

What were the results of the civilian resistance against the USSR and Warsaw Pact militaries in Czechoslovakia, 1968, and why was it significant?

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Section A: Identification and Evaluation of Sources

The focus of this investigation will be “What were the results of the civilian resistance against the USSR and Warsaw Pact militaries in Czechoslovakia, 1968, and why was it significant?” and it will analyze the Prague Spring and its outcome. This is a significant time period as it contributes to the liberalization of Czechoslovakia, and therefore, weakening the chokehold of the USSR on the Eastern Bloc.

The first source that will be evaluated in depth is Jaromir Navrátil’s *The Prague Spring ‘68*, published in 1998. The origin of this source is valuable because Navrátil has a Ph.D. in military history from the Military-Political Academy, Moscow. The book ties together a plethora of previously available historical documents into a narrative description of the Prague Spring and accompanying events from both the Soviet and revolutionary points of view. A limitation of this source is that it mainly focuses on the political aspects and does not explore the domestic ones. The purpose of this volume is to bring to light different political views, inform and raise questions about the nature of the Prague Spring.

The second source evaluated is Kieran Williams’ *The Prague Spring and its Aftermath: Czechoslovak Politics, 1968-1970*, published in 1997. The origin of this source is valuable because Kieran Williams has taught in University College London's School of Slavonic and East European Studies, where he was an associate professor in politics. He is a comparativist and specialist in the politics of Central and Eastern Europe. His analysis is based on extensive use of Czechoslovakian archive data, and the book as a whole successfully develops a narrative for the repression of the Prague Spring and its impact. However, the broadness of the topic that Williams is exploring could also be a limitation. The purpose of this source is to

try to answer questions such as “What was the revolution intended to achieve?” and “What were the results of it?”.

Section B: Investigation

In January 1968, Alexander Dubček, a Czechoslovakian leader, introduced a new model of socialism intended to be more national and democratic, including enhanced freedom of artistic expression and the reintegration of political dissidents. Dubček's efforts to give "socialism a human face" were lauded throughout the country. This period of time is commonly referred to as Prague Spring.

Dubček's reform, the Action Program, aimed to liberalize Czechoslovakia and establish a socialist society on a stable economic base (Navrátil). The change of the Action Program that carried the most weight was the restoration of the personal liberties of Czechoslovakians (Pehe). Dubček extirpated the authoritarian premise of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, or the KSČ, by expanding press and travel freedoms, and severely reducing the influence of the Soviet Committee for State Security (Navrátil). By doing this, Dubček created a safer environment for the citizens of Czechoslovakia, an environment where they could grow as individuals.

Dubček's objective was to renew and disseminate KSČ socialism by removing its most repressive elements. However, this action of his resulted in an eight-month period of pure freedom, defined by the previously prohibited transmission of information (Navrátil). This rapid exposure to ideas and information other than Soviet propaganda empowered the citizens to demand more democratic reforms, as it was now quite often spoken about and against the regime, which would later become an issue.

The Literary Pages journal was founded by a group of playwrights, authors, and intellectuals who wanted to share their ideas with the Czech population (Bischof). In it, journalist Ludvík

Vaculík issued the *Two Thousand Words* manifesto just a day after press restriction was formally abolished, where he addressed the Czechoslovakian people:

It took several months before many of us believed it was safe to speak up; many of us still do not think it is safe. But speak up we did, exposing ourselves to the extent that we have no choice but to complete our plan to humanise the regime. [...]

Whatever superior forces may face us, all we can do is stick to our own positions, behave decently and initiate nothing ourselves. (Vaculík)

Dubček's reforms brought the Prague Spring to its prospects for revolution, but it also acted as a threat to the strength of the Soviet Union as it proved to be a danger to the unification of the nations of the Eastern bloc (Batyuk). When the Soviets finally responded, it was done in three phases. First, after a three-month period of espionage and surveillance, Dubček was summoned to an official conference in Dresden, on the 23rd of March, 1968, where he declined the Soviet insistence to revoke the Action Program (Navrátil). Furthermore, the political pressure on the Czechoslovakian leader was raised, and on the 14th of July, 1968, a meeting between the Soviet Union and other Eastern bloc countries was called in Warsaw, where the "last resort" of intervention was authorized (Williams). Finally, on the 3rd of August, 1968, the Soviet Union summoned Dubček to a meeting in Bratislava, where the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Poland, East Germany, Bulgaria, and Hungary signed the Bratislava Declaration, a document pledging commitment to Soviet Socialism (Navrátil). Later it was found out that said declaration was only a way for the USSR to slow down Dubček's reforms so that they could strike.

However, only 17 days after its signing, on the 20th of August, 1968, two hundred thousand Warsaw Pact troops and two thousand tanks were sent to Czechoslovakia, intending to crush

the Prague Spring movement. The attack was unexpected, as when leaving Bratislava after signing the Bratislava Declaration, Alexander Dubček felt optimistic about achieving a certain degree of independence within the communist system (Dubček). The Czechoslovakian people opposed the invasion in a nonviolent manner, yet, within a week of the invasion, 186 civilians had been killed and 326 injured (Long). Dubček and other KSC officials were arrested and forced to endorse the military occupation and the reestablishment of censorship (Navrátil).

Following the invasion, all changes enacted during the Prague Spring were revoked (Judt). Gustáv Husák replaced Dubček as Czechoslovakia's leader, and anybody who supported or participated in the Prague Spring movement faced major discrimination (Brown). Many were demoted or fired from their workplaces, others were not allowed to be in certain public spaces. This created a feeling of unsafety within the Czechs, who after a long period of oppression were finally able to catch a whiff of freedom, only to have it taken away from them in the most violent manner. Censorship was fully reinstated and literary and cultural output was destroyed, putting Czechoslovakia under a period of "normalization" (Long).

The crushed Prague Spring built the foundation for the democratization of Czechoslovakia in 1989. One of the impacts that brought about the ultimate liberalization was the dissident movement. Once the intellectuals were no longer a part of the government, the movement shifted its aim from improving to toppling the government (Brown). The people no longer believed that the government could be changed, and rather rebelled against it. Writers and philosophers met in secret, yet their words filtered into the public sphere (Long). Václav Havel and other prominent dissidents, including the earlier mentioned Ludvík Vaculík, issued a second manifesto, which chastised the government for violating rights granted under

formally signed treaties (Bren). The Czechoslovakian people considered themselves free, or not tied, to the government, which made art and creativity to express one's thoughts and feelings popular. Another impact was the widespread discontent with Communist ideals, which fueled popular outrage, and according to Mikhail Gorbachev, the Prague Spring represented "the beginning of the end for the totalitarian system" (Gorbachev). The most significant impact of the Prague Spring was the so-called Velvet Revolution, 1989, which eventually ended Communism in Czechoslovakia (Long).

The Prague Spring served as a catalyst for frustration with the perverted ideals of Socialism, ushering in the democratic movement. The eight-month period of independence granted by Dubček's leadership revealed that the Totalitarian system could only work by severely restricting individual liberty. Once the people of Czechoslovakia realized how much more they could be as individuals, they were in no way able to go back to the absolute oppression of the communist regime. As mentioned earlier, the Prague Spring was deemed problematic as it had the ability to weaken the chokehold that the USSR had on the Eastern Bloc. With one country rebelling against the regime, many others follow. Granted, it took years to liberalize, but in a way, the Prague Spring was quite detrimental to the regime as it evoked a feeling of sympathy within the common people of other countries suffering the same repression.

Section C: Reflection

This investigation has given me insight into some of the methodologies employed by historians, as well as problems that historians confront while conducting historical research. I have improved my skills when it comes to studying and analyzing sources. Studying books by notable historians on the topic, evaluating statistical evidence, and reviewing government records are all approaches often employed by historians that I also applied when conducting this investigation.

When evaluating information offered by various sources in relation to my research issue, I found out what some of the difficulties that historians face are. When I first started reading on my research topic, I realized that many of my sources contrasted greatly from each other. I came to understand that a historian's task is to make sense of history and find the most appropriate version of history by assessing the strengths and limitations of sources. I found this quite difficult as most of my sources described the Czechoslovakian perspective, one of the sufferers in this case. An example of two very different perspectives is Batyuk's *The End of the Cold War: A Russian View* and Alexander Dubček's autobiography, with one source explaining the consequences of the collapse of the USSR and its effect on Russia's views, while the other describes the life of a leader who made it his mission to liberate his nation.

One thing I did that historians do is work with sources, interpret, and tried my best to not be biased. Of course, bias slips in every now and then when one is not a professional in a certain sphere, especially when dealing with a topic that evokes sympathy. I found myself wanting to explore the Czechoslovakian perspective more than the Soviet one because I thought it is more significant since it is the viewpoint of the victim.

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