

M. Mark Stolarik, ed., *The Prague Spring and the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia, 1968: forty years later* (Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 2010), 305 pp.

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After the fall of Communism in Europe, access to the archives of former Communist parties have contributed to a continuously rising number of academic works, books, volumes of documents, articles and studies, describing a totally new picture of the Cold War. Academic research on the East European Communist regimes relied only on suppositions and deductions, since most of the sources were tangential: Western documents referring to these regimes, newspaper articles and official speeches, memoirs of defectors (and those were few). The opening of Central and East European archives brought in an overwhelming body of evidence such as: transcripts of meetings held by party leaderships, revealing the internal (secret) decision-making process, confidential correspondence between different institutions (military and political) revealing the way information was gathered and interpreted, transcripts of meetings between the Soviets and other East European Communists etc. Apart from that, a new contribution to academic literature was brought by East European scholars themselves, deriving from their different approaches and specific experiences. They ask new questions, propose innovating comparisons and identify previously unknown paths of investigation.

This book is a perfect example to support such an assessment. The volume gathers the papers presented during the international conference “The Prague Spring and the Warsaw Pact Invasion of Czechoslovakia”, organized in October 2008 by the University of Ottawa. Its most important contribution to the academic literature on the Prague Spring comes from the authors themselves. The editor, M. Mark Stolarik, points that out in the “Introduction”: most authors are natives of Central and East European countries and based their papers on access to recently declassified archives in their countries. M. Mark Stolarik is Chair in Slovak History and Culture at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ottawa, and was the initiator of the above-mentioned conference. The volume reassess the causes and outcomes of the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia, the internal decision-making process and the factors acting upon it and also draws interesting conclusions in light of new archival evidence.

Each country which took part in the invasion, but also Romania, has an article dedicated, highlighting the domestic impact of the “Prague spring”, but also of the invasion. Drawing on declassified Russian documents, Mikail Latysh undertakes yet another analysis of the factors which determined the Soviet decision to intervene. He emphasizes the role of the military, as Soviet generals saw a potential loss of

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Czechoslovakia as catastrophic from a strategic point of view and insisted for an intervention aimed at preventing such an outcome¹. Also, Latysh further argues that Moscow was confident that support for an intervention, among the Czechoslovak party's Central Committee, would be much stronger than it actually was. Just as important seems another factor mentioned by Latysh: Brezhnev's support for Dubček was determined by the Soviet leader's personal antipathy for former party boss Antonín Novotný. Apparently, soon after Khrushchev's removal, Novotný complained to Brezhnev that he was not informed of the move planned in Kremlin but Brezhnev disliked such a remark and found it insulting (*pp.* 2). In December 1967, when the fate of the Czechoslovak leadership was discussed in Prague, Brezhnev chose not to support Antonín Novotný, but instead give credit to Dubček². The importance of personal, subjective factors is not to be underestimated since the totalitarian nature of such regimes prevented democratic, collective control on decision-making.

As previously mentioned, there is at least one chapter in the book devoted to each Warsaw Pact country. An interesting aspect, present in most of them, was the domestic reaction to the invasion. Polish historian Łukasz Kamiński, for example, discusses, in extensive pages, the Polish social support for the reforms undertaken in Prague. News of the invasion determined social unrest in Poland, manifestations of dissidence and opposition, leading many important intellectual to resign from party membership (*pp.* 112). Kamiński mentions another interesting event, less familiar among historians: it was not only Jan Palach who set himself on fire as a form of protest against the intervention, but also a Pole. On 8 September 1968, during a public meeting in Warsaw attended by Gomulka himself, Ryszard Siwiec did the same, protesting against the liquidation of the "Prague spring" by military means (*pp.* 121).

Such pressures help explain Gomulka's radical attitude in regard to the reforms in Prague³. Along 1968, Gomulka was one of the most active supporters of a military solution, pressuring Brezhnev in that sense on many occasions (*pp.* 99). The Polish leader had reasons to fear social unrest at home, but – as Kamiński points out – Gomulka did not like Dubček much and did not trust his intentions. But it was not only Gomulka who tried his best to convince Brezhnev in favor of an intervention: so did Walter Ulbricht from East Germany⁴. Fearful of possible contamination from so-called "bourgeois" and "counter-revolutionary" forces, Ulbricht also advised Moscow to intervene militarily against the Czechoslovak reforms. Ulbricht had good reasons to

¹ The relevance of the military factors in pushing forwards the decision to intervene had been stressed before by other scholars. See: Mark Kramer, „The Prague Spring and the Soviet Invasion of Czechoslovakia: New Interpretations”. *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* (Washington: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 1993)

² Concerning Brezhnev's visit to Prague in December 1967, see: Jeremy Suri, “The Promise and Failure of «Developed Socialism»: the Soviet «Thaw» and the Crucible of the Prague Spring, 1964-1972”, *Contemporary European History* 15 (2006): 144-146

³ About the social unrest in Poland, see: Andrzej Paczkowski, Jane Cave, *The spring will be ours: Poland and the Poles from occupation to freedom* (Penn State Press, 2003), 332-334. Regarding the significance of Ryszard Siwiec's suicide: Petr Blažek, *Ryszard Siwiec 1909-1968* (Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2010)

⁴ Transcripts of meetings and consultations between Soviet and East European leaders were published in: Jaromír Navrátil, *The Prague spring 1968: a national security archive documents reader* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 1998)

fear such contamination, since the Czechoslovak reforms had a strong impact on East German society (*pp.* 147). As Rüdiger Wenzke, the author of the study, reveals, social opposition to the intervention was much stronger than in Poland. But the East German leadership could not have been more estranged from society: Ulbricht felt offended when Brezhnev decided not to involve East German troops in the intervention, at the request of his Czechoslovak allies (*pp.* 155). Moreover, Ulbricht did everything possible to convince the world that East Germany did take part in the intervention and most of the world public opinion actually believed that until 1989.

Another strong supporter of the intervention was Bulgarian leader Todor Zhivkov. In his memoirs, he claims the opposite, but declassified party documents from Sophia contradict him (*pp.* 191). Documents show a frozen Bulgarian society under Zhivkov, with very limited – quasi-absent protests – but a very hysterical Stalinist leader, accusing “counter-revolution” in Czechoslovakia and demanding intervention to stop it. He was so keen on participating in the intervention himself that the Soviets were forced to transport two Bulgarian regiments by sea to the Soviet Union, in order to include them in the Warsaw Pact force which intervened (*pp.* 192-193). Terrestrial lines of communication between Bulgaria and the USSR were not usable because Brezhnev did everything possible to keep the operation secret from both Tito of Yugoslavia and Ceaușescu of Romania.

Hungary is also an interesting case, as the country had been through its own revolution and foreign intervention at the time events in Czechoslovakia were unfolding. During the conference in Ottawa, there was even a polemic between Hungarian researcher Csaba Békés and American historian Peter Pastor as to how should János Kádár’s attitude should be interpreted. The Hungarian leader had numerous encounters with Dubček, insisting that he backs down from the reformist path and answer positively to Soviet and East European concerns⁵. Békés argues that Kádár was guided by good faith, trying to spare Czechoslovakia of the trauma Hungary had to go through in 1956, while Pastor thinks that Kádár only acted as Brezhnev’s messenger (*pp.* 203-236). Further archival investigation is obviously needed in order to clarify Kádár’s position, but Békés’s argument is not to be neglected nonetheless.

As for Ceaușescu, Dragoș Petrescu analyzes the way his famous balcony speech contributed to the construction of national-Communist ideology and the cult of personality. The peril of foreign intervention was ideologically used by Ceaușescu to rally the society around himself (*pp.* 237-260); official propaganda made elaborated connections between foreign invasions in the past centuries and the heroism with which Romanians resisted in order to emphasize the similar heroism of Ceaușescu, not only as Communist, but also – and especially – as national leader. But another aspect is worth being mentioned here: there was social support for Czechoslovakia in Romania too, apart from the political and ideological interpretations generated by party leadership. In December 1968, for example there was an unauthorized students’ manifestation on the streets of Bucharest, protesting against the intervention. It was not organized by the party and its aim was not to praise Ceaușescu and his heroism; it

⁵ Roger Gough, *A good comrade: János Kádár, communism and Hungary* (B.Tauris, 2006), 168-173

was spontaneous and social, not organized or political⁶. Even under a neo-Stalinist regime as the one in Romania, such manifestations were not unusual, although rare. The events in Hungary in 1956 also caused similar unrest in Bucharest and some Transylvanian cities.

What was the impact and long-term effects of the Soviet-led intervention in Czechoslovakia? In Mikhail Latysh's words, the most important effects were: firstly, that Communism was not able to reform itself and secondly, that military intervention does not solve domestic problems of a Communist regime. On the long run, it was visible that attempts of reformation within the Communist bloc no long appeared in the following years, until the collapse of Communism. Also, faced with similar threats in Poland, in 1980-1981, the Soviets chose not to intervene militarily. It was, among all, a conclusion of the events in 1968. Warsaw Pact troops occupied entire Czechoslovakia, population remained calm in spite limited peaceful protests, and the West did not intervene in any way but yet the unexpected happened. A small detail, of which the Soviets were certain, could not fall into place: most members of the Czechoslovak Central Committee stayed on Dubček's side (*pp.* 19). In Prague, the Soviet Union had no one to rely upon. Brezhnev chose not to go through that again in Warsaw, when *Solidarity* raised similar concerns.

But the long term effects of the intervention must be related to the European Conference on Security and Cooperation, held in 1975. Commitments to support human rights gave a strong boost to those particular social elements which, years before, had protested against the intervention in Czechoslovakia. It helped consolidate an opposition movement which sprang not from the top party leaders, but from society. People like Dubček were replaced by people like Václav Havel, not only in Czechoslovakia, but elsewhere too. Even Stalinist Romania had its own Paul Goma. If de-Stalinization could not convince all idealists that Bolshevik-type Socialism was oppressive and totalitarian in its nature, than the military intervention against the "Prague spring" certainly did it.

⁶ Adam Burakowski, „Un eveniment important aproape necunoscut: demonstrația studenților din București, 24 decembrie 1968”. *Arhivele totalitarismului* 1-2 (2006): 238-247