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In the 1960s, growing prosperity in the West brought profound social change. More and more young people went to university, often working while studying and thus becoming independent from their parents.



The increasing role of visual media, particularly television, accelerated the pace of change. Both dress and lifestyle were transformed. Introduction of the contraceptive pill proved a defining moment that drove the sexual revolution.



At the same time, in the US protests against the discrimination of African Americans were intensifying. Even though the organisers wanted the demonstrations to be peaceful, in May 1963 they ended in bloodshed. Seeking to prevent a 'black revolution', President John F. Kennedy sent a draft civil rights bill to Congress. This was supported on 28 August 1963 by the March on Washington, at which the Reverend Martin Luther King delivered his famous speech about equal rights of all US citizens.

Kennedy's reform plans were cut short by his assassination in Dallas in November 1963. A year later, Kennedy's successor Lyndon B. Johnson pushed through Congress civil rights legislation that guaranteed all citizens' equal access to public institutions and banned employee discrimination on grounds of skin colour.

Racial violence continued, however, and peaked after the assassination of Martin Luther King in April 1968. The US military engagement in Vietnam faced ever stronger opposition from the public. In May 1970, the United States was shaken by events at Kent State University, where the National Guard opened fire at protesting students, killing four.

The 'hippie revolution' was a striking expression of the generational protest. Since the mid-1960s, thousands of young people had been leaving school and joining the 'flower children', whose slogan was 'Make love, not war'. Writers and performers of protest songs such as Angela Davis, Bob Dylan and Joan Baez became the generation's heroes.

Western Europe also experienced youth activism. Protests in France and West Germany in addition to antiwar and left-wing slogans, to a greater extent than in the US, highlighted the need for democratisation of relations at universities. The necessity of settling accounts with the past was also

emphasised, which was of particular importance in West Germany, where many parents of the 1968ers had had a national socialist involvement.

Tensions in Soviet bloc countries were quite different in nature. Poland experienced the so-called 'March events' after the banning of a staging of Adam Mickiewicz's play *Dziady* at the National Theatre. This triggered a wave of protests in defence of freedom of speech. The demonstrations of students, intellectuals, and young workers were quashed with brutality. They became an excuse for the communist authorities to launch an anti-Semitic campaign.

While there was relative stability in the USSR and most Soviet bloc countries, a serious crisis developed in Czechoslovakia. In January 1968, Alexander Dubček became head of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and promised reforms commonly known as 'socialism with a human face'. The Kremlin's nervous reaction resulted in Warsaw Pact troops invading Czechoslovakia on 21 August 1968 under the pretext of defending socialism. The country was under occupation.

Yet civil resistance continued. In January 1969 a student, Jan Palach, set himself on fire in Prague in an act of protest. In April that year, events after an ice-hockey match between Czechoslovakia and the USSR led to street skirmishes in Prague and eventually to the toppling of Dubček. His successor Gustáv Husák led the country's 'normalisation' efforts. Purges started, censorship was reintroduced and reformers were removed from power.

'The suppression of the Prague Spring marked a watershed in the spread of Soviet-style communism.' In the West, support for the ideology dropped after its supporters realized their belief in the system's humanistic values was a delusion. 'Socialism with a human face' had proved an impossibility.


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References: