

## SILENT AND ACTIVE BATTLEFIELDS

### THE SOVIET INTERVENTION IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA IN 1968 AND THE POSITION OF HUNGARY

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Despite all the studies dedicated to the Prague Spring and the armed intervention in Czechoslovakia until now, some issues are still open to interpretations. János Kádár's position on the solution for settling the Czechoslovak problem is one such debatable question. The present paper challenges Rudolph Pihoya's hypothesis that it was Kádár who persuaded Moscow to begin decisive actions against the CSSR. All evidence supports the conclusion that Kádár opposed for a long time the military force alternative and tried to mediate an understanding between Dubček and Moscow. One of the main reasons for his stance was that a peaceful settlement of the Czechoslovak problem would have strengthened the strategy of reforms in Hungary as well.

**Keywords:** Czechoslovakia; Hungary; USSR; Prague Spring; Communist regime; János Kádár; Alexander Dubček; reforms

During the spring and summer of 1968 an attempt to reform the Communist regime was undertaken in Czechoslovakia. It was aimed at rationalizing its economic content, to make it more acceptable. But a very severe reaction of Moscow followed. This issue became a subject of broad discussions in historiography.<sup>1</sup> The memoirs of witnesses and persons who took part in those

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<sup>1</sup> Among the most significant studies of historians and political scientists: E. J. Czerwinski, *The Soviet Invasion of Czechoslovakia. Its Effects on Eastern Europe* (New York: Praeger, 1973); G. Golan, *Reform Rule in Czechoslovakia: The Dubcek Era 1968–1969* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973); D. Simes, "The Soviet Invasion of Czechoslovakia and the Limits of Kremlinology," *Studies in Comparative Communism. An International Interdisciplinary Journal* 8 (Spring–Summer 1975); H. Gordon Skilling, *Czechoslovakia's Interrupted Revolution* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1976); V. Kusin, *From Dubcek to Charter 77. Czechoslovakia 1968–1978* (Edinburgh: Q. Press, 1978); F. H. Eidlin, *The Logic of "Normalization."* *The Soviet Intervention in Czechoslovakia of 21 August 1968 and the Czechoslovak Response* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980); Karen Dawisha, *The Kremlin and the Prague Spring* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Jiří Valenta, *Soviet Intervention in Czechoslovakia, 1968: Anatomy of a Decision*, rev. ed. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1991).

Among a great variety of memoirs we should mark out a book written by Zdeněk Mlýnař, who was a secretary of the Central Committee of the CPC in 1968: Zdeněk Mlýnař, *Nachtfrost. Erfahrungen auf dem Weg vom realen zum menschlichen Sozialismus* (Köln: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1978). See an autobiography of the ex-leader of the party A. Dubček, *Hope Dies Last. The Autobiography of Alexander Dubček*, ed. J. Hochman (New York: Kodansha International, 1993).

events are still published.<sup>2</sup> Starting with the 1990s, documents which had been top-secret before became available for researchers (including records of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the CPSU). It gave an opportunity to study the process and the circumstances in which the decision about the military intervention in Czechoslovakia had been made. The discussions held during several months at the Kremlin, the role of the Soviet Embassy and the participation of the Soviet emissaries in Czechoslovakia were observed as well.<sup>3</sup> The reports of the Czechoslovak Embassy in Washington contributed to the understanding of the American foreign policy during the Czechoslovak crisis.<sup>4</sup> The materials left from the meetings of the leaders of the countries of the Soviet Bloc, interparty and diplomatic correspondence and other resources were used to reconstruct the positions of the Communist elites in different countries.<sup>5</sup> But not all the questions about this period (the “hot” spring and summer of 1968) can be considered resolved completely. There are some sharply different points of view on some questions among researchers. Sometimes we may encounter some new versions in publications, but they are not always strongly supported by facts and sources.

The position of the Hungarian Communist Party (whose head was János Kádár) is one of these disputable questions. There is one common point of view prevailing in our historiography. According to this opinion Kádár resisted for a

<sup>2</sup> These works have special interest: the memoirs of the leader of the Ukrainian Communist Party P. Shelest, *Da ne sudimi budete* (Moscow, 1995); the memoirs of General A. Mayorov, *Vtorzhenie. Czechoslovakia 1968. Svidetel'stva komandarma* (Moscow, 1998). Among the memoirs of the Soviet diplomats see: N. P. Semenov, *Trevozhnaya Praga* (Moscow, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> For studies based on documents unavailable before the 1990s see R. G. Pihoya, “Czechoslovakia, 1968. Vzglyad iz Moskvi. Po documentam CC KPSS,” *Novaya i noveyshaya istoria*, 1994, no. 6, 1995, no. 1; M. V. Latish, “*Prajskaya vesna*” 1968 i reakzia Kremlya (Moscow, 1998); Kieran Williams, *The Prague Spring and Its Aftermath. Czechoslovak Politics 1968–1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Mark Kramer, “The Czechoslovak Crisis and the Brezhnev Doctrine,” in *1968. The World Transformed*, ed. Carole Fink, Philipp Gassert and Detlef Junker (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Rudiger Wenzke, *Die NVA und der Prager Fruhling 1968: Die Rolle Ulbrichts und der DDR-Streitkräfte bei der Niederschlagung der tschechoslowakischen Reformbewegung* (Berlin: Links, 1995); *Ceskoslovensko roku 1968*, 2 vols. (Prague: Parta, 1993); K. Kaplan, *Ceskoslovensko v letech 1967–1969* (Prague: Státní pedagogické nakladatelství, 1993); Antonin Benčík, *Operace “Dunaj”: vojáci a prazske jaro 1968: Studie a dokumenty* (Prague: Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR, 1994); Jindrich Madry, *Sovetska okupace Ceskoslovenska, jeho normalizace v letech 1969–1970, a role ozbrojenych sil* (Prague: Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR, 1994); Mark Kramer, *Crisis in Czechoslovakia: The Prague Spring and the Soviet Invasion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> I. I. Orlick, “Zapad i Praga v 1968 g. Po documentam ministerstva inostrannih del Czechskoy Respubliki,” *Novaya i noveyshaya istoria*, 1996, no. 3.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, the studies on the foreign policy of Ceaușescu’s regime in Romania during the crisis of 1968: Mihai Retegan, *In the Shadow of the Prague Spring: Romanian Foreign Policy and the Crisis in Czechoslovakia, 1968* (Iași: Center for Romanian Studies, 2000).

long time against military plans, appealing to political solutions to regulate the conflict.<sup>6</sup> His position differed from the ones of other leaders of the countries taking part in the intervention. But the ex-chief of the Russian archive service, historian Rudolph Pihoya, affirms that it was Kádár who persuaded Moscow to begin decisive actions, and that he was in a hurry to conduct incomplete military mobilization in Hungary. The last had been done even before the principal decision about the military intervention was made. Pihoya's construction lacks references to the sources used. But this absence is compensated by his logical argumentation. According to it, Kádár was interested more than anyone else in the reiteration of the scenario enacted previously in 1956 in Hungary. The reason behind this was that the installation of a "revolutionary" government in Czechoslovakia (the way it had happened in Hungary in 1956) would have shown that it was impossible to resist Moscow and that Kádár himself had done everything right in 1956. This way, he could have been relieved of a part of responsibility because of his illegitimate coming to power and severe policy during the first years of his government. This version changes the traditional view of a correlation of forces between opponents and proponents of the military decision on the Czechoslovak question.<sup>7</sup> But is this version confirmed by the real situation in the Hungary-Czechoslovakia and USSR-Hungary relations during those months? To make the position of the Hungarian leader more clear we should make our source-base broader than Pihoya's was (he used recordings of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the CPSU and documents which had been prepared for members of the Politburo).

At the beginning of January 1968 Antonin Novotný was dismissed from the post of first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (CPC). This was decided with Leonid Brezhnev during his visit to Prague on 8–9 December 1967.<sup>8</sup> The appointment of Alexander Dubček (the Slovak leader) to this post was calmly received in Moscow. He had studied in the USSR and was known for this. It was considered that he would be able to conciliate different flaws in the CPC. There were a lot of Czech "hard" Communists against Czech "liberals" in the Party and these two in opposition to the Slovak party elite, which did not like imposed settlements from Prague as well

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<sup>6</sup> The most significant work on this theme: Tibor Huszár, *1968. Praga – Budapest – Moszkva. Kádár János és a csehszlovákiai intervenció* (Budapest: Szabad Tér, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, the interview with R. Pihoya: "Ozenki proshlogo doljni sootnosit'sya s realiyami proshlogo," *Segodnya*, 23 August 1996.

<sup>8</sup> "This is, comrades, your internal business" – mentioned Brezhnev, quoted *apud* Latish, *Prajskaya vesna*, 18. Though the chief secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU did not tend to dramatize the situation in Czechoslovakia he warned his companions that a split in the party leadership was possible. This split would get the process out of control, leading to a "repetition" of "the Hungarian events of 1956" – Archive of the President of the Russian Federation, Fund 3.

(even including such anti-reformers as Vasil Bilak). Brezhnev's leaders knew about "revisionist" manifestations (for example some speeches on the Writers' Congress in July 1967) in Czechoslovakia from the Embassy's reports. But they were fully confident that it was possible to neutralize their impact on the Soviet intellectuals. However, some less confident leaders reacted more reservedly. They suspected Dubček of being too tractable. East Germany's leader Walter Ulbricht showed obvious displeasure. But the Hungarian elite perceived these changes in Czechoslovakia with enthusiasm. On 1 January 1968 a new economic policy was implemented in Hungary. The commercial independence of industry was broadened, some room for private companies in trade and service was given, and gratuities began to be used more often. The appearance of a young progressive Dubček meant that forces in the CPC which could support reforms in Hungary within a Socialist system were becoming stronger and stronger. The Embassy of Hungary in Czechoslovakia reported that Budapest approved these changes officially at the head of the country.<sup>9</sup>

The attempts to carry out economic reforms were undertaken in these two countries almost simultaneously. When Novotný was in power, contacts between the Hungarian and the Czech economists-reformers got under way. One of them, Ota Šic, underlined their common aim – more effective economic policies –, but also pointed out one important difference: Kádár supported the reform from the very beginning, but the Czechs had to overcome resistance up to the beginning of 1968.<sup>10</sup>

Kádár confirmed his image of a reformer in the Czechs' eyes when he met with Dubček on a hunting trip in Slovakia (on 20–21 January). This meeting took place in a friendly climate; it was initiated by Dubček and preceded his visit to Moscow, the first in his new capacity. The very experienced Hungarian leader congratulated Dubček on his election, but warned that there would be more worries and troubles than gladness.<sup>11</sup> On his return to Budapest Kádár convoked the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (the HSWP). It was decided to try to influence "sister" parties, forming their positive attitude towards Dubček.<sup>12</sup> But the new leader of the CPC began to surprise "Big Brother" from the first weeks of his coming to power: at the beginning of 1968 rotation in party and state apparatus accelerated – old members of staff left from Stalin's epoch was replaced by new party activists completely unknown to Moscow. Hence Moscow lost its reliable allies, who had been guaranteeing the Soviet positions for a long time.

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<sup>9</sup> Orlick, "Zapad i Praga," 4.

<sup>10</sup> O. Šic, *Vesennee vozrozhdenie – illuzii I deystvitel'nost'* (Moscow, 1991), 210–211.

<sup>11</sup> See Kádár's memoirs in the form of interview: "János Kádár o 'Prajskoy vesne'," *Kommunist*, 1990, no. 7:97. See also János Kádár, *Végakarát* (Budapest: Hírlapkiadó Vállalat, 1989).

<sup>12</sup> István Vida, "A magyar pártvezetés és a csehszlovák válság. 1968. január–október. Hronológia," *História* (Budapest), 1993, nos. 9–10:36.

The next meeting of these two leaders took place on 4 February in the town of Komarno, situated on the border with Slovakia. Dubček told Kádár that he had been friendly received in Moscow, but also complained about the distrust shown to him by the leaders of Poland, East Germany and Bulgaria.<sup>13</sup> Dubček confided his plans of reforms to Kádár, and told him about the Program of actions which was being prepared at the time.

On 21 February Kádár went to Prague for the celebrations of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the coming to power of Communism (in February 1948 Communists became firmly established at the head of Czechoslovakia). By this time party “liberals” had already occupied their position in the state mechanism, including the ideological system and mass media. The new elite was interested in weakening the old staff, and this is why it initiated the publication in press of some materials which revealed the role of the ex-leader and his companions in the repressions of the early 1950s. The Hungarians knew about these tensions in Czechoslovakia, but preferred not to spoil the celebrations by open critics. Kádár met not only with Dubček, but with Novotný as well (who had remained president of the CSSR). Novotný had the presentiment of his leaving political life and showed displeasure because of his status at the time. But he was very reserved when speaking of Dubček. He only said that in this situation he preferred to see Dubček at the head of the party rather than one of the more radical reformers.<sup>14</sup>

In March Kádár began to worry. A lot later he recalled that by that time “strange” (in his opinion) things had been happening in Czechoslovakia – the government had yielded to demands of the opposition; naturally this had been threatening the Hungarian leader. Kádár compromised with, for example, intellectuals, but never lost control over the situation in his country.<sup>15</sup> The press in Czechoslovakia began to get out of the party’s hand. Centers of non-party opposition appeared – different clubs of intellectuals. There was a feeling that the system was breaking, the CPC surrendered its positions. Leaders of other neighbor countries worried much more than Kádár.<sup>16</sup> Ulbricht firmly tried to find ideological sedition in Prague and wished to build an “iron curtain” also along the south border of East Germany. The “evil example” gave no rest to Władysław Gomułka; he was in a difficult position – student unrest in Poland reached critical point in March.

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<sup>13</sup> See notes by economist and reformer R. Nyers, then a member of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the HSWP. Kádár told him about that meeting: Rezső Nyers, “Feljegyzések 1968-ből, a csehszlovákiai intervencióról,” *História*, 1993, nos. 9–10:38.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> “János Kádár o ‘Prajskoy vesne’,” 97

<sup>16</sup> Strong unrest was mentioned in the diary of P. Shelest, *Da ne sudimi budete*, 294–297. See also the English version in Mark Kramer, “Ukraine and the Soviet-Czechoslovak Crisis of 1968,” pt. 1, “New Evidence from the Diary of Petro Shelest,” *Cold War International History Bulletin*, no. 10 (March 1998): 234–247.

On 23 March, the leaders of Bulgaria, Hungary, East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia and the USSR held a conference in Dresden. They intended to discuss the situation in Czechoslovakia. Before this meeting, on 21 March, in the Politburo of the Central Committee of the CPSU the Prime Minister of USSR Alexis Kosygin underlined that the situation in Czechoslovakia could get out of control and repeat “the Hungarian scenario” of 1956. Brezhnev remarked that extreme measures could not be excluded for the sake of Socialism in this country.<sup>17</sup> Ulbricht and Gomułka reprimanded harshly the Czechoslovak delegation. They claimed that “revolution was freely walking along the streets of Prague.”<sup>18</sup> Dubček was attacked personally. Later Kádár recalled that Gomułka had stated that there had been no problems with Czechoslovakia before January; all those disasters had begun then.<sup>19</sup> Brezhnev was less disposed to dramatize the situation<sup>20</sup> but he pointed at the threat to the regime in Czechoslovakia. “We should do something,” he summarized.<sup>21</sup>

On 19 March the position of Hungary on the future meeting in Dresden was being formed in the Politburo of the Central Committee of the HSWP. Its core was: reforms in Czechoslovakia were its internal business, and the HSWP would continue to support Dubček and would try to influence leaders of the CPC at the same time.<sup>22</sup> The Hungarian government wanted the Czechoslovak government to become more careful, take into account his friends’ concerns about the negative phenomena. Kádár’s restraint greatly contrasted with the rather hysteric exclamations of Gomułka. This contrast appears even sharper if we remember the roles of these two politicians in 1956. Twelve years later their roles changed. “In the course of time terror in Hungary weakened ... adored in October (1956), the “nation leader” Gomułka gradually made his country more and more politically and economically dependent on the USSR, increased repressions, misery and lies,

<sup>17</sup> About the sessions of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the CPSU on 15 and 21 March see Latish, *Prajskaya vesna*, 57–62. According to some witnesses the plan to occupy Czechoslovakia (if the main decision was reached) was already being prepared in May. General A. Mayorov commanding the army stationed in Western Ukraine said that he recognized this plan on 12 April. – Mayorov, *Vtorzhenie*, 19.

<sup>18</sup> The shorthand record of a meeting in Dresden was made by the Germans. About the meeting, see Huszár, 1968. *Praga – Budapest – Moszkva*, 50–59. See also Shelest, *Da ne sudimi budete*, 298–301.

<sup>19</sup> “János Kádár o ‘Prajskoy vesne’,” 98.

<sup>20</sup> Because of this P. Shelest was unsatisfied. In his opinion Brezhnev let Dubček and Černík lull him by their promises. They told him that they controlled the situation and that there was no danger of “slipping” to the right. – Shelest, *Da ne sudimi budete*, 301. We should agree with M. Latish that it was peculiar that someone else became an initiator of a force scenario. Brezhnev was not the most active opponent of Dubček, and his long speeches at meetings were not the most critical. – Latish, *Prajskaya vesna*, 218.

<sup>21</sup> “János Kádár o ‘Prajskoy vesne’,” 98.

<sup>22</sup> Nyers, “Feljegyzések 1968-ből,” 39.

but the (justly) hated Kádár tried to find a way out, began successful economic experiments, gently liberalized the regime, and was willing to compromise with the people and its intellectuals,”<sup>23</sup> wrote the Polish publicist Wiktor Woroszyński. Well-known leftist political scientist Isaac Deutscher said that these two out-of-the-ordinary leaders wore the label “Made in Stalinism.” They were both ready to block reforms if they saw anything threatening Socialism, in their own understanding. But the spring of 1968 was a credibility gap for Gomułka, whereas Kádár reached the peak of his popularity in Hungary and hoped that the success of his reform would fortify his positions. The attack against initiatives of his colleagues (less experienced in political maneuvering) was able to influence negatively his own reform, hence his prestige in the public opinion inside and outside the country as well. The public did not forget the bloody drama of 1956, but attested Kádár’s capability to evolve. All these reasons determined differences in Kádár’s and Gomułka’s actions.

In Dresden Kádár expressed his consent for the plans of reforms of the CPC but he also drew attention to the “negative phenomena,” which resembled the prologue of the Hungarian “counter-revolution” of 1956: counter-revolutionaries “begin with innocent student demonstrations, with raising demands aimed at gaining cheap popularity and misleading people.”<sup>24</sup> The logic of events can make enemies out of persons who, like Imre Nagy, had not been counter-revolutionaries, noticed the leader of the HSWP. But he expressed hope that the situation would not evolve in the same way. He thought that the CPC could cope with all difficulties by itself. When the communiqué was being prepared he asked his colleagues not to add any theses which could be interpreted as interference in the domestic affairs of the CPC.

In Dresden the delegation of the CPC politely and, in Kádár’s opinion, “rightly rejected all affirmations and accusations which they could not agree to.”<sup>25</sup> They did not manage to overcome the serious differences in views on the processes in Czechoslovakia. The hosts were particularly unsatisfied with this meeting. The mastermind of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany, Kurt Hager, spoke in public on 26 March on the occasion of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Karl Marx. He started to criticize openly not only single “revisionist” manifestations in Czechoslovakia, but the politics of the CPC as a whole. He was the first in the Soviet Bloc to do this. The Department of the Central Committee of the CPSU responsible for relations with Communist and Labor parties of Socialist countries noticed in its reference on 26 March: after the meeting in Dresden the comrades from GDR constantly spoke

<sup>23</sup> V. Woroszyński, “Vengerski dnevnik,” *Iskusstvo kino* (Moscow), 1992, no. 4:145–146.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted by Bilak’s records. See M. V. Latish, “Doktrina Brezhneva I ‘prazhskaya vesna’ 1968,” in *Sovetskaya vneshnyaya politika v godi “holodnoy voyni” (1945–1985). Novoe prochenie* (Moscow, 1995), 309.

<sup>25</sup> “János Kádár o ‘Prajskoy vesne’,” 98–99.

in support of the idea that “other parties should collectively assist the leaders of the CSSR, as far as using extreme measures if it is necessary.”<sup>26</sup>

In Hungary the reaction to the results of the meeting differed. Even figures who did not want too profound reforms in the country disagreed. One of them, the member of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the HSWP Zoltán Komocsin appeared on national television on 26 March and showed his consent for the decisions of the CPC which had been aimed at abolishing the remains of the “cult of personality,” creating “Socialist democracy” and solving economic problems. But all negative phenomena, for example the lack of unity among party leaders, or the lack of firmness in ideological and cultural politics, demanded “fight on two fronts”: against “dogmatic” and “revisionist” forces at the same time.<sup>27</sup>

The Prime Minister Jenő Fock, a supporter of reforms, was in Paris on 30 March and declared that the leaders of Hungary unambiguously shared the aims of the party, the government and the people of Czechoslovakia.<sup>28</sup> Such declarations of the Hungarian leaders produced a great reaction especially because of the fact that many Western analysts had already begun to draw an analogy between the events in Czechoslovakia and the beginning of the Hungarian crisis of 1956. One of them was Zbigniew Brzezinski. On 13 March he spoke about this possibility at the University of Columbia.<sup>29</sup> Given this resemblance, the Western analysts predicted that the reaction of the USSR would be the same.

The reasons for such fears were strong. The Kremlin leaders also remembered the Hungarian events of 1956. The stability of Kádár’s regime did not raise any doubts. That’s why the Kremlin leaders considered the Soviet politics in Hungary to have been productive. In the spring–summer of 1968 the Czechoslovak question was discussed in the Politburo of the Central Committee of the CPSU. Hungary was recalled time and again.<sup>30</sup> Diplomat and historian V. Musatov was in the staff of the Central Committee at that time. He recollected that the dossier with information about the Hungarian crisis (reports of the TASS – the Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union) had been required for study by party leaders.<sup>31</sup> The opinion of the head of the KGB Yuri Andropov was highly-reputed (then he was only a candidate among the members of this chief party structure). In 1956 he was the Soviet ambassador to Hungary and during all his life he could not get rid of “the Hungarian syndrome.” In the spring and summer of 1968 Andropov had been

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<sup>26</sup> The Russian State Archive of Modern History (RSAMH), F. 5, Op. 60, D. 313, L. 6.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 12–13.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> The Embassy of Czechoslovakia in Washington reported to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs about the election of Z. Brzezinski. – Orlick, “Zapad i Praga,” 5.

<sup>30</sup> For an analysis of the records of the sessions see Latish, *Prajskaya vesna*.

<sup>31</sup> V. Musatov, “Brezhnev vstretil utro vvoda voysk na komandnom punkte,” *Novoe vremya*, 1992, no. 16.



comparing day by day the development of events in Czechoslovakia and in Hungary in 1956, recalled people in his entourage.<sup>32</sup>

The Czechoslovak reformers kept in mind the Hungarian experience but their conclusions were absolutely different. In the spring of 1956 supporters of liberalization in Czechoslovakia feared the crowds might raise against Communists. This fear helped Novotný to calm down the critics of his regime. The opponents of the reforms constantly reminded people of “the Hungarian brutalities” of 1956.<sup>33</sup> Ota Šic maintained relations with the Hungarian economists. The majority of the Czech intellectuals took an active interest in the life of their neighbors, but could not get much information about reforming initiatives in Hungary from the Czech press. The Hungarian experience lived in their consciousness in the form of events which had taken place 12 years before and was interpreted as a warning. The recollections about the dramatic excesses of the “Budapest autumn” and Moscow’s severe reaction convinced the leaders of the “Prague spring” to be very careful in taking each new step and reminded them that it was important for the reforms to preserve faithfulness to the allied engagements.

Reformers from the CPC learned the lessons of the Hungarian revolution, but tried to avoid any parallels with those events in their public speeches. Opponents of the reforms in their turn willingly conjured up the past in the minds of their citizens, recalled the scenes of violence and carnage upon Communists and officials of the Security Office. At the same time they exaggerated the scale of violence in Hungary in 1956. Such analogies had been made by them in their talks with the Soviet diplomats since the autumn of 1956.<sup>34</sup>

The events in neighboring Czechoslovakia and disorders in France in May influenced Hungary and revived recollections about 1956. In 1968 “we again felt the breath of revolution,” “we were those who had been boys in 1956, we wanted to produce the laws of clean bloodless revolution,” recalls director István Pal.<sup>35</sup> Optimistic expectations dominated the Hungarian public opinion. They were connected with the launched economic reforms. Opposition to the regime had no fertile ground.<sup>36</sup> The staff of the Central Committee of the CPSU noticed this fact:

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<sup>32</sup> *Politicheskie krizisi i konflikti 50–60 godov v Vostochnoy Evrope* (Moscow, 1993), 171. “Methods and means which are used in Czechoslovakia resemble the Hungarian ones. There is a sort of order in this chaos. In Hungary everything began the same,” said Andropov in the session of the Politburo on 15 March. – Pihoya, “Czechoslovakia, 1968,” 1994, no. 6:9.

<sup>33</sup> Zd. Mlynař, *Moroz udaril iz Kremlya* (Moscow, 1992), 47.

<sup>34</sup> RSAMH, F. 5, Op. 60, D. 300, L. 29.

<sup>35</sup> *Vlast’ i intelligencia (Iz opita poslevoennogo razvitiya stran Vostochnoy Evropi)*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Moscow, 1993), 83.

<sup>36</sup> About the domestic situation and the public mood in Hungary in the late 1960s, and about the relations between power and society see William Shawcross, *Crime and Compromise. János Kádár and the Politics of Hungary since the Revolution* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1974); Rudolf L. Tókes, *Hungary’s Negotiated Revolution. Economic Reform, Social Change and Political Succession, 1957–1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

“The events in Czechoslovakia were taken up calmly by different groups of population in Hungary; they did not raise any political movement. The questions of the day in Czechoslovakia are considered to have been solved after 1956 or are thought to be solved nowadays ... The approval of the process in Czechoslovakia does not lead to a criticism of the HSWP,” stated the document of 26 April prepared for the high-ranking party leaders.<sup>37</sup>

The “Prague Spring” gave Kádár and his staff the opportunity to make their own political ideas more clear, and answer the question raised because of the reforms in the two countries: at what point did the patience of the Communist regime run out? When the mastermind of the regime, G. Aczél, spoke at a meeting in April, he said that the HSWP did not wish to establish a monopoly of its ideology, but wanted to provide dominating positions for the HSWP in the ideological sphere. Open arguments were preferred in the relations with opponents but administrative suppression was not excluded when there was any danger for the regime’s foundations. “If anyone using as a cover discussions tried to create a political organization or undertake other actions which broke our regulations we would answer in conformity with our laws ... We need and must use administrative measures against conscious hostile aspirations.”<sup>38</sup> It was declared that pluralism of opinions did not mean political pluralism. When any threat to the regime’s stability appeared, Kádár and his company made it very clear that their patience was wearing thin. Kádár thought that it was the right time to explain the main ideas of his ideological platform to the Hungarian intellectuals because the tendencies in Czechoslovakia could give birth to unfounded illusions in Hungary.

The leaders of the HSWP preferred to show the firmness of their position just when their northern neighbors did not have this stability (as they considered). The press felt the weakening of the censure and not only criticized Novotný’s company, but uncovered general vices of the system. Kádár thought that the flexibility of “the Czechoslovak friends” was greater than necessary but he did not want yet to correct his positive attitude towards them. The Hungarian press spoke well of the events in Czechoslovakia. On 18 April Kádár openly supported the manifest of Dubček and his entourage – the Program of actions of the CPC (which had been published recently). The Czech and the Slovak reformers were pleased very much. In May, at the meeting of the leaders of the Soviet Bloc, Brezhnev identified it as “an embodiment of a petty-bourgeois element,” and “a program opening up the possibility of restoration of capitalism in Czechoslovakia.”<sup>39</sup> R. Nyers witnessed that on 16 April Brezhnev, talking on the telephone with Kádár,

<sup>37</sup> RSAMH, F. 5, Op. 60, D. 313, L. 13–14.

<sup>38</sup> *Népszabadság*, 27 April 1968.

<sup>39</sup> Pihoya, “Czechoslovakia, 1968,” 1994, no. 6:14. The program contained the idea of improving the mechanisms which were aimed at revealing various social interests. It did not encroach on the Communist Party’s hegemony, but made a first step to pluralism in society.

had characterized Dubček as an honest, but weak person, and had pointed at the threat of a counter-revolution in Czechoslovakia.<sup>40</sup> Hence Kádár aligned his position with Moscow's.

Kádár insisted on not discussing the Czechoslovak problems without representatives from the CPC, but these were not invited to the meeting of the leaders of the five countries (Bulgaria, Hungary, East Germany, Poland, and the USSR) on 8 May in Moscow. In comparison to Dresden, Kádár's position differed increasingly, and it caused open objections of other participants in the meeting.<sup>41</sup> Kádár warned of the thoughtlessness of a military intervention in Czechoslovakia, but he did not object to Moscow's plan to conduct large military maneuvers of the armies of the Warsaw Bloc on the territory of Czechoslovakia.

These maneuvers demonstrated not only military force, but became a form of political blackmail.<sup>42</sup> They took place in the first part of the summer. The Hungarian generals reported on the tense atmosphere at the command posts, and on the Soviet generals' open distrust of their Czechoslovak colleagues. This distrust was directed at the Hungarians as well, who were considered to be unreliable allies, and did not know the whole plan of the maneuvers.<sup>43</sup> There were rumors among the Soviet militaries that the HSWP supported the CPC in interparty discussions. It became impossible to hide these rumors.<sup>44</sup>

These serious difficulties in the relations with Moscow concerned the leaders of the HSWP. Kádár understood that the geopolitical location of Hungary did not allow him to conduct any politics outside the Bloc (unlike Tito in Yugoslavia), and he also remembered that the adherents who had helped him to come to power in 1956 could just as well remove him if they wanted. Drawing on his vast experience he came to the conclusion that Moscow's confidence and absence of any tension were the main conditions for obtaining more freedom in domestic affairs. He always felt all the hesitations in the Kremlin's mood. Unlike Ceaușescu, the leader of Romania, he tried not to raise any dispute in the relations with Moscow. Kádár's position on all main issues of international affairs never seriously differed from the Soviet one. This strategy was not only Kádár's personal achievement (his pragmatic nature), but it was also rooted in a national tradition. During World War

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<sup>40</sup> Nyers, "Feljegyzések 1968-ből," 40. Brezhnev knew about the warm relations between Kádár and Dubček; in March–April he telephoned Kádár many times and expressed his fear because of the events in Czechoslovakia. He wagered that Kádár would explain the Soviet position to Dubček and influence him. Kádár reported about his talks with Dubček in the sessions of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the HSWP. – Huszár, 1968. *Praga – Budapest – Moszkva*.

<sup>41</sup> Huszár, 1968. *Praga – Budapest – Moszkva*, 84–91; Latish, *Prajskaya vesna*, 108–110; Shelest, *Da ne sudimi budete*, 307–309.

<sup>42</sup> More about the maneuvers: Mayorov, *Vtorzhenie*.

<sup>43</sup> I. Pataky, "A Magyar Néphadsereg és az intervenció," *História*, 1993, nos. 9–10:54–57.

<sup>44</sup> M. Kolesnikov, "Dnevnik ofizera," *Ogonyok*, 1993, no. 34.

Two, some governments (during Horthy's regime), being suppressed by Nazi Germany, tried to retain room for maneuver and did not create difficulties. Kádár also knew that he took the lead over Moscow with his wish to rationalize the economic system of the Communist regime. But the fate of his reforms depended on exterior circumstances. They were often unfavorable – in 1968 Moscow began to reduce the program of moderate reforms (by Kosygin). These difficulties in the relations with the USSR posed a painful problem for Kádár: how to align his position with the one of the USSR and not abandon his plans of reforms, because their success was connected with the ones in Czechoslovakia. But reforms in Czechoslovakia disturbed Moscow increasingly. To solve this problem the Hungarian leader had to make an inevitable compromise.

On 24 May the Politburo of the Central Committee of the HSWP reached the conclusion that different points of view (of the USSR and the Hungarian People's Republic) on the situation in Czechoslovakia were the result of a more general difference in attitudes towards important questions, such as economic reforms in the Soviet Bloc, the development of economic ties with the West, the relations within the Soviet Bloc. In Dresden and in Moscow Hungary was shown distrust, that is why the HSWP decided to make its position more transparent. The project of a letter to the leaders of the CPSU was being prepared.<sup>45</sup> Later this letter was considered to be inopportune. Great expectations were connected with the following bilateral meeting. The Hungarian authorities decided to avoid an open argument with Moscow. By this time the position of Moscow had slightly changed. The Prime Minister Kosygin unofficially visited Czechoslovakia in May. He had to admit Dubček's popularity. On the other side he saw the weakness of the persons that Moscow had considered its most reliable friends. The military maneuvers were an important form of political pressure, but a long-term occupation was one of the variants taken into consideration if the situation worsened. Moscow's wait-and-see attitude gave Kádár the opportunity to avoid a discussion with the Soviet leaders, which he did not want to have. On 13–15 June, a party and government delegation from the CSSR, headed by Dubček, visited Hungary. Its goal was to prolong the treaty of collaboration between Czechoslovakia and Hungary. There was no tension in their relations yet. But Czechoslovakia began to approach neutral Yugoslavia and dissident Romania. Hungary interpreted this fact as a reconstruction of the interwar Little Entente, which had been directed against Hungary. The position of the HSWP deviated farther from the general line established by Moscow. Czechoslovakia and Romania had begun to diverge from it even earlier (for different reasons). The fact that Budapest prolonged its treaty with Prague was considered a sort of a political demonstration, by East Germany, for instance.

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<sup>45</sup> Magdolna Baráth, "Magyarország és a Szovjetunió," in *Hatvanas évek Magyarországon*, ed. János M. Rainer (Budapest: 1956-os Intézet, 2004), 58–59.

However, on 13 June, on the same day that Dubček was honored in Budapest, in Prague journalist O. Machatka published an article in the weekly *Literární listý* entitled “And this is an anniversary too.” The article referred to the ten years that had elapsed since Imre Nagy had been sentenced to death. “Thanks to his critics of the totalitarian dictatorship and humanistic understanding of the Socialist idea, I. Nagy became a great representative of democratic and national Socialism,” he wrote. Nagy considered that the main solution of small countries for preserving their independence was to remain outside any military bloc. Machatka agreed with this thesis. His article created quite a stir in Budapest; most likely Kádár was informed about it after the Czechoslovak delegation left the country. The main newspaper of the HSWP, *Népszabadság*, had refrained from criticism before, but then it attacked the situation in the CSSR. Its critics targeted Machatka’s article and the “2,000 words.” This was the name of the programmatic document produced by the opposition consisting of non-party intellectuals. It was published on 27 June and was reprinted by a newspaper in the town of Győr. For Kádár the articles appearing in the Czechoslovak press meant that the non-party opposition had already undertaken political initiative and the power had lost it, a situation which threatened to occur in Hungary as well. The evolution towards the Hungarian scenario of 1956 continued. The foundations of the Communist regime and the relations with the allies were threatened. The leaders of the HSWP began to correct their policy.

On 27 June – 4 July Kádár headed the Hungarian delegation during its visit to the USSR. According to documents, he wished to align his position with the Kremlin. On 3 July, during the session of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the CPSU, Brezhnev spoke about his meeting with the Hungarians. It had been recorded that Kádár’s view on the Czechoslovak problem had been quite firm. He agreed that “2,000 words” was “a counter-revolutionary program.” In his opinion the situation did not exclude a military alternative for solving the crisis: “If it is necessary, we will do it without any doubt.”<sup>46</sup> On 3 July a meeting in honor of the Russian-Hungarian friendship took place. Brezhnev reminded in his speech of the defeat of the Hungarian counter-revolution and said that the USSR would take care of the fate of Socialism in other countries henceforth.

Kádár tried to persuade Moscow of his adherence to the “international” duty. This was very important for him, since his own plans of reforms had given rise to much suspicion in Moscow, because of the events in Czechoslovakia. Later these tactics were used again in 1972 when the fate of the Hungarian economic reform was at stake. Moscow insisted and it was abolished.<sup>47</sup> In Moscow Kádár adopted a

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<sup>46</sup> Pihoya, “Czechoslovakia, 1968,” 1994, no. 6:20. This document found by Pihoya gave him reasons to maintain that Kádár firmly supported the scenario of the intervention in Czechoslovakia.

<sup>47</sup> Tókes, *Hungary’s Negotiated Revolution*.

hard line and expressed his resentment against Dubček, who was not able to control the press. But his later actions let us think that this line was a political maneuver.

On 6 July Kádár sent a letter to the Presidium of the Central Committee of the CPC. In this letter he named Machatka's article about Imre Nagy an attempt to separate the two parties.<sup>48</sup> Simultaneously the next conference (in Warsaw) was being prepared, in which were going to take part the leaders of Communist parties of some countries of the Soviet Bloc. On this occasion Czechoslovakia was invited too. But Dubček and his adherents anticipated much more severe criticism than in Dresden. They wished to avoid this meeting in Warsaw and made a proposal to organize a series of bilateral meetings, as an alternative.<sup>49</sup> On 9–10 July Prague and Moscow sent each other telegrams. In this argument Kádár tried to become a mediator. He thought that it was better to hold a Soviet-Czechoslovak meeting before the main conference. On such meetings both sides could have made their positions clear.<sup>50</sup> The leaders in Moscow did not cherish yet hope to influence Dubček and accused "the right wing" of the party of delaying a congress of the CPC (that was planned to take place at the beginning of autumn). The conference could strengthen the positions of the "revisionists." To deliver a strict ultimatum to the Czechs was considered to be urgent. Kádár was unable to reconcile the positions of Moscow and Prague – the leaders of the CPC refused to take part in the conference.

On 1 July a military attaché of the Soviet Embassy sent a letter to Lajos Czinege, the Hungarian Minister of Defense. The message said that new military maneuvers were being prepared to the north of Hungary and that the Hungarian army had to take part in them.<sup>51</sup> The policy of armed intervention in Prague continued.

On 12 July the Politburo of the Central Committee of the HSWP decided that in Warsaw the Hungarian delegation would advocate a political solution to the problem. On the other hand they wanted to continue to persuade the CPC to make a compromise.<sup>52</sup> On 13 July Kádár and Fock had a meeting with Dubček and Černík, prime minister of Czechoslovakia. It took place on the border of the two countries. This meeting was the first, and it was characterized by a tense atmosphere. Kádár considered the Czech delegation's refusal to take part in the conference in Warsaw to be a great mistake. This mistake abolished all his attempts as a mediator and placed him in an embarrassing situation in the eyes of the allies.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Nyers, "Feljegyzések 1968-ből," 44.

<sup>49</sup> See reports of S. V. Chervonenko, the Soviet ambassador in Czechoslovakia, to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the USSR about his meetings with Dubček; also the Soviet-Czechoslovak correspondence in the middle of July, *Diplomaticeskii vestnik*, 1992, nos. 2–3:54–71.

<sup>50</sup> Nyers, "Feljegyzések 1968-ből," 45. For more about Kádár's mediatory actions see Huszár, *1968. Praga – Budapest – Moszkva*.

<sup>51</sup> Nyers, "Feljegyzések 1968-ből," 45.

<sup>52</sup> Huszár, *1968. Praga – Budapest – Moszkva*, 158–159.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 159–164.

On 14–15 July the partners of the USSR insisted again on a firm position on the matter.<sup>54</sup> The Hungarian delegation was not satisfied with its results. “Some of them considered us to be strike-breakers because we had met with Dubček earlier,” recollected Kádár twenty years later.<sup>55</sup> He offered to try to find a solution that the majority of the Czechoslovak population could agree with, but without success. Gomulka was more moderate than in Dresden, but Ulbricht was firm in his radicalism: “If you, comrade Kádár, think that you serve Socialism with your objections you are mistaken ... After the American and the West-European imperialists gain the upper hand in Czechoslovakia they will turn on you, comrade Kádár. You cannot understand it or do not wish to.”<sup>56</sup> Kádár rejected these accusations and said that he controlled the situation in his country. As to the “Yugoslavization” of Czechoslovakia, this was, of course, undesirable for the Socialist Bloc, but had not given yet any reasons for military intervention. Paradoxically, Kádár tried to prove his case by using the Soviet policy in Hungary in 1956 as an example. Then the leaders of the CPSU understood their “historical responsibility” and made the only right choice in those conditions. The Hungarian experience could have been interpreted in different ways. For example on 15 July Dubček had a meeting with an ambassador of the USSR, S. V. Chervonenko. Dubček reminded him that the CPSU extended a warm welcome to Kádár (Hungary) and Gomulka (Poland) in the autumn of 1956, but they had not been regarded as “Moscow’s persons” earlier. At that time however, when different forces in Czechoslovakia had been set in motion, it would have been right if the CPSU and other parties supported the leaders of Czechoslovakia, considered Dubček.<sup>57</sup>

It is possible to admit that the Soviet leaders considered Kádár’s opinion rather important. They remembered that he had a first-hand experience of solving the Hungarian crisis of 1956.<sup>58</sup> But they insisted on their right to a final decision. Still, we can suppose that Kádár’s opinion weighed rather heavily, given that the final decision about the military intervention was delayed. The conference in Warsaw sent a letter to the Central Committee of the CPC. It gave an ultimatum: to take immediate measures against the “enemy’s attack.” The next day the letter was published. On 18 July Dubček convinced the allies that Czechoslovakia would not break its Bloc engagements.

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<sup>54</sup> The most detailed record of the discussion was made by P. Shelest, a member of the Soviet delegation (Shelest, *Da ne sudimi budete*, 331–344). Already in the evening of 15 July, J. Kádár reported to the Politburo of the Central Committee of the HSWP about the course and results of the meeting. – Huszár, 1968. *Praga – Budapest – Moskva*, 164–171.

<sup>55</sup> “János Kádár o ‘Prajskoy vesne’,” 101.

<sup>56</sup> Ulbricht’s words are quoted by the records made by Gomulka’s interpreter. See Charles Gati, “Moskva i János Kádár posle 1956 goda,” *Most* (Budapest), 1992, nos. 1–2:80.

<sup>57</sup> *Diplomaticheskii vestnik*, 1992, nos. 2–3:69.

<sup>58</sup> Pihoya, “Ozenki proshlogo.” In March, Brezhnev asked Kádár to give Dubček enough information about the events in Hungary in 1956.

After the conference in Warsaw two courses of action were being developed in Moscow: speech and force. Both of them supposed collaboration with the so-called “healthy forces” – a part of the Czechoslovak party elite which was ready to submit to the Kremlin and contribute to reestablishing order. The search for replacements for Dubček and his staff began. The contacts with “the leftist wing” of the CPC became closer. Hungary played the role of mediator again. On the night of 20/21 July, at Lake Balaton, P. Shelest held a long meeting with Bilak; they discussed the possibility of organizing a common statement of the “leftist forces,” which were ready to ask the USSR for help.<sup>59</sup> Earlier Bilak (the leader of Ukraine) had met with Kádár in Budapest. Kádár rated the situation in Czechoslovakia as very serious and convinced the Soviet emissary that Hungary would submit to the common discipline of the Soviet Bloc. Brezhnev thanked him for this on 23 July by telephone: “We will never forget it!” – witnessed R. Nyers.<sup>60</sup>

Simultaneously a new meeting of the representatives of the CPSU and the CPC was being prepared in Čierna nad Tisou, on the Czechoslovak-Hungarian border. It took place on 29 July – 1 August. Humiliating conditions were laid down before the leadership of the CPC: to remove unreliable party members, to close intellectual clubs, to regain control over the press, etc. It was the last chance for Dubček and his entourage.

On 3 August the leaders of six countries participated in a conference in Bratislava. Not only the Hungarians, but also the Poles had doubts about solving the problem through military force. This delayed the intervention. For a short time, the tension seemed to have weakened, and the Czechoslovak people breathed freely, recollected O. Černík.<sup>61</sup> In Bratislava “it seemed that everything was going to become normal ... But that joy was felt too early,”<sup>62</sup> remembered Kádár.

Having returned to Budapest, on 5 August the leader of the HSWP said in his appeal to the Hungarians that difficulties could be overcome by finding common things that united the “brother parties.” But everyone still recognized the complexity of the situation. On 7 August in the plenum of the Central Committee of the HSWP Kádár stated that the internal problems of Czechoslovakia remained

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<sup>59</sup> The content of the meeting is known from Shelest’s memoirs (Shelest, *Da ne sudimi budete*, 347–351).

<sup>60</sup> Nyers, “Feljegyzések 1968-ból,” 48. On 26–27 July the documents necessary in case the force solution was chosen were discussed and passed in the session of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the CPSU (including the Declaration of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the CPC and Revolutionary Government). The Soviet press reporting about Czechoslovakia made clear parallels with the events in Hungary in October 1956. Brezhnev understood that if he lost Czechoslovakia he would lose his post but continued to be naturally shilly-shally. “Have we exhausted all resources of political impact, have we done everything before extreme measures?” he asked in the session of the Politburo on 19 July. – Pihoya, “Czechoslovakia, 1968,” 1995, no. 1:35.

<sup>61</sup> Interview, *Izvestia*, 5 December 1989.

<sup>62</sup> “János Kádár o ‘Prajskoy vesne’,” 101.



unsettled. It was necessary to do everything possible to find a political solution, but “if we fail, other measures are not excluded.”<sup>63</sup> The society aimed to reform the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia. Some elements of pluralism and more rational economics were its goals. By this the movement had gained its own dynamics. Despite the effort of the Czechoslovak reformers not to repeat “the Hungarian scenario” of 1956, from the outside it looked like the control over reforms was lost. Moscow considered it as a threat to the allied relations. Moreover, Dubček and his staff had gained the support of the society and did not want to sacrifice their popularity by restricting free public activity for Moscow’s sake. The Czechoslovak leaders did not have a clear understanding that Moscow’s patience was wearing thin, despite the fact that the more experienced Kádár permanently reminded Dubček of this imminent danger. Thus the domestic situation in Czechoslovakia did not change. It meant that the possibility of a military intervention increased day by day in August.

From 12 to 15 August Kádár was in Yalta (Crimea), where he held meetings with Brezhnev, Podgorny and Kosygin. Kádár remembered that the Soviet leaders had wanted to discuss the situation in Czechoslovakia with the Hungarians separately because of his special relations with the Czechoslovak leaders. They hoped that the Hungarians would be able to influence Dubček.<sup>64</sup> They came to an agreement that Kádár would come to see Dubček again on 17 August. But this meeting “came to no effect.”<sup>65</sup> The last in the series of the mediatory missions of Hungary failed again.

Their heated discussions in Komarno lasted 13 hours. Kádár tried to warn Dubček of the possible consequences if they did not agree with Moscow’s severe conditions.<sup>66</sup> R. Nyers witnesses that Kádár recognized it was time for a common military action only on 18 August.<sup>67</sup> However Dubček had the impression that Kádár wanted to tell him something, but did not do it.<sup>68</sup> In 1989, in an interview for the Hungarian television, the ex-leader of the CPC said that to the last moment he had hoped that Kádár and possibly Gomułka would boycott this military operation. He thought that if Hungary had refused to participate in it, the USSR would have been cornered and this might have prevented the intervention. Kádár was not such an idealist. In Komarno he warned Dubček that the Czechoslovak stance had crossed all limits and everything was out of his hand.

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<sup>63</sup> About the course of the session see Huszár, *Praga – Budapest – Moszkva*, 230–241.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 251–258: on 20 August Kádár reported to the Politburo what he had talked about.

<sup>65</sup> “János Kádár o ‘Prajskoy vesne’,” 101.

<sup>66</sup> We know the content of the meeting from Kádár’s report delivered at the conference of the leaders of the communist parties of the Soviet Bloc in Moscow on 18 August (the Polish record is published in Latish, *Prajskaya vesna*, 222–225) and then to the Politburo of the Central Committee of the HSWP on 20 August.

<sup>67</sup> Nyers, “Feljegyzések 1968-ból,” 49.

<sup>68</sup> Later Dubček disclosed this to Špaček. – Latish, *Prajskaya vesna*, 212.

Having left Komarno, Kádár went to Budapest and then to Moscow. On 18 August a new meeting of the leaders of five countries took place in Moscow. The Soviet leaders told the allies about the final decision that had been reached by the Politburo the day before. There were two reasons for speeding up the process: the future conference of the CPC and the coming military maneuvers of NATO in Bavaria. They feared that if the armies of the Western countries were so close, this would encourage the Czechoslovak “right” wing to break off the Warsaw treaty.<sup>69</sup> Kádár spoke about his meeting with Dubček and presented it as useless: the leaders of the CPC did not wish to enforce the measures discussed in Bratislava, thus, in his opinion, all political resources were exhausted. Kádár said that Dubček, this “enfant terrible,” suffered from nervous exhaustion and sometimes could not speak clearly. Kádár recollected later that when on 18 August he had mentioned the military solution as the last measure nobody had reacted to his words.<sup>70</sup>

As the American historian Ch. Gati said, Kádár had to follow the path between Scylla and Charybdis.<sup>71</sup> In the late 1980s Kádár explained that they conceded to the military intervention only when everyone understood that there was no way out. The Czechoslovak comrades did not take any steps to avoid the catastrophe and “in Moscow it was obvious – we were lonely with our young reforms. The majority of the Socialist countries were against us.”<sup>72</sup>

V. Musatov witnessed<sup>73</sup> that Brezhnev had promised Kádár to render economic assistance in exchange for the Hungarian armies’ participation in this operation. Kádár did not deny this fact but refused to name it as the major factor: “There would be no sense to think that we bargained at the expense of our neighbors, we, who did so much to save the situation.”<sup>74</sup> In our opinion, the fear of economic sanctions by the USSR played its role. Kádár understood that if he

<sup>69</sup> On 11 August Brezhnev spoke about his fears with General Mayorov. He commanded an army which played an important role in the operation. – Mayorov, *Vtorzhenie*. We can add that in August 1968 the idea of neutrality was becoming widespread among the Czechoslovak chief officers and in the Military-Political Academy. – J. Havranek, “Megújhodott szocializmus?,” *História*, 1994, nos. 5–6:63.

<sup>70</sup> “János Kádár o ‘Prajskoy vesne’,” 101–102.

<sup>71</sup> Gati, “Moskva i János Kádár,” 79. During the discussions on 18 August Kádár’s pragmatism and experience of 1956 made him underline the necessity to organize better actions of the “left-wing.” He thought it was more important than military operations.

<sup>72</sup> “János Kádár o ‘Prajskoy vesne’,” 102. Even on 18 August the Soviet generals were not sure that Hungary would support military action. General Mayorov witnessed that in the morning of 18 August Marshal A. A. Grechko said on the consultation of commanders that Kádár had “some troubles” with his Politburo and he would explain his final position only in the morning of 19 August. – Mayorov, *Vtorzhenie*.

<sup>73</sup> V. Musatov, *Predvestniki buri. Politicheskie krizisi v Vostochnoy Evrope (1956–1981)* (Moscow, 1996), 130.

<sup>74</sup> “János Kádár o ‘Prajskoy vesne’,” 102.

participated in the intervention, this would confirm him as a firm Communist politician and a supporter of reforms at the same time.

The Soviet leaders did not forget the Hungarian experience but decided to change tactics. In 1956 they preferred to conduct operations by themselves, but in 1968 they did everything to make this conflict international, to present it as a common problem of the whole Soviet Bloc, and to share responsibility with the allies. Nevertheless, when the concrete plan of actions was prepared, the scenario previously enacted in Hungary became its foundation. The plan was to bring to power forces which would break with an old government and would ask "brother-parties for help." As in 1956 they wanted to name this new government a Revolutionary Workers' and Peasants' Government. When the first plan failed, it was decided to rely on the Slovak politician G. Husak, and the association with the events in Hungary in 1956 occurred once more. Like Kádár and Gomulka, Husak was a victim of an old regime in the eyes of the public opinion. Moscow considered him to be a reliable person who was able to accomplish the program prepared in Moscow.

Having returned to Budapest, Kádár gathered the Politburo of the Central Committee of the HSWP. According to records<sup>75</sup> he was quite critical towards the Soviet leaders. The situation in Czechoslovakia reminded him not of Hungary, but of Poland in 1956. Then the peaceful scenario worked. Hence in his point of view the Hungarian variant was not appropriate for this crisis. But he told them that if they refused to take part, this would have created tension and made the situation more difficult and unpredictable. If Hungary had been neutral, it would have lost all possibilities to influence the events. Thus it was a cruel necessity. In the late 1980s Kádár recollected that all leaders of the HSWP regretted that all efforts to reconcile Moscow with Prague had failed.<sup>76</sup> But the choice was made and they had to follow the actions of the five countries.<sup>77</sup> Later they had to become stricter in

<sup>75</sup> Magyar Országos Levéltár (Budapest, Hungary), M-288. f. 5/467 ö.e.

<sup>76</sup> "János Kádár o 'Prajskoy vesne'," 102. The Hungarian leader did not mention that one of the active members of the HSWP, András Tömpe, had sent a letter to the Central Committee. He didn't agree with Hungary's participation in the Czechoslovak action. In 1971 Tömpe committed suicide. After three years it was proved that this concession made to Moscow in 1968 led to a reduction in reforms. Some other members of the Central Committee of the HSWP spoke against the intervention in Czechoslovakia too. They incurred a penalty for breaking party discipline.

<sup>77</sup> P. Zsidai, "A magyar néphadsereg 1968-as csehszlovákiai inváziójának propagandatevékenysége," *Kritika* (Budapest), 2005, nos. 7-8. As a whole, the Hungarian press was more reserved than the press of any other country taking part in the military action. After 21 August, Kádár spoke in public on the Czechoslovak problem very rarely. Possibly he wanted the public opinion to understand it had been a forced step. On the other hand, the fact that Hungary participated in the intervention was used in the Kremlin's propaganda and as an argument in the discussions with the "Euro-communists."

In November 1968 A. Kirilenko received E. Berlinguer from the Italian Communist Party (ICP). Kirilenko tried to prove to Berlinguer that it had been necessary to make use of power. He mentioned that Kádár knew very well what revolutions were like and that was the reason he had joined other

attitude towards the Hungarian intellectuals who dared to condemn publicly the military intervention.<sup>78</sup>

The international situation and the position of the Western countries favored Moscow's choice. The policy of the USA and their NATO allies in Eastern Europe was aimed at maintaining stability in the relations with the USSR. Some of the American politicians said it was necessary to counteract the Kremlin harder and more actively. But another point of view dominated: the enforcement of poly-centered tendencies in the Soviet Bloc would break the balance in Europe and increase tension, which was undesirable for the West. During the "Prague spring" the American government maintained its distance from the Czechoslovak reformers, and did not wish to give the Soviets any cause for accusation that they were interfering in the internal affairs of Czechoslovakia. The State Department used its influence on the press and limited the expression of solidarity. Using diplomatic means it appealed to the Prague reformers, convinced them to be cautious, and clearly gave them to understand that it would not support the demand of a neutral status for Czechoslovakia. Such a demand could worsen the outcome of the events. The USA and their allies demonstrated loyalty to the treaties concluded in Yalta and Potsdam. After 21 August in spite of their propaganda they did not intend to organize any serious actions against the USSR, but showed they had no interests in the internal affairs of the countries of the Soviet Bloc. As in 1956 they admitted that the USSR had the right to impose settlements in its sphere. They did not want to hinder the negotiations for arms reduction that were scheduled in autumn because of Czechoslovakia.

Some of the well-known Western observers had enough reasons to say that the action of 21 August had a defensive character. Subjectively it was aimed at restoring the positions of the USSR in one of the most important areas, and keeping the parity gained before. It was not directed at obtaining new geopolitical territory. General Ch. de Gaulle openly talked about it. In autumn 1956 he scandalized the French public opinion when he justified the Soviet aggression in Hungary, asserting that it was for the sake of maintaining the balance in Europe.<sup>79</sup> Some

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leaders and advocated "the suppression of evil tendencies in Czechoslovakia." Of course he did not say that Kádár had hesitated longer than anyone else and had never accepted this action mentally. The main reason was, according to Kirilenko, that Kádár wished that events such as those happening in Hungary never happen again. – "Mi spasli socialism v etoy strane. Iz zapisi peregovorov s delegaziey IKP 13–14 noyabrya 1968," *Istochnik*, 1994, no. 5.

<sup>78</sup> The world-known philosopher Gy. Lukács let Kádár know of his negative attitude towards the action but refrained from criticism in the Western press. Though some of his followers (on 21 August they were at the philosophic congress in Yugoslavia) signed a collective letter of protest. They incurred party penalty and administrative restriction for it.

<sup>79</sup> For the French leftists' (who disagreed with the Soviet policy in Hungary in 1956) reaction to de Gaulle's speech, see records of their talks with representatives of the CPSU: RSAMH, F. 5, Op. 30, D. 223, L. 144.

liberals and conservatives in different countries feared that if the reforms in Czechoslovakia succeeded, leftist ideas and parties would increase their impact in the West. The idea that there would not be a big war because of Czechoslovakia played its role when the decision about the armed intervention was being made. The speech of the Minister of Foreign Affairs A. Gromyko during the session of the Politburo of 19 July was very typical: "I think that extreme measures cannot cause an aggravation. There will not be a big war. The present international climate does not hide any presents for us."<sup>80</sup> The thesis "there will be no big war" coincides with the words which Khrushchev uttered in the session of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the CPSU on 31 October 1956, assessing the events in Hungary.<sup>81</sup>

Though the military operation was conducted by the Soviet generals very well,<sup>82</sup> the political action did not succeed. Kádár also believed it was worth gambling on the "leftists" in the elite of the CPC, and he urged for the plan to be prepared more properly. But his advice did not help. Forecasts of the Soviet Embassy were very optimistic, because the Embassy had been misrepresenting the state of the public opinion and the situation in the party leadership over many months. "The healthy forces" failed to gain majority in the Presidium of the Central Committee of the CPC, and president L. Svoboda refused to acknowledge the puppet government of "Moscow's friends." The National Assembly of the CSSR and the 14<sup>th</sup> Conference of the CPC convened at the turn of August condemned the aggression (the conference was the only one conducted illegally). The representative of Czechoslovakia in the session of the Security Council of the UN also termed this action unlawful.<sup>83</sup> The plan to bring a new group to power (as had been done in Hungary) failed. They had to change tactics. Dubček, Kriegel, Smrkovsky, Černík, Špaček and Šimon were summoned to Moscow. They were among other representatives of Czechoslovakia. Negotiations began. A lot of new stricter conditions were imposed on them. "The only thing we could do in Moscow was trying to limit our losses, and maintain room for future independent actions ...

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<sup>80</sup> Latish, *Prajskaya vesna*, 179.

<sup>81</sup> E. D. Orekhova, V. T. Sereda and A. S. Stykalin, eds., *Sovetsky Soyuz i vengerski krizis 1956 goda. Dokumenti* (Moscow, 1998), 480.

<sup>82</sup> The Czechoslovak Embassy in the USA reported to Prague on September 17: "Military specialists of the USA assess the action of five countries-members of the Warsaw Treaty as an absolute military success." – Orlick, "Zapad i Praga," 17. See also James H. Polk, "Reflections on the Czechoslovakian Invasion, 1968," *Strategic Review* 5 (1977).

<sup>83</sup> "On 21 August the headquarters of the UN on the East-river resembled a troubled ant hill ... The political atmosphere was very tense. I have never seen – before or after – such sharp, rude, sometimes even offensive for some participants polemics. It proceeded mainly between an American and a Soviet representative," recalls V. Israelyan, who was a deputy of a constant representative of the USSR in the UN. – V. Israelyan, "105-e veto Sovetskogo Soyuza," *Mezhdunarodnaya zhizn'*, 1990, no. 10:125–126.

I did not lose hope that we would manage to save a core part of our reforms,”<sup>84</sup> recollected Dubček in one of his last interviews. These illusions were broken. Under the Kremlin’s pressure the leadership of the CSSR made more and more concessions, as a result it abolished the reforming course and all its supporters were removed.

On 23 August, in the common session of the Central Committee of the HSWP and the cabinet, Kádár voiced his irritation: “If it seems that the USSR protects yesterday, it will put an end to the world of the Communist movement.”<sup>85</sup> He had already known that the new government had failed. Several months later, in December 1968, Kádár told almost the same thing to his old acquaintance (from 1956) Andropov, the chief of the KGB, who went to Budapest. Then he showed candor and critical attitude<sup>86</sup> (very rare in talks with the Soviet leaders). On 24–26 August in Moscow, during the consultations of the leaders of the countries of the Soviet Bloc, Kádár differed with his wish to find a compromise settlement of the conflict.<sup>87</sup>

Kádár did not wish the reforms in Czechoslovakia to cross the limit which was mandatory for him – party control. At the same time he was concerned with the fate of economic reforms in Hungary. He hoped that if his plans were realized it would strengthen the Communist regime. He had serious grounds for thinking that punishment of the Czechoslovak reformers would have consequences on his own plans. That’s why to the last moment he wanted to resort to a political solution for the crisis. But in the end he did not dare to oppose the allies’ decision. His compelled compromise is proof of all the unfavorable conditions and objective limits which formed the background to the “Kadarist” reforms. August 1968 demonstrated the stability of the system founded in Yalta and Potsdam, and reminded the Hungarians of their limited sovereignty. They could not cross the borders of the Soviet Bloc. Their attempt to do so failed.

Hungary’s mission as a mediator in the conflict between the Prague reformers and Moscow did not succeed either (in the history of Kádár’s regime this case was special – Hungary played such an active part in foreign policy). The leaders of the USSR oppressed the initiatives of the reformers because they could have spread to other countries and threatened the Soviet hegemony in Central Europe. Ideological reasons (not to infect the Soviet society with the ideas of a more humanistic Socialism) combined with geopolitical reasons when the decision to recur to military force was reached. Moscow feared that if it was not ready to

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<sup>84</sup> *Ogonyok*, 1993, no. 34:35.

<sup>85</sup> Nyers, “Feljegyzések 1968-ból,” 50.

<sup>86</sup> *Társadalmi Szemle*, 1995, no. 1:84–94.

<sup>87</sup> The report of this meeting was published in *Novoye vremya*, 1991, nos. 8–9.

defend its sphere of influence the whole world would think that its positions were weak. "If we really lose Czechoslovakia, this loss will become a great temptation for others. If we keep it, it will strengthen us,"<sup>88</sup> Gromyko declared in the session of the Politburo of 19 July. But the Brezhnev leadership was not able to oppose anything except brutal power to the Czechoslovak experiment. This revealed its inner weakness. We can discuss how far the Czechoslovak Communist regime could have evolved moving to pluralism and democracy, but reforms were nipped in the bud. The only obvious fact is that the decision reached on 21 August damaged the prestige of the USSR and the future of the Soviet Empire as a whole.

The government of the USSR strengthened its strategic positions in a very important region by force. But the political elite of Czechoslovakia continued to pledge loyalty to its allied duties even under the conditions of democratization. This action favored the forming of a broad front consisting of different political forces. Anti-soviet ideology united them. In the autumn of 1968 the KGB in its reports to the Kremlin showed that NATO was consolidating, the contradictions between some of its members weakened (including the USA and France), the tendency towards arms reduction diminished.<sup>89</sup> Small European countries wished to see the USA as a force capable of opposing the Soviet Bloc. The relations of the USA and Yugoslavia improved as well. This Soviet policy delivered a severe blow to the leftist forces in Europe. The most influential Communist parties in the West ceased to support the Soviet policy. And a part of the public opinion that had not ruled out that the Soviet system was capable of reforming was forced to abandon this idea. August 1968 precipitated the mental evolution of many leftist intellectuals in Western and Eastern Europe. This process led to their complete refusal of Socialist ideas. This situation concerns Hungary too. "The '60s were the time of illusions for us ... It seemed that within the one-party and State Socialism system it was possible to create Socialist market economy, Socialist democracy or democratic Socialism ... The intervention in Prague in 1968 buried these illusions," Gy. Konrád recollected.<sup>90</sup> M. Vajda, a well-known philosopher and the disciple of D. Lukács, admitted in an interview that on the Hungarian intellectuals of his generation the events in Czechoslovakia had an even bigger influence than their own 1956.

Even after August 1968 Hungary hoped to save its reforms. But the political climate in Moscow changed and this fact gave no reasons to realize them completely. By 1973–1974 the Hungarian reforms were reduced not because of internal difficulties, but because of continued oppression. Thus all hopes that

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<sup>88</sup> Quoted by Latish, *Prajskaya vesna*, 179.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 346.

<sup>90</sup> *Izvestiya*, July 28, 1990. Conrad is a politician and a writer; at a certain point he was president of the International PEN-club.

Communism could take a new form as democracy were finally destroyed. J. Kádár, one of the strongest and most clear-sighted politicians of the Soviet sphere, admitted before his death: “In August 1968 we were all in a deep crisis, personal and political. I see that some cannot overcome it even now. Our movement suffers from it.”<sup>91</sup>

“We had to make up our minds then in those conditions, we did not have a choice,” Kádár said in his last interview. “The experience of Romania was not appropriate for us – they did not have to save reforms there.” The choice made by the Hungarian leader could not guarantee the fate of reforms. It seems to me that the American researcher J. Valenta is right when he says that the shoots of reforms were killed when Kádár yielded to Moscow’s pressure.<sup>92</sup> But this is the subject of another study.

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<sup>91</sup> “János Kádár o ‘Prajskoy vesne’,” 97.

<sup>92</sup> Valenta, *Soviet Intervention in Czechoslovakia*.