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Occupation of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact troops (1968)

The Czechoslovak reform communists did not consider replacing socialism with a democratic system as part of the Prague Spring, but rather sought its renewal as 'socialism with a human face', i.e. with a more democratic, social and economic model that would better reflect the historical development of Czechoslovakia. However, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia was not prepared for this development, and events escalated from spring 1968. Disputes about the extent of the renewal process even polarized the Communist Party. Organizations that had been disbanded in 1948 (Junák, Sokol) re-emerged. Artistic activity increased, academic officials were elected, the Church called for religious freedom to be respected, and a genuine civil society began to arise. Oldřich Černík became prime minister, Josef Smrkovský became chairman of the National Assembly, and after the resignation of A. Novotný, General Ludvík Svoboda was elected president.

The Communist Party of Czechoslovakia asserted moderate Action Programme reforms within socialism. The programme promised the observance of political rights and civil freedoms, cancelled discrimination in the educational system, pledged to use some market economy principles and independence, but excluded the introduction of political pluralism. The Two Thousand Words text by Ludvík Vaculík published in Literární Noviny newspaper on 27 June 1968 called for the extension of the renewal process. The paper stimulated the origin of the people's movement that supported reformers and developments after January. Many important figures signed this proclamation, but leaders in the Soviet Union and its satellite countries were concerned and saw additional signs of contra-revolution. They strove to stop the process because they feared a domino effect amongst their own citizens. The Communist Party of Czechoslovakia was warned against the contra-revolution, and at the meeting of the "Warsaw Five" (the USSR, the GDR, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria) on 8 May 1968 the basis of the 'Brezhnev Doctrine' was laid: the defence of socialism in any country is simultaneously the defence of socialism's borders. From the end of July, bilateral negotiations between the Soviet and Czechoslovak delegations in Čierna nad Tisou appeared to have calmed the situation. But an anti-reform collaborator group (V. Bil'ak, D. Kolder, A. Indra, A. Kapek and O. Švestka) was established in the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia that through an 'invitation letter' requested Soviet support against the contra-revolution and prepared a coup d'état. When Soviet Union and 'Warsaw Five' crossed the country's borders, no members of the 'labour-agrarian' government dared publicly support them. The Presidium of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia rejected the intervention



as being 'brotherly international help in saving socialism in Czechoslovakia', and instead passed a resolution expressing their disapproval. All presidium members were then deported to Moscow, and forced to participate in negotiations at which President Svoboda also arrived. Negotiations lasted until 26 August, and resulted in the Moscow Protocol being signed, which bound the leaders of Czechoslovakia to fulfilling both the original and newly formulated requirements of the Warsaw Pact's intervening members (stopping renewed organisations, introducing controls over mass media, recalling the application for negotiated intervention filed with the United Nations Security Council, etc.). Only one Czechoslovak politician had the courage to refuse the demanded capitulating signature: František Kriegel.



Although some protocol points indicated hope for the retention of certain parts of the renewal process, nobody could implement them. Reform politicians were soon recalled from their offices and removed from public life, and pro-Soviet conservative communists quickly assumed power and turned back the wheel of history.

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References: