

“By winter we will know all.”:

The Prague Spring and Conflict over Control

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Last year, one of us produced a documentary on Mikhail Gorbachev, General Secretary of the USSR from 1985 to 1991, who rejected antiquated dogma and strived to modernize the USSR by implementing liberal economic and political reforms, known collectively as *glasnost* and *perestroika*. When asked about the difference between his reforms and those of Alexander Dubček during the Prague Spring, his spokesman answered: “20 years.” The 2018 NHD contest is an opportunity for us to explore Gorbachev’s inspiration and learn about the brief but globally impactful democratic experiment Czechoslovakia underwent in 1968—as well as the infamous military operation that crushed it. We quickly settled on the Prague Spring for our topic, as we are fascinated with Soviet history and the political turmoil of the Cold War.

We relied on a wealth of primary sources, mainly documents from the Central Committee of the KSČ, the Warsaw Pact Treaty, and the infamous “Brezhnev Doctrine” published in *Pravda*. We consulted online archives such as Seventeen Moments in Soviet History to acquire general information, and used the Wilson Center Digital Archive on the Cold War for other key documents. Robin Alison Remington’s *Winter in Prague: Documents on Czechoslovak Communism in Crisis* was essential as it contained the full text of Dubček’s Action Program, the Czechoslovak reply to the Warsaw Letter, the November resolution of the KSČ, and many more

primary sources that we quoted throughout the website. Mark Kurlansky's *1968: The Year that Rocked the World* was also an excellent source of historical context that provided a global perspective on the movement. The BBC archives contained a series of images of the invasion by Josef Koudelka, a Czech photographer who boldly smuggled striking evidence of the event out of the country. We obtained footage from AP Archive and recordings from Radio Prague. We interviewed Michael Fuchs, a Czechoslovak citizen in 1968, Harvard professor Mark Kramer, and Dr. Igor Lukes, professor at Boston University and former citizen of Czechoslovakia, for key analysis and accounts of the event. We created a website to display the abundance of primary sources, allowing the viewer to interact with textual, auditory, and visual evidence.

The Prague Spring of 1968 was a conflict between Dubček's 'socialism with a human face' and the unyielding political monopoly of the Soviet Union, embodied by Stalinism. Free expression and democracy meant Czechoslovakia would interact with Western states beyond the Iron Curtain, and the USSR would lose ideological and economic control over its prized member state. General Secretary Brezhnev refused to compromise over the reforms, suppressing healthy political conflict and opting for military action. He told Dubček: reverse the liberal compromises, or face repercussions. Dubček chose the latter option, and Czechoslovakia was reigned in for two decades. Gorbachev's policy of compromise, mirroring Dubček's, then allowed Czechoslovakia to slip from the grasp of the embattled USSR in 1989, contributing to the union's 1991 dissolution.