno miners not to do anything in support of his precarious position. Thus proceeds this tale of woe. The problem wasn't the behaviour of a few individuals, but the questionable mentality of the whole stratum of reformist communists.

So what should have been done?

First and foremost, the reformists should have realised that the October talks with Leonid Brezhnev would end up badly, no matter what. The Czech Congress should have been held before these talks. After all, promises had been made in August that the congress would be convened

without delay; some of my friends on the co-opted Central Committee were positive it would be held soon.

In any case, it should have been held regardless of the Soviet view. The Czechoslovak side should have ignored all threats and insisted it was an internal affair. No force would have been able to prevent what the invasion itself proved unable to prevent – the meeting in Vysocany.

Dubcek's problem, Brezhnev is reported to have said at the October talks in Moscow, was that he wanted the party to win the people's affection... In Brezhnev's view, a good communist policy forced people to give the party respect. So, in my view, the Czechoslovak leadership should not have tried to win the affection of the Soviet Union but should have acted in such a way as to win its respect. There was no other way if the reform programme was to survive [...]

How do you explain the failure of Dubcek's group?

[...] Let's pose the question: Could the Czechoslovak leadership have insisted in Moscow upon acceptance solely of those ideas which did not need to be concealed from their own people? [...] Could they have refused to face the nation as the executors of policies forced upon them?

Dubcek and his group helped to break resistance to the invasion...having cut off their branch they then fell victim to the purges

It wasn't the invasion that defeated the reform movement. The reform communists had an overwhelming majority in the Presidium (after the invasion); they also had an overwhelming majority in the Central Committee [...]

The ruling reformist communists deeply misunderstood the paradox of the events of August 1968. This was because they were simply incapable of seeing things as they really were. They understood the invasion as being 'the end', a catastrophe, the debacle of their own lives. You can read much about this in their memoirs while samizdat literature, to this day, blames failure on various 'radicals'.

Several weeks after the August plenum (one of my good friends) told me we had to have courage to admit defeat to ourselves. This was precisely what our adversaries wanted us to do. Following his own logic, he then added that one day what I had said at the Castle on August 31 would be carved in marble in gilded letters. But for the time being, what I had said was – impractical.

At the first and last meeting of the Vysocany Central Committee on August 27, I said the communists had once criticised [President] Benes for giving up without a fight [to Hitler, at the time of

the Munich crisis in the autumn of 1938]. In doing so, they had had the support of most of the nation. This critical, anti-Benes standpoint had given them political credibility which had proved decisive in the early postwar years. If they failed now, I said, they would be destroying the credibility of every one of their policies from the start. Their fall would be hard – not even the fact that Brezhnev wasn't Hitler would diminish the impact. Another good friend of mine said to me as I was leaving the platform: "My dear Jaroslav, this is all very noble, but quite unrealistic. [...]"

If I'm saying that the blackest day of 1968 was not August 21 but the last day of August, I know what I am talking about. I am attacking the cliché according to which the 'Prague Spring' was crushed by Soviet tanks. This is the less important part of the truth. The other part is much more important. [...]

You were one of those trying to keep society on the move even at the beginning of the 1970s. For most people, these attempts were rather futile.

Justifiably so. It was impossible to keep society on the move at the beginning of the 1970s. Stagnation had become the natural state of our society. The last great and despairing expression of popular anger was suppressed in August 1969. At the same time, all the mechanisms for stifling spontaneous political activity were put into motion. But this is why it was very important that a layer of people should survive who were not going to give up the notion of a democratic revival. It was important for this grouping to acquire a new structure by continuing to develop the idea as a living entity, constantly reacting to the prevailing situation [...]

In November 1970 there was a meeting in Hlinsko [in the Czech-Moravian Highlands] of some 10 expelled party officials from Prague and Brno... On the basis of what was discussed I compiled a written record to which Milan Hubl (a prominent reform theoretician in the 1960s) gave the name 'A Small Action Programme' and that name has stuck.

The reference to the 1968 Action Programme was deliberate; we did want to continue in the footsteps of the 1968 reforms. But in the early 1970s the ideological framework of the opposition was no longer limited to reformist communism: we fully respected the viewpoints of all who were striving for a self-governing, democratic society. After all, the concept of 'democratic self-government' was created by Masaryk [the first president of the pre-war, democratic Czechoslovakia] in 1918.

This concept made possible a common denominator for all the movements and factions interested in radical democracy, which – would – have – all – the classic attributes but which would be more than just a return to parliamentary democracy and capitalism. [...]

I am first of all a Charter 77 signatory. That's why I say I am not a reformist

communist: I mean a communist who regards his 'party allegiance' as more important than 'non-political' principles—the principles of defending the civil and political rights of all citizens.

I reached this conclusion after a discussion of the future of Charter 77, which took place in the summer of 1977. A few friends started talking about what should be done next. I suggested that it should become a permanent, independent citizens movement, a lasting democratic initiative, which should tackle all serious issues including political ones. Some reformist communists disagreed with this. In private conversations they argued that Charter 77 should be either put to sleep or limited to 'protecting the hinterland' of reformist communist activity, that reformist communism was the only practicable alternative to the existing status quo.

I am a Charter 77 signatory who is convinced that the human rights issue is a fundamental political issue. I don't believe it's a secondary issue.

I am convinced that the primary aim of the struggle for human rights in our circumstances must be the re-introduction of civil liberties and political democracy with all its classic attributes, and that we will only be able to achieve political democracy if we manage to defeat the bureaucrats.

I believe that an anti-bureaucratic democracy is a system which subjects the apparatus (even the 'good', useful, necessary bureaucrats) to full public accountability to ensure the bureaucracy will never get out of hand again; that our anti-bureaucratic democracy may become a successful, free society only if it understands that economic and political pluralism is ... the driving force of its development.

I believe that the measure of progress on our way towards an anti-bureaucratic democracy will be the amount of self-government we achieve; that our society will be only able to mature towards self-government by developing a democratic political culture; that a self-governing democracy must be a true government by all the people, namely a society in which no citizens are being discriminated against. The government by the people must not recognise any other power than the power of people's own political affiliation;

I believe that a party which wishes to follow in the footsteps of the working class movement, even a communist party, must be fully subject to democratic control by society like any other party. This presupposes that its inner structure must become fully democratic: all its full-time officials, the members of its apparatus must become fully accountable. This is the only way a privileged political formation which has become totally alienated from the working people could become a democratic workers' party in the best sense of the word.

Is Charter 77 going in the direction you would wish?

Neither 'Yes' nor 'No' can express the



Sabata (right) at the Polish-Czechoslovak Solidarity border meeting this July Dementi

complexity of the situation. Charter 77 has gone through many discussions and disagreements. That's how it should be (and) the Charter has emerged strengthened from these discussions.

With the accession of Mikhail Gorbachev, the notion of a "common European house" is being mentioned more and more frequently. How do you see this question?

Masaryk was aware that a self-governing, democratic Czechoslovakia would only be able to survive as an independent state in a democratic Europe. However, Masaryk's vision of a democratic Europe was far too optimistically straightforward—just like the vision of a world proletarian revolution cherished by his left-wing opponents. Masaryk saw the First World War and its consequences in terms of a 'World Revolution' in which democracy had defeated 'theocracy' [...]

The moment people decide to show civic courage will be the start of a major change

We must distinguish clearly between what has become obsolete and what has survived. Both in this country and elsewhere, projects of various periods corresponding to relatively immature stages in the development of European democracy have been abandoned by the wayside. The idea of a self-governing democracy, however, strong enough to be able to think in terms of the whole of Europe, has survived.

In Czechoslovakia, it re-emerged two years ago in the shape of a Charter 77 document entitled 'The Prague Appeal', published on the day Mikhail Gorbachov was elected General Secretary. The Appeal suggests a reunification of Europe

and its transformation into a system of self-governing democracies. I believe that forces which are otherwise quite distant could well meet on the road towards this transformation. [...]

In your view, how much longer will we have to live under the present status quo? When will a real change take place?

How does one find out whether a change has taken place? Does it depend on who addresses the nation? [...] This is undoubtedly very relevant. People used to say in 1968 that new policies require new people. But this doesn't mean that the nation cannot be addressed by people of the existing establishment. What matters is what they are really saying and doing. [...] What is of prime importance now is that anybody who has anything to say should be given the opportunity to say it.

If the government wishes to make a genuine move towards democracy, it can't avoid taking a simple but important step: it must recognise that the independent citizens' initiative Charter 77 is a legitimate part of our public life. In other words, the government must recognise that whoever has anything to say must be given the right to speak. Some small steps in this direction have been taken but the process must be completed.

It is necessary to remind the government constantly that people's confidence in its ability to govern well has been shaken to an unimaginable extent. The responsibility for this must be borne by the top party echelons. The leaders must start using a completely new language. 'All of us must learn democracy', says Charter 77's 'Appeal to Our Fellow-Citizens' [...] Citizens have the right to oppose empty talk. More than that—they have a duty to do so.

Those citizens unwilling to wait until they are granted democracy by Gorbachev, during some as yet

unspecified future visit to Czechoslovakia, will come to the conclusion that it is their duty to show civil courage. The moment they decide to do so will be the beginning of a major political change. The moment an

overwhelming majority of citizens decide so to do, that major political change will have taken place.

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The article is an extract from a longer interview, which explains the development of Sabata's activities and thinking since the war. The manuscript is available in English from Palach Press, which is looking for a publisher.

Chronology:

August 1968

20 Meeting of the Presidium of the Czechoslovak Communist Party discusses the forthcoming 14th Congress of the Communist Party, to be held on September 9 1968. At 11pm Prime Minister Cernik is telephoned the news that armies of five Warsaw Pact countries crossed Czechoslovak borders.

21 Half a million soldiers, 29 divisions with 7,500 tanks and 1,000 planes invaded Czechoslovakia. At 1am the Presidium of the CP passed a statement to the people rejecting the invasion by seven votes against four. Soon afterwards Alexander Dubcek, Oldrich Cernik, Josef Smrkovsky, Frantisek Kriegel, Josef Spacek, and Bohumil Simon are arrested in the name of the quisling "worker-peasant government led by Alois Indra" and taken to Moscow.

22 The 14th Congress meet secretly at a factory in the Vysocany district of Prague attended by 1,192 of the 1,543 delegates elected to the congress (but only 44 Slovaks). The conference of delegates discussed whether to call itself the 14th Congress of the Czechoslovak Communist Party or, in the absence of the majority of Slovak delegates, a constituent congress of Czech Communist Party. The delegates decided by an overwhelming majority to regard themselves as the extraordinary 14th Congress and a new Central Committee was elected. Jaroslav Sabata is among the new

members. The Vysocany Congress demanded immediate withdrawal of Warsaw Pact troops from Czechoslovakia, reinstatement of the arrested leaders and a world meeting of communist parties.

23 President Svoboda and other Presidium members travelled to Moscow for talks with the Kremlin leaders which were joined by Dubcek and his other detained colleagues.

22-24 All attempts to set up a quisling government in Prague fail.

26 Dubcek and other communist leaders, with the sole exception of Dr Frantisek Kriegel, sign in Moscow the so-called Moscow Protocols which spelled the end of all reforms.

27 They return to Prague; Dubcek and Smrkovsky address the nation on television but they do not explain the contents of the Moscow Protocols.

31 The old Central Committee meets at the Prague Castle. Some members elected at Vysocany are coopted into this Central Committee, others are only invited to attend. The CC session approves of the capitulation in Moscow. Frantisek Kriegel and especially Jaroslav Sabata speak against the capitulation. The president dismisses the most radical reformist government minister, J. Pavel, from the Ministry of Interior.

October After a top-level meeting of Czechoslovak and Soviet leaders in Moscow the Czechoslovak National Assembly legitimises the occupation of

the country as a "temporary stationing of Soviet troops". Only four deputies, including Kriegel, voted against the treaty.

15-19 November The Central Committee meets. Dubcek defends the necessity of "normalisation" and criticises some "negative features" of the Prague Spring.

19 November In response to the Central Committee, Prague students decided to stage a sit-in strike. Students throughout Bohemia and Moravia join them and their 10-point Manifesto is adopted by factories and agricultural collectives as their own. The Manifesto defends the basic reforms of the Prague Spring.

19 December The student's union of Bohemia and Moravia signs an agreement with the trade union of Czech Metalworkers in which both parties pledge to defend the reforms, to resist any more concessions to the Soviet Union and threaten to resort even to a general strike if one of the remaining reformist leaders, Josef Smrkovsky, is removed. All other Czech trade unions sign similar agreements with the students during December and January 69.

January, 1969

3 The Party Presidium condemns the student campaign and the strike threat.

5 Smrkovsky speaks on TV and begs the workers not to strike on his account. Two days later he is demoted.

16 Jan Palach pours petrol over himself and suffers third-degree burns. He protests against the continuous concessions granted by Dubcek's party to the occupying power and against the growing apathy of the people.

19 Jan Palach dies; 250,000 people march through Prague.

25 Half a million people attend Palach's funeral. Reformists such as Dubcek and Cernik speak about "misunderstanding between the students and the government", Gustav Husak condemns Palach's act as counter-revolutionary. Smrkovsky expresses his sympathy. Kriegel attends the funeral.

17 April At the Central Committee meeting Dubcek is forced to resign and Husak is elected the party's new General Secretary. The process of "normalisation" accelerates.

