

In February 1948, when the Communists took power, Czechoslovakia was declared a "people's democracy"— a preliminary step toward socialism and, ultimately, communism. Bureaucratic centralism under the direction of KSČ (Communist Party of Czechoslovakia) leadership was introduced. Dissident elements were purged from all levels of society, including the Catholic Church. The ideological principles of Marxism-Leninism and socialist realism pervaded cultural and intellectual life. The economy was committed to comprehensive central planning and abolition of private ownership of capital. Czechoslovakia became a satellite state of the Soviet Union; it was a founding member of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (Comecon) in 1949 and of the Warsaw Pact in 1955. Czechoslovakia was declared a socialist state in 1960.

### **Causes**

In the early 1960s, the Czechoslovak economy became severely stagnated. The industrial growth rate was the lowest in Eastern Europe. As a result, in 1965 the party approved the New Economic Model, introducing free market elements into the economy. The KSČ "Theses" of December 1965 presented the party response to the call for political reform. Democratic centralism was redefined, placing a stronger emphasis on democracy. The leading role of the KSČ was reaffirmed but limited. Slovaks pressed for federalization. On January 5, 1968, the KSČ Central Committee elected Alexander Dubček (right), a Slovak reformer, to replace Novotný as first secretary of the KSČ. On March 22, 1968, Novotný resigned from the presidency and was succeeded by General Ludvík Svoboda.



In April, Dubček launched an "Action Programme" of liberalizations that included increased freedom of the press, emphasis on consumer goods, and the possibility of a more democratic multi-party government. It also planned the federalisation of the ČSSR into two equal nations. Radical elements found expression: anti-Soviet polemics appeared in the press; the Social Democrats began to form a separate party; new unaffiliated political clubs were created. Party conservatives urged the implementation of repressive measures, but Dubček counselled moderation and re-emphasised KSČ leadership. In May, he announced that the Fourteenth Party Congress would convene in an early session on September 9. The congress would incorporate the Action Programme into the party statutes, draft a federalization law, and elect a new Central Committee.

The Soviet leadership at first tried to stop or limit the changes in the ČSSR through a series of negotiations. The Soviet Union agreed to bilateral talks with Czechoslovakia to be held in July at Čierna nad Tisou, near the Slovak-Soviet border. At the meeting, Dubček defended the program of the reformist wing of the KSČ. The KSČ delegates reaffirmed their loyalty to the Warsaw Pact and promised to curb "anti-socialist" tendencies, prevent the revival of the Czechoslovak Social Democratic Party, and control the press more effectively. The Soviets agreed to withdraw their troops (still stationed in Czechoslovakia since the June manoeuvres) and permit the September 9 party congress.

On August 3, representatives from the Soviet Union, East Germany, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Czechoslovakia met in Bratislava and signed the Bratislava Declaration. The declaration affirmed unshakable fidelity to Marxism-Leninism and proletarian internationalism. The Soviet Union expressed its intention to intervene in a Warsaw Pact country if a "bourgeois" system—a pluralist system of several political parties

representing different factions of the capitalist class—was ever established. After the Bratislava conference, Soviet troops left Czechoslovak territory but remained along Czechoslovak borders.

### **The Warsaw Pact invasion.**

As these talks proved unsatisfactory, the Soviets began to consider a military alternative. The Soviet Union's policy of compelling the socialist governments of its satellite states to subordinate their national interests to those of the "Eastern Bloc" (through military force if needed) became known as the Brezhnev Doctrine. On the night of August 20 - August 21, 1968, Eastern Bloc armies from five Warsaw Pact countries invaded the ČSSR.

During the invasion, Soviet tanks ranging in numbers from 5,000 to 7,000 occupied the streets. They were followed by a large number of Warsaw Pact troops ranging from 200,000 to 600,000. During the attack of the Warsaw Pact armies, 72 Czechs and Slovaks were killed (19 of those in Slovakia) and hundreds were wounded (up to September 3, 1968). Alexander Dubček called upon his people not to resist. He was arrested and taken to Moscow, along with several of his colleagues.



### **Consequences**

The invasion was followed by a wave of emigration, unseen before and stopped shortly after (estimate: 70,000 immediately, 300,000 in total, typically of highly qualified people). Popular opposition was expressed in numerous spontaneous acts of nonviolent resistance. In Prague and other cities throughout the republic, Czechs and Slovaks greeted Warsaw Pact soldiers with arguments and reproaches. Every form of assistance, including the provision of food and water, was denied the invaders. Signs, placards, and graffiti drawn on walls and pavements denounced the invaders, the Soviet leaders, and suspected collaborators. Pictures of Dubček and Svoboda appeared everywhere.



The generalized resistance caused the Soviet Union to abandon its original plan to oust the First Secretary. Dubček, who had been arrested on the night of August 20, was taken to Moscow for negotiations. It was agreed that Dubček would remain in office and that a program of moderate reform would continue. On January 19, 1969, student Jan Palach set himself on fire in Prague's Wenceslas Square to protest the renewed suppression of free speech. Finally, in April 1969, Dubček was replaced as First Secretary by Gustáv Husák (like Dubček another Slovak, this time from Bratislava), and a period of "Normalization" began. Husák reversed Dubček's reforms, purged the party of its liberal members and dismissed from public offices and jobs those of professional and intellectual elites who openly expressed disagreement.

### **Activities**

1. What were the reasons for the Prague Spring?
2. What were Dubček's aims?
3. Why did the USSR invade?
4. What were the consequences of the USSR Invasion?