

In the spring of 1968, communist reformers in Czechoslovakia wanted to create "socialism with a human face." Their attempt ended with Russian tanks on the streets. New research indicates East German troops were not part of the action, as previously thought.

To the West it was more than an interesting experiment – it seemed like a new departure of historical import. Czech reformers led by the new Communist Party chairman Alexander Dubček were looking for a third way, a connection between socialism and democracy that would overcome dictatorial structures. Besides political reforms, they envisaged economic reform to modernize the centrally planned economy by the introduction of market mechanisms. In the final analysis, the communist reformers were also searching for a way that would lead them back to Western Europe.

Communist leaders in East Berlin, on the other hand, saw the Prague Spring as a threat. The Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED), the dictatorial state party that ruled the Democratic Republic of Germany (GDR), responded accordingly to the events in their neighboring country.

East German policy was determined by SED leader Walter Ulbricht. But the power of the SED and the continued existence of East Germany depended on closed borders and the security guarantees of the Soviet Union. The SED acted in 1968 for reasons of state and in close cooperation with the Soviet leadership.

The Soviet invasion and occupation of Czechoslovakia in August 1968, ended the Prague Spring. The reforms were reversed and the Communist dictatorship was restored. The East German lead-



Outraged protestors on the streets of Prague – but the Czech reform supporters were helpless against Soviet tanks.

When freedom turned to tragedy

Forty years ago, Soviet troops put an end to the Prague Spring

By Manfred Wilke

ership had demanded and helped formulate this goal.

Events began unexpectantly in January 1968, when Dubček took over the leadership of the Czech Communist Party. Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev and Ulbricht already saw signs of counter-revolution in the first reforms, which included the lifting of censorship. This suspicion was strengthened following a sweeping change of party functionaries in the Czech party and state apparatus. Brezhnev and Ulbricht saw in these measures the "considered intention" to introduce system change under the flag of Czech socialism.

East German leaders believed they knew only too well who was masterminding events in Prague – West German politicians. At a meeting in Dresden in March, Brezhnev had already told Dubček that he expected

the Czech leader and his presidium "would be in a position to change the course of events and prevent this very dangerous development." He combined an offer of help from the Soviet communists with a threat: "If that is not possible, or if you

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consider it to be false, then we cannot remain inactive in regard to developments in Czechoslovakia."

Brezhnev indicated his belief that the security of the socialist states was at risk. He communicated the political goal, agreed to by Ulbricht, to Dubček: restoration of the Communist dictator-

ship and abandonment of the reforms.

The Czechoslovak Communist party did the opposite and continued its reform course. On Aug. 17, the Kremlin decided to invade. One day later, Brezhnev hosted a secret summit of party leaders from Poland, Bulgaria, Hungary and East Germany in Moscow. All four pledged to take an active part in the "collective action." On Aug. 20, Ulbricht gave the order for East German troops to take part in the military operation.

On Aug. 21, freedom turned to tragedy. Images went around the world of demonstrating Czechs, their faces drawn with fear, anger and desperation as they confronted the Soviet troops and their tanks on Wenceslas Square in Prague.

During the invasion by Soviet and other Warsaw Pact forces, 72 Czechs and Slovaks were killed and 700 wounded.

Dubček was arrested and taken to Moscow for negotiations. He was eventually allowed to remain in office until April 1969, when he was replaced, expelled from the party and given a job as a forestry official.

In East Germany, communist party propaganda conveyed the impression that the National People's Army (NVA) had also marched into Czechoslovakia. West German Foreign Minister Willy Brandt condemned the "attack" on Aug. 22 as a breach of international law. He explicitly addressed the behavior of East Germany. "We should be especially aggrieved that armed forces from the other part of Germany were mobilized to participate in the invasion after the Ulbricht regime had already played a prominent role in exacerbating the situation in the past few weeks and months."

On Dec. 1, 1989, following the collapse of the Communist regime, the East German parliament apologized to the Czechs and the Slovaks for the "participation of the GDR in military actions of Warsaw Pact states" in August 1968.

It is now accepted, however, that combat units of the East German army did not march into Czechoslovakia in 1968. The 7th Panzer Division was supposed to advance in the direction of Prague overnight between Aug. 20-21, alongside the Russian 20th Guards Army. But the divisional commander was informed at short notice that his unit would only be deployed if needed.

The East German military leadership was surprised at this decision by the Soviet military. Two days after the invasion, the question of who withdrew the march order for the East German troops was discussed by the Czechoslovak president Ludvík Svoboda and Brezhnev in the Kremlin. The question of whether German soldiers were on Czechoslovak sovereign territory was answered negatively by Brezhnev. "We held them back," he said.

Moscow's decision was in line with a request from the Kremlin's collaborators in the leadership of the Czech Communist party, that German soldiers should not be allowed to enter Prague. Memories of March 1939, when Hitler ordered the invasion of Czechoslovakia and the German Wehrmacht occupied Prague, were still too fresh.

Manfred Wilke is an expert on the history of Communist East Germany. He is one of the editors of the recently published two-volume study "Prager Frühling: Das internationale Krisenjahr 1968" (Prague Spring: The International Crisis Year 1968).



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