

**Manfred Wilke**

**Ulbricht, East Germany and the Prague Spring – the confrontation began in Dresden  
March 1968**

### **The Power Question**

The Czechoslovak communists surprised their sister parties in the Soviet Empire in spring 1968 with their plans for reform. Relations with the ruling communist parties were the job of the respective party leaders. Walter Ulbricht, the first Secretary of the Central Committee of the SED, was full of mistrust towards this “Prague Spring”. The changes interested him above all from a political angle: did they serve the KSC’s monopoly on power or not? As the reforms of the KSC pertained to the political system and the central administrative economy of the country, they did indeed affect core areas of its monopoly on power.

It was already clear to the SED leadership in March 1968 that these reforms were leading to a “counter-revolution”. This keyword was used by communists to characterise a change of system in a socialist society. In order to avoid such a change in the ČSSR, the SED took active part in the Soviet politics of intervention to restore the dictatorship.

This essay focuses on the political decision process in the SED party leadership and their actions in the interventionist coalition against the reformist communists in Prague.

### **“Counter-Revolution” in Prague?**

As the year 1968 dawned, the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the SED, Walter Ulbricht, was at the zenith of his power. The borders of the GDR, closed since the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961, provided for economic planning security, the mass exodus to the West was eliminated. The SED discussed a reform of the direction of the planned economy and a new constitution. The latter was to emphasise inwardly and outwardly the independence of the SED state. The “leading role” of the SED in the GDR received constitutional status and had, as a result, to be respected by all citizens and social institutions. The constitution did not give up on the prospect of a united Germany and identified the GDR as the socialist core state that was to demonstrate to a united Germany what its future development would look like.

With regard to foreign affairs, the GDR had received support at the 1967 conference of 25 European communist parties in Karlovy Vary/Karlsbad for its demand for international

recognition as the second German state. In the West and in the non-committed states, the Federal Republic had prevented this recognition since its founding in 1949. In Karlsbad, the SED received the assurance that in the future no socialist state would enter into diplomatic relations with the Federal Republic before the latter had recognised the GDR. This agreement was a direct response to Romania entering into diplomatic relations with the Federal Republic.

With the support of the CPSU, the SED gained a foreign affairs victory. This support foiled the intention of the new eastern policy of the great coalition in the Federal Republic to isolate the GDR within the socialist camp.

The change from Antonin Novotný to Dubček at the head of the KSČ in January 1968 did not yet disconcert the SED. The demand made by Ota Šik to introduce a new criterion for legitimating the rule of the Communist Party was presented quietly and did not immediately make it beyond the Czechoslovak border. He demanded in the future “the creation of better living conditions and the solution of the new social contradictions”, and, if the Party did not bring this about, the danger existed “that the people would begin to turn their backs on socialism”. In order to prevent this, he demanded that “the Party should give up its monopoly on power” and fundamentally alter the style of Party work. “Under current circumstances, it is not possible and also not necessary that the Party directs and controls the entire power and leadership apparatus in detail.” With this, he formulated the fundamental idea of the reformers. In the future, the Leninist conception of the Party should not legitimate the power of the Party, but rather the living conditions of the people under socialism should constitute in the future the yardstick by which its actions would be judged.

The SED leadership did not become alarmed until the developments of the following months: the personnel changes on all levels of the Party organisation, Novotný’s resignation as state president, the debate on the rehabilitation of the victims of repression at the beginning of the fifties and above all the abolition of censorship and, with it, the Party’s control over the media.

An important building block for the first chosen positioning of the Central Committee apparatus of the SED in March was the report of the GDR ambassador in Prague. Peter Florin reported the following to East Berlin: “The activity of the opposing forces has intensified over recent days and assumes increasingly open counter-revolutionary characteristics.” The press, the radio and the television were largely in “opposition hands” and the media were becoming in this way organisers of “counter-revolution”.

The keyword for the Marxist-Leninist perception of the dangerous character of the Prague reform politics had been spoken. It was a phrase with a meaning that provided direction. The first sentence of the Soviet black book from August 1968, with which the intervention was justified, was: “The counter-revolutionary line amounted to liquidating the leading role of the KSČ.” For the SED ideologues, counter-revolutionary processes in socialist states under the circumstances of systemic confrontation between socialism and imperialism were always an interaction between “imperialist aggression” from the outside and the emergence of “hostile forces” within the socialist society. The ideological struggle against the ruling communist party was among the most important instruments of “counter-revolution”. At the meeting in Dresden, Ulbricht delivered a lesson on the causes of the Czechoslovak crisis with the KSČ delegation in mind. Using the example of the current discussion surrounding freedom in the ČSSR, he lectured on the interplay between the internal and external factors of a counter-revolutionary process. He stressed that the administrative errors made by the KSČ in the past had not been corrected in the framework of the politics of a Marxist-Leninist party, but rather “under the slogan of absolute freedom, the transition from dictatorship to freedom, etc. However, dear friends, you are not alone in Europe. On the western border you have German imperialism. Absolute freedom brings with it several difficulties for you. The opponent is waging psychological warfare. At this moment in time, it would be very costly for you to proclaim absolute freedom.”

From this point of view, the main “counter-revolutionary” attack was always directed against the communist party’s monopoly on power. In the GDR ambassador’s report was a message that was particularly unsettling for the SED leadership: The unity of the KSČ leadership no longer existed; an “open” and an “illegal centre” were active within it.

The term “centre” had a bloody meaning in the party language of the communists. The accused during the Moscow show trials that took place in Moscow from 1936 onwards were defined according to “centres”. The first show trial against the old Bolsheviks was directed against the “Trotsky-Zinoviev centre”; in January 1937, the “illegal so-called Soviet-hostile Trotskyist parallel centre” was condemned.

The “illegal centre” in Prague in 1968 was unknown to Florin in its composition in terms of personnel. The “open centre” consisted of the economic reform planner Šik, the Director of Television Jiří Pelikán, the chairman of the Writers’ Association Eduard Goldstücker and the author Pavel Kohout. The differences in the new KSČ leadership were expressed by Florin in the conspiracy constructions of the Stalinist show trials. The victims of the show trials in Prague at the beginning of the 1950s were to be rehabilitated at that precise moment.

On 15 March, Soviet General Secretary Brezhnev invited Dubček to Dresden for an economics conference of the ruling communist parties. The Central Committee of the SED met prior and parallel to the Central Committee of the CPSU in order to establish their position. The report of the Central Committee apparatus on developments in the ČSSR was regarded internally as prescribed terminology and named critical points of the reform process in the neighbouring country: the removal of censorship and the publicly recognisable differences within the Party leadership. Josef Smrkovský, Šik and Goldstücker were characterised as revisionists. According to comments he made in an interview with WDR, Smrkovský's reform aim was quoted as being to unite democracy and socialism. For the SED, the demand for "democratisation" was the banner under which the anti-socialist forces were to be gathered; a tactical concealment of the actual aim: the overthrow of socialism. Prior to Dresden, the SED was already convinced that in Prague the old social democratic revisionism was ideologically and politically rearing its head in new clothes. Already two days before the 5th Central Committee Congress, Rudolf Helmer communicated to a counsellor from the Soviet Embassy in East Berlin an event that was important for Moscow, which the counsellor noted as follows: "He stressed that they have no secrets from their Soviet comrades and that, as he was aware, the principal judgement and the access to events in the ČSSR on the part of the leaderships of the CPSU and the SED were consistent with each other."

Ulbricht used this Central Committee Congress to evaluate the SPD's new eastern policy and to link it with the changes in Prague. For the SED boss, this new eastern policy was a strategy of ideological "maceration of the socialist countries with new methods and demands and that under the slogan of security in Europe, the slogan of the 'new eastern policy'". For Ulbricht, the SPD sought with this policy to find "ways of infiltrating the GDR, of unrolling the GDR from within, in order to transfer the West German system of state monopoly capitalism with its Federal Armed Forces to the whole of Germany". The aim of German unity was for him "the main point of difference with the Social Democrat leadership". Ulbricht mistrustfully recorded all contact between SPD and KSČ during the spring.

### **The Dresden Tribunal in March 1968**

The intervention in August began with a confrontation in March in Dresden. The leaderships of the CPSU, the PUWP, the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party, the Bulgarian Communist Party and the SED reproached the delegation of the KSČ, led by Dubček, that a counter-revolutionary process had been established in the ČSSR. The Communist Party of Romania

was consciously not invited. Dubček was deceived by the invitation – he believed that he and his delegation were travelling to an “economic conference”. Ulbricht as host then announced the real topic of the conference. He requested of Dubček information regarding the plans of his Central Committee and the preparation of the KSČ’s action programme. He stressed the self-evident right of every communist party to determine its own policies, but his party was entirely isolated. “Thus, developments in a socialist country and the resolutions of a sister party can have far-reaching consequences for every other party and also the situation in Europe. Our mutual mortal enemy, imperialism, does not sleep.” Before entering into the order of business, Brezhnev declared: “The discussion will be very serious; [...] I would, therefore, suggest not keeping the minutes.” Dubček agreed, but Ulbricht allowed a record to be made.

For the time being, Dubček had to explain the policies of his party without any preparation. Following his comments, the confrontation began. Brezhnev presented his assessment of events in the ČSSR and explained bluntly that in Dresden it was not a question of discussing reforms with the KSČ but rather of coordinating a mutual evaluation of developments in the ČSSR. Four parties toed the line laid down by Brezhnev. The question posed to the KSČ delegation was: would it yield to this verdict and alter its course?

Brezhnev’s keyword in describing the situation in the ČSSR was “counter-revolution”, which was organised by “an entire group or entire centre” in public life in the ČSSR. He asked Dubček directly what he understood “democratisation” or “liberalisation” to mean. “Have you not had democracy thus far?” For him, the “main processes” of the preceding few weeks were: “Public attacks against the Central Committee” and “defamation” of all the “achievements” of the previous 25 years and “that will be printed in West Germany, in America, in Austria, everywhere”. “Attacks against the leading cadre of the Party, against the government, against the Ministry of Defence, against the Ministry of the Interior [...]. It’s all being denigrated.” He demonstrated what the consequences might be by citing Foreign Minister Václav David: “For 20 years he led the struggle against imperialism in alliance and agreement with us. [...] but he was also pelted with dirt in order to create a basis for the ‘independent foreign policy’.”

The anti-socialist background to all these campaigns seemed for Brezhnev to be no secret: he saw this in the tendencies of a “Czech socialism”. In order to emphasise this judgement on the danger of a domestic change of system, he followed on with the question: “Yes, what will come next?”

What did the enemy want? That was the key question in the struggle against “counter-revolution”. The “enemy acted skilfully, very tactfully and organised. We cannot claim that one single centre is being established today in Czechoslovakia. Perhaps there are several centres. But all events – this must be stressed – are consummated in intellectual circles, in youth circles, but not in the sphere in which one could find strong support for the Presidium and the Central Committee, in order to fight against the counter-revolution. That is namely the working class.

The concern over the potential change of sides on the part of the ČSSR, which was already hinted at in the question regarding an autonomous foreign policy, was repeated as a question pertaining to the Warsaw Pact. Why was the view being disseminated: “Our people do not know what the contents of the Warsaw Pact are, but if our people did know it, our people would very quickly withdraw from the treaty. As though it was a gagging treaty in the event of a war.”

In the Dresden debate on the autonomy of socialist states and their communist parties as well as on how binding the Warsaw Pact was, the Soviet Prime Minister Aleksey Kosygin positioned himself unequivocally. The discussions in the Czechoslovak media on the role of the Communist Party and relations with the Soviet Union were not only followed worldwide, they “not only concern the entire socialist camp”, but affected the whole communist movement. With this, Kosygin formulated the keynote of the later so-called “Brezhnev Doctrine” of the limited sovereignty of the socialist states. For him, the Dresden meeting served to support the KSČ in the struggle against the “counter-revolution”. Addressing Dubček directly, he said that here “the support for Czechoslovakia in the struggle for a socialist and communist Czechoslovak country was forged, [...] for the business of Czechoslovakia is our mutual business and we do not surrender this business to our enemy, whatever it might cost us!” Brezhnev’s comments on the – from the point of view of the communists – negative reports in the ČSSR media were accentuated by Kosygin: they found themselves “in the hands of the enemy”.

Brezhnev personalised the term “counter-revolution” and mounted a massive attack on Josef Smrkovský. His list of transgressions began with the interview on West German Radio (WDR). Brezhnev quoted him: “We are convinced that that which we are undertaking will set an example for the comrades of other socialist countries. That’s what he said! He assured the Federal Republic that that which they are doing will set an example for everyone. We will do and achieve that, and believe that it will be interesting for both German socialists and the socialists of other western countries, he said.” Addressing Dubček directly, the Soviet Party

leader commented “[and you] give him a good appraisal, honest etc.” Using the example of Smrkovský, he demonstrated at the same time the leadership weaknesses of KSĊ Presidium and Central Committee: “In Party practice it is not common that some coal minister or forestry minister replaces the Central Committee and gives interviews to the Federal Republic, indeed an anti-socialist, anti-communist interview for which one could pay millions of dollars. [...] How is it that the Central Committee did not know that such an interview exists?” Brezhnev’s next charge was Smrkovský’s relationship with the Soviet Union. “The same Smrkovský says: Oh well, what does it mean if the Soviet Union has lost 100,000 soldiers, but the Czechs have also lost, and why? The Party has made so many mistakes.” Again addressing the KSĊ delegation, he passed judgement: “That means, dear comrades, behind your back this highly praised politician of yours carries out his anti-socialist, anti-Party activities.” Once more he quoted the WDR interview. From Brezhnev’s point of view, Smrkovský answered the question as to what was to be done in the ČSSR with a challenge: “Perhaps something that no communist party has done, namely the combining of socialism with freedom.” Brezhnev clarified that the CPSU regarded the events in the ČSSR not as an “experiment” but as a “premeditated scheme” to bring about a change of system. This view became very clear at the end of his speech:

“We have the authorisation of our Politburo, to express the hope to you who are seated here today that you at the top will be in a position to alter events and prevent a very dangerous development. We are prepared to give you moral, political and democratic assistance. I would be very pleased and happy – and so would our Party – if I could at the same time express the support of all other parties present here.” He remarked threateningly: “If that should not be possible, however, or if you consider that to be incorrect, then we are nevertheless unable to remain detached towards developments in Czechoslovakia. We are united with one another by means of friendship, by means of international commitments, by means of the security of the socialist countries, by means of the security of our states.”

The political aim towards the KSĊ was formulated as follows: the KSĊ should assert its monopoly on power in Czechoslovakia and strike down the “counter-revolution” using its own power. In order to achieve this aim, it could count on the assistance of the CPSU. In order to achieve it ultimately without and against the KSĊ, the invasion of Warsaw Pact troops took place on 21 August. The restorative aim had already been formulated in Dresden. What everyone expected from Dubček was repeated by Gomułka as head of the Polish delegation: “We are of the opinion that it is today still possible to face these dangers, I would say, to face these dangers in a peaceful way, nonetheless with an energetic counter-offensive

that must in our opinion be undertaken by the leadership of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia against the counter-revolutionary forces.”

Dubček immediately received pledges of assistance from the PUWP, the SED, the HSWP and the BCP. Each of the parties communicated in addition specific messages to the KSČ. The minutes convey the impression of a well thought-out performance. It began with the “confession” of the accused Dubček, the “plea” by Brezhnev, to which the SED, the BCP, the PUWP and the HSWP acquiesced and with which a united course was constituted; it became the binding frame of reference. The PUWP and the HSWP then reminded the KSČ of the lessons of the counter-revolutionary experiences of the year 1956. Hungary’s Party leader Kádár delivered a historic analogy in order to underline Brezhnev’s judgement: “this process is extremely similar to the prologue of the Hungarian counter-revolution at a time when it wasn’t yet a counter-revolution. This means that is the process that took place in Hungary from February 1956 to the end of October. And we ask that you give that some thought.”

The SED undertook to demonstrate by means of the German example the interaction between western interference and the stance of the internal “enemy”, and to recall the struggle of the socialist camp against imperialism. Ulbricht began with the special situation of the GDR and the ideological threat posed by West German reporting on events in the ČSSR. He spoke of the “heating up of the psychological war” and referred explicitly to Brezhnev’s remarks on Smrkovský’s WDR interview. The praise of the Czechoslovak press association ČTK for the politics of the SPD in their report on the SPD’s Nuremberg party congress was for Ulbricht interference in the domestic affairs of the GDR; on top of everything he saw in this the “representation of the ideology of West German imperialism”. He announced to the KSČ that the SED would no longer remain silent regarding all these things, but rather publicly “refute the opposing arguments”. Following a lesson on the causes of the current situation, which he sought in the failure of ideological work within the KSČ, he described how the West was currently benefiting propagandistically from developments in the ČSSR: “In a situation where we are all interested in the socialist camp and the Warsaw Pact states acting unanimously, now, where US imperialism is in a difficult position with its global strategy, in this of all situations you start to discriminate against your own party, you give the enemy material for its campaign against socialist countries and the West German imperialism naturally exploits that and conducts a massive campaign.” In his analysis of the new tactics of the enemy – he claimed to have learnt from the failure of the Hungarian “counter-revolution” – he dealt with the importance for future developments of freedom of the press. If the freedom of the press was like in the ČSSR, where a “platform for counter-revolution at the current stage” could be

publicised unimpeded without this being prevented, then the freedom of the press would lead directly “to counter-revolution”.

Ulbricht demanded from Dubček that the KSČ in their action programme “state concretely what happened in the past, what must be corrected, how the situation is assessed and what dangers have arisen as a result of the revisionist approach of certain intellectuals. The Party leadership should turn to the workers.” Dubček and his leadership should say openly “which dangers exist”. He provokingly accentuated the question: “Will you also have the courage to say that there are counter-revolutionary forces under Western influence who are attempting to do their business?” With the accentuation on block loyalty and the conflict of systems, Ulbricht intrinsically represented the political interests of the SED relating to Germany and also attempted in this way to preclude special negotiations on the part of the ČSSR with the Federal Republic on the normalisation of state relations.

The Dresden conference set the course for the further development of the Czechoslovak crisis. With the claim that the main tendency of developments had been leading since the KSČ’s January plenum to “counter-revolution”, the CPSU made their assessment of the situation. Supported by the SED, the PUWP, the BCP and the HSWP, they demanded from Dubček and his leadership the restoration of the KSČ’s monopoly on power and with it the abandonment of the reform course, which was stigmatised in the person of Smrkovský. This political aim was never subsequently revised. Once the “healthy forces” within the KSČ could no longer realise this on their own, external military intervention was effected. In each phase, the SED executed this Soviet policy of intervention without restrictions.