



1968 tanks roll into Prague

Author: František Dostál; URL: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/ef/Franti%C5%A1ek_Dost%C3%A1l_Srpen_1968_4.jpg

The Sound of Silence: How Czechs Commemorated the 50th Anniversary of the Prague Spring

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50 years after the 'Prague Spring' ended, Czech political leaders remain strangely silent in commemorative events. A gradual shift is taking place in the Czech national conversation about 1968, away from the strong anti-communist narrative of the first post-communist decades. However, the opportunity is missed to finally engage a wider public in discussing the political ideas and legacies of 1968 for the country today, leaving room for populists and illiberals to shape the narrative.

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The Sound of Silence: How Czechs Commemorated the 50th Anniversary of the Prague Spring

Not only words – but also silence – can cause a political controversy. Such was the case in August 2018 when Czech president Miloš Zeman refused to give a public speech marking the 50th anniversary of the military invasion that crushed the Prague Spring in August 1968. This silence caused a controversy in local media and internationally. This article provides an overview of the existing narratives of 1968 in order to offer a framework for describing the main shifts in commemoration after 1989 including the 2018 political debate, which was sparked by President Zeman’s silence. Upon closer examination, this commemoration not only symbolizes a shift in the Czech national conversation, instigated by contemporary political circumstances, but also a much broader shift in both local and European political discourses.

Narratives of 1968

As early as the Prague Spring itself, a variety of narratives had already emerged to explain the unfolding events and their meaning.^[1] Probably the most widespread among them was the reformist narrative, which was produced and shared by the more reform-oriented members of the Czechoslovak Communist Party who were actively participating in the process of political liberalization. In their eyes, the Stalinist period and the political developments of 1950s represented a distortion of socialist development. Political, economic and cultural reforms of the existing system would therefore return society toward the path of democratic socialism. Although the reformist interpretation allowed for political pluralism as a means representing varied opinions and attitudes, it nonetheless demanded political unity in the form of a ‘socialist consensus’ and a leading role for the Communist Party.^[2]

Despite sharing a similar vision of ‘socialist unity’ with the reformists, the radical democratic narrative developed a distinct interpretation of the Prague Spring, rejecting communist reformism as an inadequate political strategy and instead stressing dynamics ‘from below.’ It also highlighted the role of direct democracy and direct participation in political action. Both narratives understood the Czechoslovak project of 1967/68 as a singular attempt to build a unique version of socialism – a combination of liberal freedoms and democratic, non-dogmatic, and non-centralist socialism.

From the perspective of actors outside communist circles, the liberal understanding of the ongoing political changes of the 1960s was crucial. The liberal-democratic narrative interpreted the Prague Spring as an imperfect and internally contradictory attempt to establish an “incomplete” democracy, always “limping along” behind Western liberal democracies.^[3] From the liberal perspective, real democracy could not be established as long as the Communist Party represented the preeminent – *primus inter pares* – political actors. This opinion was widely shared among non-Communist Party members who demanded broader political pluralism and supported the idea of parliamentarism.

The anti-reformist narrative of the 1968 events, which would later evolve into the counter-revolutionary normalization narrative, remained on the margins of public discussion. This interpretation was mainly shared by dogmatic and anti-reformist members of the Party, and described the Prague Spring as an anti-communist and anti-socialist movement supported by Western military agents aiming to restore capitalism in Czechoslovakia. During the Prague Spring, such an interpretation played only a marginal role, although it would become important in the political developments that followed after the events of

1968, since it provided the ideological basis for the infamous ‘letter of invitation,’ signed by five high-ranking Czechoslovak Communist Party members calling for “fraternal help” from Moscow.

Two and half years after the invasion, in December 1970, the plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia adopted a resolution, [Lessons from the Crisis Development in the Party and Society after the 13th Congress of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia](#), which followed the line presented in the letter of invitation and thereby established the new official interpretation of both the Prague Spring and the Warsaw Pact intervention on 21 August 1968. The document adopted the anti-reformist version of the events: events after the 13th Congress of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in 1966 were depicted as a “social crisis”, and the reformist attempts during the spring of 1968 were called “revisionist” and “right-wing opportunism”. Alexander Dubček and other reform communists were denounced as traitors to both Czechoslovakia and the ideals of socialism. The invasion of the five Warsaw Pact countries was described as “international assistance to the Czechoslovak people in defence of socialism.” Opposing interpretations were prohibited, yet rich discussions continued within oppositional circles, especially among excluded communists who saw the “Czechoslovak experiment” as a vibrant inspiration for European socialist politics.

After the collapse of the Communist regime in 1989, a new official narrative of 1968 was quickly established, shaping much of the post-communist public discourse as well as the historiography and school textbooks. The relationship to the communist past became a formative factor for new political identifications and the clear rejection of the “criminal communist regime” became essential for achieving political legitimacy.^[4] In this environment, a new “official” Prague Spring narrative, based on the existing liberal narrative, emerged: at its centre was the claim that the non-communist and democratic moment had come about despite the communist dictatorship.

After 1989, the entirety of the communist period (1948-1989) was presented as forty years of homogeneous ‘totalitarianism’. Elements of the totalitarian paradigm also prevailed within the historiography. As a part of the process of coming to terms with the communist past, new history laws were approved. The 1993 [Act on the Illegality of the Communist Regime and on Resistance Against It](#) established a new ‘legal’ interpretation of history, declaring that

the regime based on communist ideology, which governed the state and fates of its citizens in Czechoslovakia from 25 February 1948 until 17 November 1989, was criminal, illegitimate and is worthy of contempt.

This rather simplistic statement was immediately challenged by several politicians, journalists, and former reform communists. They often made the comparison between the new anti-communist “Act” and former communist “Lesson”. Karel Kosík, one of the Prague Spring’s most prominent philosophers, opposed the idea that any legal norms could determine the explanation of history and argued that:

the Lesson defined how society should understand its recent history and dictated to everyone who wanted to succeed how to behave. The anti-communist law of today’s winners dictates the interpretation by means of legal norms, which is an unprecedented matter, perhaps only possible in the land of Josef Švejk and Franz Kafka.^[5]

The 1993 Act contains no specific references to the Prague Spring, indicating that the Prague Spring

was not regarded as qualitatively different from the rest of the communist period. As a legal resolution, the aim of the 1993 Act was not to provide direction to historians or even to directly furnish a balanced account of the past, rather it had a high symbolic function.

On 4 October 1991, the Federal Assembly and the Czech National Council adopted the so-called “Great Lustration Act” ([Zákon č. 451/1991 Sb.](#)), which aimed to disqualify officials from the highest positions of the state apparatus and determine “further prerequisites for certain positions filled by election, designation or appointment.” Yet, unlike the earlier Act on the Illegality of the Communist Regime, the Great Lustration Act explicitly excluded those citizens, who had held high political posts during the period from 1 January 1968 to 1 May 1969, thus exempting some former members of the Communist party from the suspicion of guilt.

Nonetheless, the new post-communist regime has continued to struggle with the difficult legacy of the democratic moment in 1967/68, which they are unable to neatly fit into the anti-communist totalitarian narrative of a criminal communist regime. Thus, the nation’s democratic heritage of the twentieth century is almost exclusively ascribed to the First Czechoslovak Republic (1918-1938), which is often uncritically idealized as an ‘island of democracy’ in interwar Central Europe.

The Main Discursive Shifts in the Political Debate

For much of the post-communist period, the difficult legacy of the Prague Spring prevented a larger public discussion of its actual ideas. After 1989, the very word “socialism” became a highly compromised political concept and even left-wing politicians avoided incorporating socialist vocabulary into their political programs. In the political rhetoric of the post-communist period, socialism and democracy were mutually exclusive, since the twentieth century “socialist experiment” incontrovertibly proved that they were incompatible. The key political concepts of the Prague Spring, socialist democracy and democratic socialism, were thus considered oxymorons, and not widely discussed as viable political alternatives. The traumatic moment – the August 1968 military intervention, during which outside forces crushed the Czechoslovak democratic movement – thus became the main motif for commemorating 1968. The image of a unified national protest standing against invading foreign tanks and against “malevolent” Soviet power fit much better into the anti-communist totalitarian interpretation than the more ambiguous understanding of 1968 as an interrupted democratization. After 1989, the Warsaw Pact troops were often reduced to “Soviets” or “Russians” in public representations of the events, confirming (and deepening) the negative public image of Russia. This in turn went hand in hand with the new ‘anti-communist consensus’ of the 1990s.

Today, this anti-communist consensus is slowly disappearing as an important part of a post-communist political identity. Anti-communism played a crucial part in democracy-building after 1989, becoming an important trope in rhetoric across the political spectrum, including in the language of the democratic left. Currently, its role in the political discourse seems to be diminishing significantly. Merely opposing communism no longer suffices as a satisfactory political solution to present social, political or global problems, such as immigration, climate change, or the high rate of unemployment among young adults. A clear turning point was reached during the 2008 financial crisis, which triggered a wave of disillusionment with the economic and social developments of the post-1989 period across post-communist societies, and thereby strengthened both the rise of right-wing populism and a widespread mistrust of liberal democracy.

Indeed, a closer look at the political debate reveals that the “spectre of communism” no longer haunts a larger portion of Czech society. Prime Minister Andrej Babiš – a populist billionaire and the second richest man in the Czech Republic, who himself was a member of the Czechoslovak Communist Party in the nineteen eighties – has repeatedly been investigated for his past collaboration with the State Security (an accusation he resolutely rejects). Despite this, his party (ANO) remains the strongest and most popular political party in the country. Moreover, [a June 2018 public opinion poll shows](#) that his approval rating remains the highest of all Czech politicians. In June 2018, Babiš formed a minority government in coalition with the Social Democrats, which would be dependent on the backing of the Communist Party in Parliament. Communists have thus become a de facto part of the current governing coalition, albeit informally, for the first time since 1989. Ironically, the new government was introduced on 27 June 2018 – the official commemoration day for the victims of Communism. The relationship to the communist past as a key avenue for shaping political identity is thus gradually moving to the margins of political debate in the Czech Republic. Central aspects of post-communist politics of the early post-1989 period – especially a strong political anti-communism, and a pro-Western orientation in foreign policy – are becoming weaker and are more and more replaced by a critique of the transition and an ever-growing Euroscepticism.

Presidential Speeches at 1968 Anniversary Commemorations

Returning to the presidential speeches marking past commemorations of 1968, two features are invariably present: an articulation of the current relationship to Russia and a lack of debate on the actual political ideas of the Prague Spring.

On 21 August 1990, Václav Havel [spoke about the few brave Soviet citizens](#) who protested on the Red Square in Moscow against the invasion of Czechoslovakia: “To these people we are grateful”. Notably, he made no reference to the concrete political program of the 1968 reformers. Reflecting on his own political experience, Havel stressed the importance of dissidence to communist power. Three years later, in 1993, Havel again spoke only about the “democratic moment” of national unity between Czechs and Slovaks. Never having been a member of the Communist Party himself, Havel also emphasized the importance of democratic activity “from below”, yet he made no positive reference to the concept of socialist democracy or democratic socialism.^[6]

Similarly, on the 40th anniversary of the invasion, then president Václav Klaus applauded the spontaneous democratic activity of non-party members, while strongly condemning the concept of “socialism with a human face,” [which he called](#) “nonsense”. He also [reminded](#) his audience that as early as the 1960s he himself had criticized the reformist economy “from a right-wing perspective” and had already then considered the 1960s-era idea of an economic third way as a mistake.

In regards to Russia, Klaus employed an even more conciliatory tone than Havel by noting the terror committed by communists in the 20th century, but also emphasizing that in “those days of August 1968” there had been a widely shared belief,

that the Russians occupied us, which is not entirely true, because the main responsibility was with Soviet totalitarian power. The victims of the communist totalitarian regime also included millions of Russians and citizens of other nations of the Soviet Union.^[7]

Interestingly, the same strategy – clearly delineating between contemporary Russia and the Soviet Union – was used by Václav Klaus Junior, son of the former president and currently one of the country's most influential right-wing politicians, when he ironically described the 1968 commemorations as a week of Czech-Russian hostility: "you can feel furious, but the Russians as a nation were the biggest victim of the Communist dictatorship. Millions of dead people. And unlike the Czech Republic, the Russian Communists are in the opposition, ours are not."^[8]

Against this backdrop, [the silence of current president Miloš Zeman](#), formerly a liberal Social Democrat, on the 50th anniversary of the Prague Spring, is remarkable. Zeman is widely regarded as one of the most pro-Kremlin leaders in Europe today, with [close ties to several Russian oligarchs](#), and followed the same strategy as Russian official media: to let the anniversary pass, practically unnoticed. Zeman often reiterates Kremlin messaging, including denying the presence of organized Russian troops in Ukraine, arguing that Crimea is Russian, and demanding that the West lift its sanctions against Russia.^[9] An official explanation of the president's silence appeared on Zeman spokesperson Jiří Ovčáček's [Twitter account](#):

There will be no speech. The president was brave in 1968, at a time when courage was not cheap. He lost his job for speaking out against the occupation. And that's much more valuable than a thousand speeches fifty years later.

Zeman later added in [an interview](#) for [Parlamentní listy](#)^[10] that "only people who were directly affected by the invasion should comment on the situation." While the president is under no obligation to deliver a speech on that day, it is highly unusual not to speak on such an important anniversary.^[11] As one [commentator remarked](#), "The silence of the president, who is the top Czech leader, opens the space for the Kremlin's game of relativizing the 1968 events and their significance for the present time."

Thus, fifty years after one of the most traumatic moments in Czech national history, no presidential speech was delivered. Instead, Czech public television aired a speech by Zeman's Slovak counterpart, president Andrej Kiska. [His four and half minute speech](#) did not offer a particular interpretation of what happened in 1968, but, Kiska was crystal clear in his political positioning:

It's the duty of today's democratic politicians to protect our freedom. We therefore need allies with the same values and the same respect for freedom, human rights and democracy. We have such partners in the European Union and NATO, the two pillars of our prosperity and security.

While Prime Minister Andrej Babiš was booed during his 21 August speech, in response to his decision to govern with the Communists and the continuing investigation of his collaboration with State Security, Kiska's speech represented a strong pro-Western moment during this year's public statements on 1968.

A number of liberal Czech politicians have criticized the presidential silence on the 50th anniversary of the invasion. The head of the Pirate Party, Ivan Bartoš, [stated](#) that he was not surprised by the president's "sad" announcement "considering his political worldview". Petr Fiala, leader of the Civic Democratic Party [tweeted](#) that Zeman's decision was "strange" and reflected ill on him alone. One of the most critical reactions came from the leader of the liberal TOP 09 party. Jiří Pospíšil, former Minister of Justice, wrote [an open letter](#) to the president:

I'm calling on you not to neglect your constitutional obligations. [...] Despite your pro-Russian sympathies, both you and I are citizens of one country that in 1968 dreamed its dream about a just social order. The occupation put an end to this dream. For years, you have refused to publicly participate in both reverential and official actions commemorating the Warsaw Pact invasion.

In this respect, right-of-centre liberal parties used the anniversary as an opportunity to protest against what Pospíšil described as President Zeman's "pro-Russian sympathy", while also warning against allowing the Communist Party to regain political influence (which they had already begun to achieve by supporting Babiš's government in Parliament). However, Prime Minister Babiš also took a clear stand on the invasion, [when he declared](#) that the events of August 1968 were "a terrible tragedy for the whole nation. It was organized by the Soviet Union and it must be condemned." Among government party leaders, the only one to [defend Zeman's right to remain silent](#) was Tomio Okamura, leader of Freedom and Direct Democracy, a far-right, Eurosceptic, and anti-immigration party.

Beyond the Zeman controversy, which dominated large parts of the media discussion, the 1968 commemorations were, just as in previous years, centred around the traumatic experience of the invasion, emphasizing the heroism of those who resisted the invading tanks. Among Czech political parties, none recognize the politics of the Prague Spring as significant for today's more left-wing political programs. Discussions about the meaning of 'democratic socialism' remain limited to academic circles and rather marginal leftist intellectual journals, such as [A2](#) or [Alarm](#). From this perspective, as historian Veronika Pehe points out, the memory of the Prague Spring is caught up in a paradox: "While the cultural boom of the Prague Spring is remembered affectionately, the memory of its politics has become hazy." According to her, the Prague Spring in popular culture is thus represented "as a time of great songs, still well-known today, stylish fashions, and the successes of Czechoslovak cinema, with directors such as Miloš Forman soon gaining international renown."^[12]

The Ukraine Crisis and the Prague Spring Commemorations

During a visit to the Czech Republic in 1993, then Russian president Boris Yeltsin condemned the 1968 invasion as "unacceptable", clearly laying blame on the Soviet leadership at the time, and not contemporary modern "democratic Russia". Thirteen years later, in 2006, Russian president Vladimir Putin went a step further, when he declared – in Prague – that Russia carried "no legal, but a moral" responsibility for the Warsaw Pact invasion.^[13] This development toward reconciliation as part of the transnational commemoration of 1968 seems to have shifted however, after the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea. As events unfolded in Crimea, parallels were already being drawn in the Czech and Slovak media, between the 1968 occupation of Czechoslovakia and the ongoing occupation of Crimea. In 2018, the Slovak political analyst Grigorij Mesežnikov again linked the annexation of Crimea to the events of August 1968 to protest against imprisonment of writer and film-maker Oleh Sentsov:

Just as in 1968, when Czech and Slovak citizens became victims of the power and wilfulness of an aggressive state, today the Russian leadership, headed by Vladimir Putin, is ready to sacrifice the life of Oleh Sentsov to its own interests – just because he does not agree with the Russian invasion, occupation and illegal annexation of Crimea.^[14]

Not only critics of Russian aggression made use of this historical comparison. Since the annexation,

Russian state media has begun to adjust its image of the occupation of Czechoslovakia. On May 2015, Russian state television channel Rossiya 1 aired a documentary entitled “The Warsaw Pact – Declassified Pages.” The film-makers claimed to have access to previously unreleased Soviet archival material, that allegedly “casts a new light on the Prague Spring.”^[15] In reality, the documentary simply adopted the former counter-revolutionary narrative, well-known since the 1970s: the invasion was “a pre-emptive move” to protect Czechoslovakia against a NATO-backed coup, “supposedly being planned under the cover of a peaceful civilian uprising with the romantic name of the Prague Spring.”^[16] This newly revived rhetoric of “pro-Western agents” and a “fascist threat” appears again in 2013 and 2014, directed against the pro-European Maidan movement in Ukraine. Similar to the immediate post-1968 period, Moscow thus portrayed itself as a protector, fighting against alleged “fascists” collaborating with Western military organizations.

As a part of the Czech commemorations of 1968 in 2018, the “Ukrainian moment” was clearly visible, especially in statements by members of the Czech Communist Party. Vojtěch Filip, the leader of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia [gave an interview to The Guardian](#), in which he insisted that Russia had played little part in the invasion:

One hundred per cent [the history of 1968] is being falsified. Nobody will write that the whole idea is being based on the position against Russia. [...] The politburo of the Soviet Union at that time had only one pure Russian, and he voted against [the invasion]. [The Soviet leader Leonid] Brezhnev was from Ukraine. The major force of the invading armies were [sic] Ukrainian.^[17]

Filip added that it had been the leaders of the Soviet satellite states, such as East Germany, Poland and Hungary, who saw the Prague Spring as a threat to their own power. He also insisted that the current Czech Communist successor party should not be held responsible for past decisions.^[18] Commentator Petr Honzejk called this a clear example of a successful Russian information campaign, since the public debate has focused on Filip’s absurd statement, thereby almost overshadowing the significant questions of what the August 1968 events mean to present-day Czechs and what approach Prague should take towards the big power in the East, which is not Ukraine.^[19]

Conclusion

The 2018 political debates surrounding the anniversary of the Prague Spring reveal both the gradual weakening of the pillars of post-communist politics – namely a robust anti-communism, and a pro-Western foreign policy – and the substantial new cleavages in Czech politics. Today, nearly 30 years after the collapse of communism in Central Europe, we are witness to not entirely obvious, but still significant, shifts in the official commemorations of the Prague Spring. While the wider framework of 1968 has not changed and still rests on the moral condemnation of the Warsaw Pact invasion, new elements in the narrative about the invasion have appeared in response to the annexation of Crimea, especially the relativisation of the decisive Soviet role in the events.

Finally, public political statements reveal how little actually remains of the original Czechoslovak political project. The political program that was central to the Prague Spring – the idea of a socialist democracy – has never been considered as a significant part of a national democratic tradition. The noted decline in the anti-communist narrative (including its dismissal of the ideas of democratic socialism) could possibly open up a space for this to change, allowing for a more nuanced public debate – one that would

take the political ideas of that time seriously, consider the events of 1968 in their full complexity, and reflect on their legacies for today. Yet even fifty years after the crushing of the Prague Spring this opportunity has largely been missed. Instead, the narrative void serves those political forces that benefit from better relations with Putin's Russia and promote anti-liberal democratic politics.

Footnotes

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4. Adéla Gjuríčová, Michal Kopeček, Petr Roubal, Jiří Suk, and Tomáš Zahradníček, *Rozdělení minulostí: vytváření politických identit v České republice po roce 1989*, Praha: Knihovna Václava Havla, 2011, pp. 9-16.
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6. Václav Havel and Jan Zelenka, eds. *Projevy a jiné texty 1999-2006; Prosim stručně; Odcházení*. Praha: Torst, 2007, pp. 111-114.
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9. Jakub Janda, [How Czech president Milos Zeman became Vladimir Putin's man](#), The Observer (26 January 2018), retrieved 29 August 2018.
10. [According to idnes.cz](#), the Czech security community considers Parlamentní listy the most influential pro-Russian conspiratorial website in the Czech Republic, as it systematically supports Russian disinformation campaigns.
11. See Jiří Pehe's commentary in Alan Crosby, [Czech leaders silent or spurned as country marks 50th anniversary of crushing or Prague spring](#), Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty (21 August 2018), retrieved 29 August 2018.
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16. Ibid.
17. Robert Tait, [Czech communists confront bitter legacy of Prague Spring](#), The Guardian (12 August 2018), retrieved 28 August 2018.
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19. Petr Honzejek, [Výmluvné ticho prezidenta Zemana](#), Hospodářské noviny (20 August 2018), retrieved 21 September 2018.



“Moscow 1968–2018: 20 years of occupation, 30 years of lies” - protesters at the Russian Embassy, August 2018

Author: Petr Zewlakk Vrabec



“An occupier is not a brother” - protesters at the Russian Embassy in Prague, August 2018

Author: Petr Zewlakk Vrabec



Jiří Pospíšil, leader of TOP09 party, at the protests in front of the Russian Embassy in Prague, August 2018
Author: Petr Zewlakk Vrabec



Protesters against Prime Minister Babiš and his government for relying on communists, August 2018
Author: Štěpán Lohr



A caricature of President Miloš Zeman in the colours of the Russian flag
Author: Štěpán Lohr