

THE SOVIET INVASION OF CZECHOSLOVAKIA IN 1968

THE RUSSIAN PERSPECTIVE



EDITED BY
JOSEF PAZDERKA

The Soviet Invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968

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The Soviet Invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968: The Russian Perspective
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The Russian “Prague Spring”

Prologue to the English Edition

Josef Pazderka

There was life before August 21, 1968, and life afterward. That was the year of our self-determination. On that day, directly or indirectly, it sealed the fate of a great number of people. Some people headed once and for all to the dissident movement; and for some that even meant going directly to jail; others, by contrast, went into reverse and, fully aware of what they were doing, parked themselves in a Communist career.¹

These words of the Russian dissident historian Arseny Roginsky may be a bit surprising for many Czechs and Slovaks. Many of them would not expect Russians to have so much empathy for them regarding the traumatic experience of the Soviet-led military intervention in August 1968. They ought, however, to remind Czechs and Slovaks of an important fact—namely, that they were not the only ones with a Prague Spring. Russians, too, had had their own “spring.” Theirs was earlier and more complicated, and actually opened the door to the Prague Spring, by starting a Thaw in the totalitarian Eastern Bloc in the first half of the 1960s. It was that Soviet *otpepel* that, with its unexpected intense ending, was linked to events in Prague and came tragically to a close with the entry of Warsaw Pact troops on August 21, 1968.

THE FIRST SHOCK WAVES

The whole story begins at the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in 1956 and the rousing speech of the then-party chairman, Nikita Khrushchev.² He was the first to dare to criticize the “idol” Stalin, and in a secret speech to the delegates of the congress, he described at least some of the aspects of Stalin’s cult of personality and some of his

crimes. For a totalitarian state that had been built over several decades, that came as a huge shock. To criticize Stalin meant criticizing or even wiping out an essential part of the life of many Soviet people. Thanks to Khrushchev, the reeking contents of the bowels of the totalitarian system were gradually coming out in public after years of being hidden—in particular, information about the victims of Stalinist terror, numbering by some estimates at between 12 and 20 million people and another 12 to 14 million *zeks*, that is, political prisoners who passed through the system of totalitarian labor camps known as gulags.³

It may have been the beginning of the parting of ways with the brutal Stalinist era, but it was not going to be a straightforward progression. Many members of the Soviet establishment considered it a mistake to expose the crimes of Stalin. Feeling threatened, they warned against “rocking the boat.”⁴ Khrushchev himself, moreover, was implicated in Stalin’s crimes and skilfully covered up his own sins. By his anti-Stalinist position, however, he nevertheless sent the first signal of the Thaw to the totalitarian Communist State. “After so many years of the cult of Stalin and of total brainwashing, suddenly someone was able to call at least part of reality by its proper name. [. . .] Revealing the crimes of Stalinism meant a huge breakthrough in the minds of people and in the history of the country,” said Lyudmila Alexeyeva, a future chronicler of the Soviet dissident movement, in an interview in this book.

Demolishing the cult of Stalin was, however, slow and complicated. The Khrushchev regime went from one extreme to another. The partial lifting of censorship and the beginning of the rehabilitation of the victims of Stalinism alternated with the brutal suppression of the Hungarian Revolution in 1956, a massive anti-Church campaign, the building of the Berlin Wall, and growing tensions with the United States, bringing the two superpowers to the brink of war. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, in 1962, the two Cold War superpowers teetered on the verge of mutual destruction, and Khrushchev’s uncompromising attitude played a big part in that.⁵

The half-educated, cynical, and shrewd First Secretary of the CPSU, Khrushchev, promising Soviet citizens that they would soon be living in a truly Communist state, nevertheless launched processes in the Soviet Union, which began to slip out of the otherwise firm control of the totalitarian system. In 1961, Stalin silently disappeared from the mausoleum on Red Square, and ceased to be perceived only as an idol. A year later, Aleksander Solzhenitsyn’s novel *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* began to be published in the literary magazine *Novy mir* (New World). This short novel was the first to give Soviet readers a look into the bowels of the gulag, and for some liberal intellectuals it meant the first serious shock to their faith in the Communist system.

New faces began to arrive on the arts scene. In non-mainstream Soviet cabarets, original poets and singer-songwriters gradually began to appear—like Alexander Galich and Bulat Okudzhava—and were eventually joined by a young actor of the Taganka Theatre in Moscow, Vladimir Vysotsky. When, in 1966, Andrei Tarkovsky's new film *Andrei Rublev* was finished, it seemed like a revelation in the flood of contemporary propaganda (and the terrified censors did not release it for public viewing in cinemas until several years later). "The sense of freedom, the chance to speak freely and discuss things knew no limits," said Roginsky, describing the atmosphere of the Soviet Union in the 1960s.⁶ Though it was a limited Thaw in a totalitarian state, it had a considerable impact.

The changes in the Soviet Union in the 1960s were not only in politics. Under the surface of the totalitarian monolith, economic problems were increasingly being voiced. During the almost fifty years of the Communist system, the euphoria and desire to work without being paid had exhausted itself. The centrally planned Soviet economy was grinding to a halt. Industry was lacking modern technology, and collectivized agriculture was incapable of feeding the Soviet population. In the first half of the 1960s, the price of milk, meat, and other staples began to rise noticeably. In 1962, the Soviet government brutally cracked down on the first protests in Novochoerkassk, which led to riots, leaving twenty-three people dead and hundreds wounded.⁷ Mikhail Gorbachev, a member of the Party leadership in the Stavropol region, and, later, the author of the perestroika policy, recalled the state of the Soviet economy in the 1960s:

A further step had to be taken. The industrial revolution required democratization, a flexible society, and the introduction of new technologies. Everyone at that time was looking for new economic solutions. The leaders of the country realized that they had at their disposal only raw materials and simple materials. The West—despite certain difficulties—had already introduced new technologies, increased labour productivity, and had increasingly higher-quality products. We did not have them, and instead we were installing outdated production lines. The educated strata of society, mainly scientists and other scholars, needed more oxygen. But it was all talk, no action.⁸

Although the then-chairman of the Soviet Council of Ministers Aleksei Kosygin attempted to push through some economic reforms, he ran up against the stiff resistance of the rest of the Party leadership and others whom the immobility of the centrally planned Soviet economy suited.

THE GENERATION OF THE THAW

Amidst the Soviet political and economic discrepancies of the 1960s, the first postwar generation insisted on being heard. They were the children of the soldiers who had returned home after the Second World War and had started families. They came of age in the mid-1960s; they were the young generation unscarred by war and full of a desire to change things around them. Their efforts represented progress, which, although within the limits of the totalitarian state, was without precedent. Soviet society in the 1960s was at the height of its strength. Men, on average, were living to the age of sixty-eight, the longest life expectancy in Soviet history, less than 2.5 years short of the average longevity of males in their greatest rival country, America.⁹

A great part of the Soviet *jeunesse dorée* was satisfied with maintaining merely a formal distance from the old times. New singers, film stars, and other celebrities appeared, including the ballerina Maya Plisetskaya, the football goalkeeper Lev Yashin, and the comedian Arkady Raikin. Soviet women first tried out pantsuits; in the conservative Soviet milieu this way of dressing was revolutionary, and could, for example, prevent a woman so dressed from being allowed into a restaurant. Nonetheless, the first attempts at women's liberation were gradually being made. In Moscow and Leningrad (St. Petersburg), the Thaw also eventually saw the birth of "Zhivago's Children."¹⁰ Young liberal intellectuals, following the model presented by Pasternak's novel *Doctor Zhivago* (first published, in Italy, in 1957; not published in Russia until 1988), longed for at least some personal freedom. In a milieu affected by decades of Soviet brainwashing, their ambitions were of course more modest than those of their contemporaries in other countries.

"We were young, inexperienced, and brought up in the Soviet system. There was no way to leave. We took Socialism for granted. We were interested in its 'imperfections.' Why did it treat people so cruelly? Why was this or that injustice committed?" said Lyudmila Alexeyeva, a former member of the informal movement, in an interview for this book.

The struggle for a minimum of freedom was, however, hard and bitter. After Khrushchev was forced to step down as chairman of the CPSU, and Leonid Brezhnev came to power in October 1964, the nervous totalitarian state began to tighten the screws again. Some room for freedom remained. The periodical *Moskva* published, albeit in a censored form, Mikhail Bulgakov's novel *The Master and Margarita* (1967), which caused a muted sensation in liberal circles. The return to the old order was, however, already visible. The new CPSU chairman, Brezhnev, and his chief ideologist, Mikhail Suslov, revived the Stalinist terms "general secretary" and "Politburo." Voices calling for the rehabilitation of Stalin were gaining strength.

Although Brezhnev, compared to Khrushchev, was better read (for example, he loved the poet Sergei Yesenin), and insisted on well-tailored suits, he was cautious, sought to avoid conflict, and was weak. He feared shocks, even change, and preferred to sweep problems under the carpet or wait for them to blow over. The period of stagnation (*zastoy*) under Brezhnev was born inconspicuously, and it would accompany the totalitarian Soviet state for the next eighteen years.¹¹

There was no room in this state for the generation of the Thaw. But they discovered that only gradually. The first warning shot was fired, even before the new regime, with the trial of the writer Joseph Brodsky, in January and March 1964, and the trial, in February 1966, of his fellow writers Andrei Sinyavsky and Yuli Daniel. Having published critical writings under pseudonyms abroad, they were punished mercilessly at home with sentences of seven and five years of jail respectively, plus years of exile. The persecution of liberal intellectuals was supported not only by the conservative Politburo. The sentences also reflected the mood of a large part of Soviet society. Many people simply longed for the iron fist of the Stalinist system. They considered Khrushchev's Thaw to be a mistake and the result of weakness. Thousands of letters were again being sent to the editors of Soviet periodicals, calling for the death sentence for Daniel and Sinyavsky.

The two writers were publicly vilified at the 23rd Congress of the CPSU by Mikhail Sholokhov, a winner of the Nobel Prize for literature. The tone of his speech perfectly reflects the reaction of the scared totalitarian system:

Our Soviet homeland is too dear to us to allow anyone to spit on it and slander it. Many people continue to moan and groan about the alleged inhumanity of the court's sentences. How, one wonders, might an army unit have acted if traitors had appeared in its ranks? Soldiers know very well that humanism is a sign only of weakness. If this scum had been judged in the 1920s, when no firmly set laws were yet in force, but when people were guided by the enthusiastic spirit of revolution, they would then have seen and got what they deserve. And yet they still whine about how it is all unjust and inhuman.¹²

But the generation of the Thaw refused to give up. Indeed, they found strength in resistance that was unexpected and hitherto unseen in Soviet circumstances. On Pushkin Square in Moscow, for the first time in Soviet history, dissident demonstrations were held in support of the imprisoned writers. For the first time, petitions appeared against State action. This was not yet full-fledged dissent; it was only a small group of people who did not want to be stripped of the last bits of their recently won freedom. Bullying, excessive supervision, and the general inhumanity of many decisions were



Figure 0.1. *Source:* Photo by Paul Goldsmith

the principal matters that angered them and for which they also reproached the Soviet regime.

Under increasing regime pressure, these people sought support wherever they could find it. And it was here somewhere that the link between Zhivago's Children and the Prague Spring was born. After the Thaw had spread into the Soviet satellites, and Alexander Dubček had become the head of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in January 1968, the reform spirit in Czechoslovakia gained in strength. Young liberal Russians were interested in it and encouraged by it. Alexeyeva has described their great personal interest in events in Czechoslovakia:

“Socialism with a humane face”; that unusual turn of phrase hit the nail on the head! It expressed it perfectly; that's exactly what we too felt and wanted. How exactly? We had no idea, and that's why we kept an eye on events in Czechoslovakia. We kept telling ourselves that if it succeeded in your country, something similar would gradually make its way also to our country. Perhaps it would take ten or even fifteen years, but one day it would definitely come. That's why we kept our fingers crossed for the Czechs and the Slovaks.

In the few months before the Soviet intervention, the Prague Spring thus became a matter of great interest to liberal Russians. It was the last breath of

hope (perhaps actually a premonition of the end), after which would come the bitter reminder that, as Alexeyeva remarked, “Socialism cannot have a humane face.”

THE RUSSIAN PERSPECTIVE

That brief Russian enchantment with the Prague Spring, together with views that other parts of Soviet society had of Czechoslovakia in 1968, constitutes the main topic of this book. Indeed, the book seeks to provide the widest possible range of views—from soldiers who came in on the tanks to liberal journalists who observed the Prague Spring directly in Czechoslovakia to Soviet liberal intellectuals and the “gray zone” artists, scholars, and ordinary Soviet citizens.

Although it seeks to present a fairly comprehensive view, the book makes no claim to completeness. It intentionally, for example, ignores events at the top levels of the Soviet political leadership and military command, which have already been discussed in many history books and other academic publications. Rather than an exclusively academic work, our book is a *psycho-gram*, that is, an attempt to capture Russian moods, emotions, and thinking about the Prague Spring and its violent end.

It considers generals and foot soldiers, dissidents and members of the gray zone. But this psychological portrait also has gaps and holes. The inner world of the Prague-based journalists on the Soviet daily *Izvestia* and the international Communist periodical the *World Marxist Review: Problems of Peace and Socialism* is revealed to us only from the statements of individuals who worked there (Krivosheyev and Lukin), and these will one day need to be compared and contrasted with other information. And that applies also to a number of other eyewitness testimonies. This book contains at least some of them and seeks to explain them and put them into their historical context. Nevertheless, it assumes that other works will follow on from this, and that research on Russian sources will increase. There are still many blank spaces. Historians still need to try to track down other living witnesses to those fateful days in August 1968 (including the soldiers who were sent to quell unrest at the Czechoslovak Radio station in Prague, the KGB agents who prepared acts of provocation in Czechoslovakia before August 1968, and the paratroops who arrested the Czechoslovak Communist Party leaders) and to gather their testimonies.

This book was originally intended for Czech and Slovak readers—as a reminder of views that they may have forgotten or never known. Its translation into Polish, Russian, and English is a bonus. It is an appeal for an honest

reassessment of events of almost fifty years ago that are now falling into oblivion or are still veiled in the silt of Soviet ideology, which has in recent years, regrettably, returned in Russia and is getting stronger (as, for example, in the Russian documentary film *Pražský zlom*, TV Rossia, 2003, directed by Alexander Sidorov, or *Varšavskiy dogovor. Rozsekrechennyye stranitsy*, TV Rossia, 2015, directed by Dmitry Ushakov).

I will be very grateful to readers for any remarks, observations, and references to other important facts. These can be sent to the following email address: ctwarsaw@gmail.com.

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authors of the texts—contributed without asking to be paid or for merely symbolic honoraria.

Special thanks are due to Josef Koudelka, a living legend of Czechoslovak photography, who, by his magnanimity, triggered an avalanche of contributions from many of his colleagues. Many of the photographs are published here for the first time (for example, the wonderful series by US photographer Paul F. Goldsmith), and some are even unique historical sources (the photographs from the archive of Boris Shmelyov and Vladimir Lukin).

My sincere thanks also go to all the authors and interviewees in this book—for their unusual openness, directness, and willingness to share aspects of their lives and experiences, which many of them no longer wanted to return to after so many years.

—Prague, February 2017

NOTES

1. *Invaze 1968: Ruský pohled*, documentary film for Česká televize, directed by Josef Pazderka, Prague, 2011. <http://www.ceskatelevize.cz/ivysilani/10101491767-studio-ct24/211411034000158-invaze-1968-rusky-pohled/>; <http://www.csfd.cz/film/300462-invaze-1968-rusky-pohled/prehled/>.

2. <http://lib.ru/MEMUARY/HRUSHEW/kult.txt>; see also *НИКИТА ХРУЩЁВ .1964. Стенограммы пленумов ЦК КПСС и другие документы*, М.: Международный фонд «Демократия», 2007, серия «Россия. XX век. Документы».

3. Stephen F. Cohen, *The Victims Return: Survivors of the Gulag after Stalin*, Exeter, NH: Publishing Works, 2010; see also the information from the Russian Memorial movement at www.memo.ru.

4. William Taubman, *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004.

5. Ibid.

6. *Invaze 1968: Ruský pohled*.

7. *Исторические хроники с Николаем Сванидзе. 1965 г. Косыгин.*, a series of documentary films for TV Rossia; <http://video.mail.ru/mail/sokolovchik/31/1572.html>.

8. *Invaze 1968: Ruský pohled*.

9. *Исторические хроники с Николаем Сванидзе. 1965 г. Косыгин.*

10. Vladislav Zubok, *Zhivago's Children: The Last Russian Intelligentsia*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009; Л. М. Алексеева, *Поколение оттепели*, Moscow: Захаров, 2006; and Л. М. Алексеева, *История инакомыслия в СССР: Новейший период*, Vilnius: Весть, 1992; see <http://www.memo.ru/history/diss/books/ALEXEEWA/index.htm>.

11. Edwin Bacon and Mark Sandle, *Brezhnev Reconsidered*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002; Robert Service, *The Penguin History of Modern Russia: From Tsarism to the Twenty-first Century*, London: Penguin, 2009; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_Standard_Book_Number; *Исторические хроники с Николаем Сванидзе. 1966 г. Леонид Брежнев*, a series of documentary films for Rossiya TV, <http://video.mail.ru/mail/cyrella/298/1511.html>.

12. *То ли быль, то ли небыль: О деле писателей Синявского и Даниэля*, Russian documentary film, Moscow: CSDF, 1989.

Chapter One

We Came to Carry Out a Mission

Soviet Soldiers and Their Views of the Invasion

Daniel Povolny

The topic of the Soviet Army and its key role in the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 has been thoroughly researched for more than forty years. Since the opening up of the Soviet archives in the early 1990s, some important stages of Operation Danube have gradually been clarified—from the secret planning in the spring of 1968 to attempts to conceal it during Warsaw Pact exercises to the inclusion of the armies of other Socialist states and the execution of the operation in August 1968. Military historians today have a fairly good overview of the individual steps taken by the Soviet General Staff, the number of soldiers deployed, the kinds and number of weapons used, and the overall number of military and civilian casualties.¹

This article aims neither to summarize existing research nor to expand on it. It draws on the research only to provide context for the interviews with former Soviet soldiers and the other texts contained in this section of the book. The interviews focus on the inner worlds of the Soviet soldiers during the August invasion, and form part of the search for answers to key questions. What did the Soviet soldiers actually know about the aims of the intervention? What were their personal thoughts of the invasion? Were they mere puppets, or did they sense the discrepancies between what their superiors were telling them about Czechoslovakia and what they could see with their own eyes? It is not in the power of a single author or one book to answer these questions definitively. It is possible, however, at least to point toward answers.

WE WENT INTO THE UNKNOWN

The number of foreign soldiers who entered the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic on the fateful night of August 20 to 21, 1968, is generally estimated at

between half a million and three quarters of a million. The truth is, however, that many of them probably never even crossed the Czechoslovak border. We still lack precise information about the Soviet Army. From the number and kind of divisions deployed, however, it is possible to estimate that between 300,000 and 350,000 Soviet soldiers actually entered the country, out of a total of just under 400,000 soldiers of the Warsaw Pact armies.²

The others, however, were on high alert in the neighboring Socialist countries and saw to the logistics of Operation Danube. Soviet troops headed for Czechoslovakia from various sides—from bases in the European part of the Soviet Union, mainly from the Baltic states and Ukraine, and from Poland, the German Democratic Republic, and Hungary. Their ethnic composition was varied. Though Czechs and Slovaks most often recall Soviet soldiers with Asian faces, most of the soldiers—like General Pavel Kosenko, who in the book also relates his experiences—probably came from Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltic states.

From the interviews and other available information, it is evident that the Soviet soldiers knew little about Czechoslovakia before the invasion. With few exceptions, their knowledge did not go beyond what they had learned in school and from ideologically tinged information provided by the Soviet mass media. Most of the Soviet soldiers who were asked in these interviews claim that they had previously never been in Czechoslovakia. Others in this book—for example, LCpl Shmelyov—recall a civilized country with beautiful towns and lovely historical sites. He mentions music, literature, Jawa motorcycles, and other Czechoslovak products, but he appears to be an exception among his brothers in arms.

The Czechoslovak and Soviet armies had, of course, already developed contacts with each other. At the end of the Second World War, Soviet soldiers helped to liberate Czechoslovakia,³ and knew their little neighbor to the west. But other contacts between rank-and-file Soviet soldiers and Czechoslovaks tended—despite the incorporation of Czechoslovakia into the Eastern Bloc after February 1948 and the establishment of the Warsaw Pact in May 1955—to be sporadic.

The Russians came into contact with Czechoslovak officers, who in the 1950s and 1960s attended Soviet military academies. And in Czechoslovakia, from the early 1950s onward, Soviet advisers helped to ensure, among other things, the “Sovietization” of the Czechoslovak People’s Army, that is, its greatest possible unification with the Soviet Army, with regard to structure, armaments, equipment, and military regulations. This entailed dozens of people, whose number gradually decreased after Stalin’s death in March 1953 and Nikita Khrushchev’s becoming the general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (which he soon renamed First Secretary).⁴

In Czechoslovakia, a limited number of military experts also saw to the manufacture of a wide variety of materiel for the Soviet Army. Short-term attachments for officers of the two countries were regularly organized; soldiers met at joint army exercises and exchanges; some of them spent their free time together and went on leave together. Nevertheless, for most of the Soviet soldiers deployed in the August 1968 invasion Czechoslovakia was actually *terra incognita*.⁵

IDEOLOGICAL PREPARATIONS

Soviet soldiers mostly knew nothing about what was happening in Prague and Bratislava, apart from what had been presented to them by the State-run Soviet mass media and officers at regular political-training sessions. Already from the spring of 1968 onward, soldiers based in the Soviet Union, East Germany, Poland, Hungary, and Bulgaria were being ideologically prepared to intervene in Czechoslovakia. The closer it was to August 20/21, the greater the propaganda. “Commanding officers, political bodies, and Party and Komsomol organizations continued to spread active propaganda to explain to the troops the resolutions of the July plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and materials published in the *Pravda* and *Krasnaya zvezda* newspapers, about Czechoslovak events and the Czechoslovak Communist Party,” wrote Lieutenant General Mayorov,⁶ commander of the 38th Soviet Army, upon his return from the “Šumava” exercises, in his report from Slovakia in July 1968.

In their talks, the politruks (political commissars for civilian control of the military) mostly just repeated official government propaganda and added military information to it. Yuri Kuzmin, a soldier doing his national service in the Southern Group of the Soviet Forces in Hungary, recalled the period before the invasion:⁷

Extraordinary emphasis was put on political training. They continuously presented us with examples of how the international situation was getting tenser. The United States were at war in Vietnam, which kept the Soviet leadership very busy. The independent course of the Romanian leadership, headed by Nicolae Ceaușescu, also made them nervous. In the Federal Republic of Germany a coalition was in power, whose steps Soviet propaganda described in very negative terms. And reports about increasingly revanchist moods in Germany continued to be published in the newspapers.

The most recent events in Prague were, according to Kuzmin, also explained to the Soviet rank-and-file in a similar spirit. The picture of Czecho-

slovakia that was presented to them at political-training sessions in the summer of 1968 appeared ominous: They saw a country where the mass media were controlled by right-wing forces that were dragging honorable Communists through the mud, a country where the forces of counterrevolution were gaining strength and would attack law enforcement officers and try to destroy Czechoslovak-Soviet friendship, a country that was naïvely opening up its borders to the West and letting in Western secret agents.

The soldiers were also presented with information about alleged NATO re-deployments and maneuvers in the Federal Republic of Germany as evidence of Western plans to occupy Czechoslovakia.⁸

The soldiers, who had been trained in the totalitarian Soviet system and cut off from their families and other sources of information, mostly accepted this version of events unquestioningly. “We had no doubt that there were attempts to get rid of Socialism in the country, and we did not want to leave the Czechoslovak nation, our brothers, in the lurch,” recalled Kuzmin.⁹

Eduard Vorobyev, who in August 1968 was a junior officer and in the late 1980s was the last commander of the Central Group of the Soviet Army in Czechoslovakia, recalls in an interview in the current publication: “The West of course, [. . .] wanted to disrupt the unity of the Socialist camp. We had no doubt about that. I myself not only believed that, but also, of my own free will, as the leader of the group, I impressed it upon my subordinates, my non-commissioned officers and privates, as part of their political training. No one was putting pressure on me to do that.” Most of the Soviet soldiers therefore entered the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic believing that if they did not intervene, the West German Bundeswehr or other NATO troops were going to invade Czechoslovakia.

INVASION

But the invasion of Czechoslovakia took the Soviet soldiers by surprise. A number of things that they had previously heard at political-training sessions did not correspond to reality. The people who were supposed to welcome them as saviors from counterrevolution, threatened and cursed them instead. Kuzmin, a Soviet private, recalled unpleasant experiences while occupying Bratislava:

The Slovaks were surrounding our vehicles and each of them was asking the same question: “Why did you come?” In the windows of the first floor appeared the faces of young women, who were holding their heads in disbelief. From their expression it was clear what they were thinking: “What’s going on? What’s going to happen to us?” Some of them were weeping and gesturing at us to leave.

A young woman came up to me and said that she always used to respect the Russians but now no longer could.¹⁰

“The resistance of ordinary people took me, as well as the other soldiers, by surprise,” recalls Vorobyev in this book. (He and his fellow soldiers were occupying part of the Bohemian Forest region at the West German border.) “But at that moment we didn’t think about it much. We were mainly busy with our specific tasks. I was convinced that it was temporary, that people were taking umbrage that the army was intervening without their consent, but that it would gradually pass, especially if there were no fighting.”

The Soviet commanding officers sensed that things were not going according to plan, and in order to maintain morale among their men, they kept contact between Soviet soldiers and the population to a minimum.

Among the troops themselves, by contrast, propaganda was boosted, and it began to spread a number of half-truths among the soldiers, in an effort to support the Soviet version of events—that is, that counterrevolutionaries were allegedly abducting and murdering Soviet soldiers, and their weapons were, they were told, being found everywhere (even, for example, in ambulances and schools).

Particularly potent were the stories about the heroes in tanks whose paths the counterrevolutionaries had blocked by putting children and other civilians in their way, but the tank crews chose to avoid them rather than hurt them.

The doubts that gnawed at Soviet soldiers when they looked at what was happening were mostly dispelled by the closed world of the military, a sense of being under threat, and their many duties. Though there were instances of disagreement and resistance, they existed in only a fairly limited and “quiet” form, because every realistic soldier knew the consequences of speaking up too much. The historical sources provide evidence of ten Soviet deserters.¹¹ But their commanding officers kept quiet about these cases, and the Czechoslovaks did not find out about them until asked to cooperate in investigations. Consequently, one cannot clearly determine their causes either. They may have resulted from an attempt to defect to the West, to escape bullying, homesickness, or excessive mental strain. While in Czechoslovakia in 1968, at least five Soviet soldiers committed suicide.¹² To what extent that had to do with disagreement or protest against the occupation is, however, hard to determine. The only Soviet soldier to publicly condemn the August invasion of the ČSSR, though he did not directly take part in it, was General Pyotr Grigorenko.¹³ Some of the Soviet officers who did take part in the invasion confided to their Czechoslovak counterparts, already in August 1968 (though always confidentially), their personal reservations about the intervention, and they apologized to them, as did Lt Gen Boris Ivanov. Years later, in his memoirs, the commander of the invading forces, general of the army Ivan Pavlov-

sky remarked: “To be frank, the population was not friendly towards us. [. . .] You yourselves probably understand: when an uninvited guest arrives in your home and begins to order you about, you aren’t going to like it much.”¹⁴



Figure 1.1. Soviet soldiers, Old Town Square, Prague, August 1968. *Source:* National Archives, Prague

INCIDENTS

The tense emotions of the August events and the continuous confrontations with the hostile environment were naturally taxing for the locals and the soldiers themselves. According to the most recent information, at least 122 Czechoslovak citizens were killed during the occupation.¹⁵ Almost half of them were victims of traffic accidents with military vehicles, and a similar number were hit by gunfire from occupying forces. Apart from the incidents of August 21 at the building of Czechoslovak Radio in Prague and dramatic events in Liberec, among the most tragic cases was the car crash on the road between the towns of Svitavy and Litomyšl, on October 12, 1968, which claimed the lives of members of the Chlup family (the mother, the father, and their elder son; their two other children survived the crash).¹⁶ There were also cases recorded in which Soviet soldiers stole food and personal items from occupied buildings, and even raped young women.¹⁷ The Soviet authorities dealt with the crimes secretly, and thus to this day it is still suspected that many of the culprits have remained unpunished.

Soviet propaganda, by contrast, exaggerated Soviet losses¹⁸ while denying losses on the other side. The claims of General Kosenko, that his troops did not kill or injure anyone in Prague, and that, on the contrary, they lost a few of their own soldiers, are, in the light of the information we have access to, untenable. He himself, however, even more than forty years after the events, had no doubt about the truth of what he said.

“We returned home proud, with our heads held high. We had helped a fraternal nation. We had defended Socialism. We had again demonstrated that we don’t leave our friends in the lurch,” said Kuzmin, recalling his return to the USSR in November 1968.¹⁹

Some of the eyewitnesses to the invasion have by now gradually changed their position on the events. One has to take into consideration that the vast majority of the soldiers were young men, barely twenty years old, who, only later with age and experience, gradually began to understand things and put them into context. Perestroika and glasnost in the Soviet Union, and the eventual dissolution of the country, made it possible to publish a number of memoirs,²⁰ but apart from pleas for forgiveness for having invaded a sovereign state and for having committed acts of violence,²¹ they also contain a number of old myths about the threat of a third world war and a “preventive strike” necessitated by the complicated international constellation. From internationalist soldiers who to this day have remained entirely in the thrall of the Soviet view of the world, one would, of course, be hard-pressed to hear critical reflections of what they had experienced. For them, behind everything bad that happened to them were right-wingers and counterrevolutionaries

trained in the West who deceived the people. According to them, anyone who argues otherwise does not know what he or she is talking about.²²

We therefore still await honest reflections of the experiences of Soviet soldiers of August 1968, as well as reflections about a number of other points of recent Soviet history.

NOTES

1. D. Povolný, *Vojenské řešení Pražského jara*, vol. I: *Invaze armád Varšavské smlouvy a Vojenské řešení Pražského jara*; vol. II: *Československá lidová armáda v srpnu 1968*. Prague: Vojenský historický ústav, MO ČR, and AVIS, 2008, and Vojenský historický ústav, MO ČR, and PIC MO, 2010; M. Bárta, L. Cvrček, P. Košický, and V. Sommer, *Oběti okupace: Československo 21.8.–31.12.1968*. Prague: Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů, 2008; A. Benčík, *Operace "Dunaj": Vojáci a pražské jaro 1968. Studie a dokumenty*. Prague: Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR, 1994.

2. In the Bulgarian People's Army, there were 2,168 soldiers; in the Polish People's Army, 28,612 soldiers (as of September 14, 1968); and in the Hungarian People's Army, about 17,000 soldiers. The National People's Army of the German Democratic Republic had nine soldiers in the liaison group at the occupying forces command in Milovice, Bohemia, and a few hundred, who for a variety of reasons moved about Czechoslovakia.

3. During the liberation of Czechoslovakia, about 144,000 Soviet soldiers lost their lives.

4. Soviet advisers nonetheless remained with the most important units of the Czechoslovak People's Army. In 1968 General Zadvinsky, together with his subordinates, worked with the intelligence directorate of the General Staff of the Czechoslovak People's Army, in Prague, and Lt Gen. Aleksander Yamshchikov, the permanent representative of the Warsaw Pact in Czechoslovakia, and Trusov, the Soviet military attaché, were also present in Czechoslovakia. All of them served as "information channels" between Prague and Moscow, and during the invasion they immediately became key "transmission belts" of Operation Danube, which was then underway. They ensured, for example, the secret stay of about twenty senior officers of the General Staff of the Soviet Armed Forces, led by the first deputy of the head of the General Staff, Nikolai Vasilyevich Ogarkov, and before midnight on August 21, they took control of the General Staff of the Czechoslovak People's Army in the Prague district of Dejvice.

5. See the article by Leonid Shinkarev in the current publication.

6. A. M. Mayorov, *Vtorzheniye: Chekhoslovakiya 1968*. Moscow: Prava cheloveka, 1998, 162–63.

7. Y. M. Kuzmin, "Chekhoslovakiya 1968 goda glazami sovetского soldata, stavshego istorikom," in T. V. Volokitina, G. P. Murashko, and A. S. Stykalin (eds),

1968 god.: *Pražskaya vesna (Istoricheskaya retrospektiva)*. Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2010, 573.

8. The making of the American film *The Bridge at Remagen* (1969), in Davle near Prague, for instance, was also used to that end, when the presence of a few tanks and other US military equipment used in the battle scenes were presented as evidence of the presence of the US Army in Czechoslovakia.

9. Kuzmin, “Chekhoslovakiya 1968 goda glazami sovetского soldata, stavshego istorikom,” 577.

10. Ibid., 581.

11. See the reports deposited in the Ministry of National Defence, 1968–70, record group in the Vojenský ústřední archiv, Prague.

12. *Rossiya i SSSR v voynach XX. veka: Poteri vooruzhennykh sil*. Moscow: Olma-Press, 2001, 533.

13. Pyotr Grigoryevich Grigorenko (1907–1987) was a general of the Soviet Army and, later, a dissident. He had served in the Far East, where, during the Second World War, he was seriously wounded. From 1945 to 1961, he lectured in cybernetics at the Frunze Military Academy, Moscow. In 1964, he was arrested for involvement in public affairs, was called “mentally unstable,” demoted, and sentenced to internment in the Leningrad Specialized Psychiatric Hospital. He was released in 1965. After the military intervention in Czechoslovakia, he and Ivan Yakhimovich, also a dissident, issued a statement condemning the occupation of Czechoslovakia, which was published on February 28, 1969, in *Khronika tekushchikh sobytiy* (A chronicle of current events). On May 7, 1969, he was arrested and then sentenced to internment in the Chernyakhovsky Specialized Psychiatric Hospital. Thanks to international protests he was released in 1974. He continued to speak out publicly. He was a founding member of the Ukrainian Helsinki Group for human rights and the Moscow Helsinki Group. In 1977 he defected to the United States and was consequently stripped of his Soviet citizenship.

14. Rossiyskiy obshcheobrazovatelnyy portal, see http://historydoc.edu.ru/catalog.asp?cat_ob_no=13417&ob_no=13418 (Accessed June 7, 2011).

15. Povolný, *Vojenské řešení Pražského jara*, vol. II: *Československá lidová armáda v srpnu 1968*.

16. Bárta, et al., *Oběti okupace*.

17. Ibid.

18. By the end of 1968, 104 Soviet soldiers had died in Czechoslovakia—mainly in traffic accidents and from mishandling firearms. Cases of alleged attacks by Czechoslovak citizens—recent Russian sources repeatedly report that at least twelve soldiers had been killed—have been jointly investigated by both sides. The only killing of a soldier of one of the invading armies of which we have evidence is the shooting of Sgt Nikolai Tsvetkov, of the 22nd Motor Rifle Company of the Bulgarian People’s Army, while guarding Ruzyně Airport, on September 9, 1968. The losses suffered by the East German Army are still not clear, but the Poles lost ten soldiers in Czechoslovakia, mainly as the result of mishandling firearms and other accidents, whereas the Hungarians probably lost four (resulting from an accident, a heart attack,

a suicide, and mishandling firearms). See Povolný, *Vojenské řešení Pražského jara*, vol. II: *Československá lidová armáda v srpnu 1968*.

19. Kuzmin, “Chekhoslovakiya 1968 goda glazami sovetskogo soldata, stavshogo istorikom,” 587.

20. For the experiences of rank-and-file soldiers, see B. V. Shmelyov in this publication; for the experience of officers, see V. P. Suntsev www.dunay1968.ru (accessed June 29, 2011). For the experiences of commanding generals, see G. P. Jaškin and A. M. Mayorov et al., “Vzpomínky generála Jaškina,” *Lidové noviny*, September 3, 1992, and Mayorov, *Vtorzheniye*.

21. V. V. Nefedov, A. M. Mayorov, and I. G. Drogovoz, *Neobyavlennye voyny SSSR*. Minsk: Kharvest, 2004; Mayorov, *Vtorzheniye*.

22. See the volume of recollections and archive documents, Volodimir A. Ulyanchenko, Vladislav P. Suntsev, Oleskiy O. Yurchenko, Volodimir L. Tkachenko, Nina Ya. Vorobyeva, and Oleksandr P. Remezov, Volodimir A. Ulyanchenko et al. (eds), *Voni zakhishchali mir u Evropi*. Zhytomir: 2003. Available online <http://dunay1968.com/pdf/book.pdf> Accessed May 12, 2016, and V. Shevchenko, *Navstretchu rassvetu*. Rostov-on-Don: Aftair, 2011.

Chapter Two

We Saved the World from a Third World War

An Interview with General Pavel Kosenko

Josef Pazderka

Major General Pavel Denisovich Kosenko (1919–2013) was, at the time of this interview, conducted in 2008, one of the last surviving Soviet commanders of the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968. He graduated from the Vladivostok Military Academy, and he spent the Second World War with the Soviet Army in the Far East. In 1964 he was made commander of the 35th Motor Rifle Division of the Soviet Army in the German Democratic Republic, which, during Operation Danube, occupied the center of Prague in August 1968. Kosenko and his men spent three months in Czechoslovakia, before leaving the country on November 12, 1968. From 1970 to 1979, he was the director of the Moscow Military Engineering Academy. He was the recipient of important Soviet military decorations. At the end of his life, he and his wife lived in Moscow and he spent time helping military veterans.

Where are you from?

From central Ukraine, from the Cherkasy Oblast along the River Dnieper. My parents were ordinary farmers. I had six siblings. I am the eldest. But none of them is alive anymore. I am the last one.

Was anyone in your family in the army?

No one. My father had barely two grades of school. My mother was illiterate. I was drawn to the army. It was prestigious. But my father discouraged me from it. He used to tell me: “First, finish ordinary school, and then you’ll see.” And so, in 1938, I became a teacher at an elementary school. Because of that, at the military commissariat. I was exempted from compulsory military service. I taught for a week, and then suddenly the order to enlist came. War



Figure 2.1. Pavel Kosenko, Moscow, 2009. Photo by Iva Zimová.

was about to break out. For about eight months we had basic training, and then I entered the infantry boot camp in Vladivostok.

You said that the Soviet Army was prestigious. Was there also an ideological dimension to that? Were your parents Communists?

Not at all. As I said, my parents were uneducated. So how could they be Communists? They taught us to be conscientious—to study and to work honestly. That’s all.

Did you join the Communist party?

Yes. I was a Pioneer, then a member of the Komsomol [All-Union Leninist Young Communist League], and when I graduated from the military school and the waiting period was up, I became a member of the Communist party in 1940. I still have my Party card. I didn’t throw it out or return it to anyone.¹

So, you didn’t hesitate about joining the Communist party? The Soviet Union was recovering from the brutal Stalinist purges of the 1930s, and the Soviet leadership was not what one would call exemplary, either at the beginning of the war or during it . . .

I do, of course, remember some of that, but I lived more or less in isolation. In the Far East I carried out tasks mainly in the general staff. I delivered orders, and we drew up maps and plans of combat activity, which meant that there was no real direct contact with the front and the soldiers. Furthermore, I was only a captain at that time.

Nonetheless, you must have seen what was happening around you. You come from Ukraine, where Stalin unleashed the famine in the 1930s. And there were other atrocities, too. Did no one in your family die as a result of them? Was no one put to death or sent to a camp?

No, no one. I remember the 1930s, of course, but neither our immediate family nor our other relations were affected in any way.

When you later heard what the Stalin regime had perpetrated and how many people had been its victims, what effect did that have on you?

Do you mean Khrushchev and his criticism of Stalin? In my opinion, Khrushchev did not do the right thing. He, too, was implicated in those things. He should, of course, have told the truth, but without emotion and without the havoc that followed. After all, he had taken part in that.²

I don't quite understand you just now. How would the form of the message have changed the fact that Khrushchev was the first to speak about the crimes of Stalin? Shouldn't he have done that? Or, according to you, did those crimes never even happen?

I personally was not there and don't know exactly what took place. People say all kinds of things . . .

But today there are publications, concrete names of victims of the Terror, the chronicles of the Memorial movement, and other testimonies . . . Don't you believe them?

How should I put it: I believe and I don't believe them. The camps, yes, they existed; there's no question about that. It is, in short, part of our history. Another question is who served time in them and why he or she ended up there. My family wasn't affected at all by that, and perhaps the camps were necessary. Thanks to the camps, the Soviet Union made huge progress. In the course of two and half five-year Plans, it achieved unbelievable progress and came out of the Second World War victorious. Today, there's a lot of speculation about what would have happened if things had all taken a different course. But there are problems everywhere. In Russia we have had a new system, democracy, for twenty years, and it's still hobbling along. There's nothing we can do about the past. Yes, under Stalin's rule people died—but aren't people dying today?

Yet surely one cannot make that comparison—the number of people, the way they died, the circumstances. Those are absolutely different things.

Not for me. Under Stalin there was security. There was no way that somebody would just shoot you dead on the street. Today that is normal. Judgments on that may differ.

But the Communist regime was responsible for the deaths of millions of innocent people, who were executed without trial, without any opportunity to defend themselves.