

History: The Cold War
Lesson 22 of 30

Worksheet:

What were the causes and consequences of the Prague Spring?



What was the Prague Spring?

The **'Prague Spring'** refers to a period in the **spring of 1968** when a **series of reforms were introduced in Czechoslovakia**, a satellite state of the USSR. These reforms were introduced by a man named **Alexander Dubček** who became the First Secretary of the Czech Communist Party on 5th January 1968. **Dubček** was a **keen and committed Communist** and was **trusted by the Soviets**. However, **Dubček** believed very strongly that **Communism should not make people's lives miserable**. He therefore introduced a series of reforms from April 1968 that were **aimed at improving the lives of Czech people** or, as it came to be known, introducing **'socialism with a human face'**. In other words, his reforms were designed to **remove the worst bits of Communism** and instead ensure that **socialism** in its truest form was practiced in Czechoslovakia.



Over the next few weeks and months, **Dubček introduced reforms** such as a **reduction in censorship** and the **allowance of criticism of government action**. He also **removed travel and trade restrictions with the West**, such as trade with West Germany. Most significantly, he began to **discuss the possibility of democratic elections** and introduced a **10-year programme for political change** that included plans for a **multi-party state** and the creation of a new form of democratic **socialism**. This was important because it would **give Czechoslovakians more say how their country was run**. The reforms were incredibly **popular with the Czech people** and the Prague Spring was seen by many as the **dawn of a bright new age in Communist Czechoslovakia**.



What were the causes of the Prague Spring?

Between 1948 and 1967, Czechoslovakia had been a **'model' satellite state of the USSR**. Unlike states like Hungary or East Germany, the **standard of living was quite high** and the **Czechoslovakian government were largely obedient to the USSR**. However, in the 1960s, **resentment and resistance to Soviet influence and control over Czechoslovakia increased** for three main reasons.



Lack of political freedom

In effect, **Czechoslovakia was ruled by the USSR**. The **secret police were used to maintain control** and **harsh censorship** meant that there was **little freedom of speech**. Also, in 1957, the **hard-line communist Antonin Novotny** became leader of Czechoslovakia. He was **very unpopular with Czechoslovakians**, largely because he **refused to introduce reform**. Despite **Khrushchev's** calls for de-Stalinisation to be introduced throughout Eastern Europe, **Novotny** was reluctant to break with Stalin's forms of ruling and **he was very slow to release political prisoners who had been jailed under Stalin**. This was particularly upsetting for the Czech people because, between 1949 and 1954, Stalin had forced the Czech government to carry out **purges** in Czechoslovakia. Victims had ranged from democratic and communist politicians, to military leaders, Catholics, Jews and people with connections to the West. Consequently, **Czechoslovakians wanted a change in their country's leadership** but also wanted more of a say about who their leader should be.



Economic problems

The **Czech economy was also run for the benefit of the USSR**. For example, the USSR forced Czechoslovakian industry to produce materials, like steel, for the Soviet economy, yet the Czechoslovakia economy needed these raw materials in their own country. The USSR also wanted all Czechoslovakian production to be geared towards its economic needs – this meant that **Czechoslovakian factories were not allowed to produce consumer goods** which were desperately needed in Czechoslovakia. By the **1960s**, the **Czechoslovakian economy was in decline**, the **national income fell** and **living standards were low**. This made **Novotny very unpopular** and caused **many Czechoslovakians to demand reform**.



The rise of protests

Protests against the low standard of living and lack of freedom in Czechoslovakia grew. **In 1966, student demonstrations showed just how unpopular the communist government was.** These demonstrations led to a number of **reformers**, such as **Alexander Dubček, taking action.** In **October 1967**, these **reformers challenged Novotny's leadership** at a meeting of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. In **December 1967**, **Dubček** went as far as to invite the leader of the USSR, **Leonid Brezhnev** to Prague, to **show him just how unpopular Novotny was.** **Dubček** stressed to **Brezhnev** how important it was to the future of Communism in Czechoslovakia that **Novotny** be replaced by a more popular leader. **Brezhnev was shocked at the extent of opposition towards Novotny and decided not to support him.** Instead, the following month, the **Soviets supported the replacement of Novotny by Dubček** into the top position of the communist party and the subsequent positioning of **General Ludvik Svoboda** as **President of Czechoslovakia.** **Svoboda was supportive of Dubček's plans to reform Czechoslovakia** and, at least initially, **Brezhnev** trusted that the two popular leaders would resolve the opposition to communism which existed in Czechoslovakia by improving the Czech people's quality of life. Consequently, **by March 1968, the stage was set for the Prague Spring to begin** and in April, **Dubček** began to introduce his reforms.



What was the Soviet response to the Prague Spring?

Initially, the **USSR tolerated the Prague Spring**. However, as time wore on, and more and more reforms were introduced, **Brezhnev** started to get worried. **Czechoslovakia was one of the most important and influential countries in the Warsaw Pact** – if it decided to leave the Warsaw Pact, it could **prove a very useful ally for the West** and could split Eastern Europe. Also, **many other Warsaw Pact countries, like Poland and East Germany, were worried** that if reforms in Czechoslovakia continued, their people might demand similar changes. For instance, in June 1968, encouraged by **Dubček's** proposed political reforms, the **Social Democrats** began to **form a separate party to challenge the Communist party**. This concerned **Brezhnev** and the Warsaw Pact members because it would mean an end to the **one-party state** – a key feature of Soviet Communism that allowed tight control by authoritarian governments in the satellite states and within the USSR. Consequently, **Brezhnev** challenged **Dubček** about his reforms in July 1968. **Dubček reassured Brezhnev that he had no plans to leave the Warsaw Pact** (he had certainly learnt from what happened to Nagy in Hungary a decade previously) and that **he would not allow the new Social Democratic Party to continue its campaign**. This seemed to reassure Brezhnev and, for a while, tensions eased.



However, **Brezhnev** continued to get **increasingly worried about Czechoslovakia** as the summer drew on. Despite warnings, **Dubček continued to introduce reforms**. On 9th August, **Dubček also welcomed the leaders of Yugoslavia and Romania to Czechoslovakia** for talks. This was the final straw for **Brezhnev**, who believed that the **three countries were planning on leaving the Warsaw Pact**. Scared that the USSR's tight grip on Eastern Europe was starting to crumble, **Brezhnev ordered 500,000 Warsaw Pact troops, from Bulgaria, East Germany, Hungary and Poland, to invade Czechoslovakia**. Despite resistance from Czechoslovakians that included the changing of street signs to confuse invaders and anti-Soviet broadcasts, there was **no armed resistance by the Czechoslovakian army** and fewer than 100 people were killed. The Prague Spring was halted firmly in its tracks. **Dubček was arrested and sent to Moscow** where he was told in no uncertain terms that **he must accept an end to Czech moves towards democracy**. By 1969, **Gustav Husak** had replaced **Dubček** as leader of Czechoslovakia and, as a hard-line Communist who was very loyal to the USSR, he **undid many of the reforms that Dubček had introduced**. It was clear that Czechoslovakia was firmly back under the tight control of the USSR.



What were the consequences of the Prague Spring?

The Prague Spring, and particularly the Soviet invasion that had occurred in response to it, not only had important consequences for Czechoslovakia, but also for the USSR's control of Eastern Europe, other communist countries and the relationship between the USA and the USSR.

Czechoslovakia

Although **demonstrations in Czechoslovakia continued** until April 1969, they had **little impact on changing the situation in Czechoslovakia**. In April 1969, **Jan Palach** went as far as to **set himself on fire** in one of Prague's main squares but this still did not prevent reformist members of the Czech Communist Party from being purged and the new leader, **Gustav Husak**, from **arresting thousands of Czechs who resisted Communist rule**. It was clear that Czechoslovakia had **reverted to strict Communist rule**, where resistance and reform would not be tolerated and which would remain in place for the next 20 years.



USSR

In response to events in Czechoslovakia, and to justify his response, **Brezhnev** introduced the **Brezhnev Doctrine** in the **autumn of 1968**. This was a **Soviet foreign policy that emphasised that members of the Warsaw Pact were under the close control of the USSR**. It **redefined Communism as a one-party system** and declared that **all member countries had to remain part of the Warsaw Pact**. Also, it declared that the **USSR had the right to intervene militarily in any country whose actions were interfering with the stability of the Eastern bloc** and that all Warsaw Pact countries were obliged to intervene if any member country was threatened either by capitalist control or another threat to Communism, such as a country leaving the Soviet sphere of influence. This **strengthened the USSR's hold on Eastern Europe** because it gave a clear message to all Warsaw Pact countries about the **loyalty expected of them** and also demonstrated that **any attempts to overthrow or relax Communist control would be suppressed**.



Communist countries

However, **some Communist countries refused to be intimidated** by the **Brezhnev Doctrine** and instead **reacted angrily to the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia** and **gradually began to move away from Moscow's influence**. For example, the President of Romania refused to send troops to join the forces invading Czechoslovakia while Albania left the Warsaw Pact for good in 1968. The **Yugoslav and Romanian governments condemned the USSR** for its invasion and **began to move away from Moscow**. Instead, they began to **form alliances with China** who was increasingly becoming a communist rival with the USSR. This showed that **rifts and divisions were beginning to form between Communist world powers** and that many communist powers were uniting against the USSR in case it did the same to them as it had done to Czechoslovakia.



Relations between the USSR and the USA

The **Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia was condemned by the USA** and the West, and **relations between the USA and the USSR temporarily worsened**. However, as the invasion took place a long way from the USA and was within the Soviet sphere of influence, **it did not really affect relations between the superpowers for long** and did little to hinder the improvements that had been made since the Cuban Missile Crisis. The **USA failed to send any military support to Czechoslovakia** or to react against the **Brezhnev Doctrine**. This was largely because the USA was in the middle of a presidential election and also the Vietnam War. **Lyndon B. Johnson**, the President of the USA, and **Brezhnev** also had an **unspoken agreement that the USA would not intervene in Czechoslovakia as long as the USSR did not intervene in Vietnam**. Consequently, while **Brezhnev's** actions in Czechoslovakia went largely unchallenged and the Czechs' freedoms were once again removed, little deterioration was seen in the improved relations between the USA and USSR showing how, at times, **the maintenance of peace and cooperation between the superpowers came at a very high price**.



Glossary

Brezhnev Doctrine – Soviet foreign policy which called for military intervention by Warsaw Pact forces if another member of the Warsaw Pact tried to leave the Soviet sphere of influence or reform communism in their country too much.

Multi-party state – a country where multiple parties compete in elections to make decisions and run the country

One-party state – a country where one party has the right to form a government and run the country



Glossary

Purge – forced, and often violent, removal of opposing groups from a state or political party

Socialism – a theory of government in which the whole community rather than individuals owns all of its property and resources

‘Socialism with a human face’- Idea and political programme promoted by **Alexander Dubček** during the Prague Spring which argued that communism’s worst features should be removed and that better standards of living and increased freedoms should be introduced for the Czech people, in line with the communist ideal.



Comprehension Questions

1. What was the 'Prague Spring'?
2. Why was Antonin Novotny unpopular in Czechoslovakia?
3. Why did Warsaw Pact troops invade Czechoslovakia in August 1968?
4. What was the Brezhnev Doctrine and how was it used to justify the invasion of Czechoslovakia?
5. Challenge question: What were the consequences of the Prague Spring for Soviet control of Eastern Europe?

