

'Letter from Prague' published in Le Figaro (10 September 1968)

Caption: On 10 September 1968, the French Conservative daily newspaper Le Figaro publishes a letter addressed to French readers by a resident of Prague and member of the Czechoslovak Communist Party which testifies to the fear inspired in his fellow citizens by the Soviet military intervention.

Source: Le Figaro. 10.09.1968, n° 7.474; 142e année. Paris: Le Figaro. "Lettre de Prague".

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Letter from Prague

This letter is a historical record. Written to her French friends by a woman living in Prague who was a member of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, it throws light not only on the facts with which everyone is now familiar but also on the trials and tribulations being experienced by a patriot and a genuine activist.

Although it has taken a long time to reach us, we wanted to publish extracts from this eyewitness account for our readers.

My dear friends,

On this, the fifth night of the occupation, and since I am an eternal optimist, I hope to find some way of getting this letter through to you.

I listen to the radio all day long. It is very difficult, because the stations are being jammed more and more frequently. I listen to them to find out what the world is being told about the real situation in our country. Well, they are not telling everything, and, above all, they are not giving a true picture. I BESEECH YOU TO TELL THE TRUTH AS IT IS AND AS I SHALL TRY TO DESCRIBE IT TO YOU.

Last night, 20–21 August, I was woken by the loud noise of cars and aircraft. I thought to myself, *Good heavens, there should be some limits on the democratisation process, and people should not be woken up at 2 o'clock in the morning!* I made up my mind to complain to the local citizens' committee, closed the window and went back to sleep. At 6 o'clock today, 21 August, the doorbell started ringing like crazy. I went to open it, and my friend, Captain M., rushed into the flat, weeping and shouting, *'We're being occupied!'* To tell the truth, I thought it was a joke. I ran to the window and saw tanks, Soviet tanks, coming down the street one after another with their guns ready to fire and soldiers sitting on the tanks aiming their automatic rifles at our windows. You all know me, and you know that I fought in the resistance in a young Communists' cell. On 15 March 1939, I saw Nazi tanks cross our border. So, although I am definitely quite a polite woman, without thinking I started swearing like a trooper, not giving a thought to what I was saying.

What will you tell your mother?

An hour later, fighting broke out around the radio building. You know where I live. My son was woken by the noise, and, when I told him that we had been invaded, he asked me, *'Is it the West Germans?'* I had to tell him, *'NO, IT'S OUR FRATERNAL ALLIES.'* For a whole hour, we lay on the floor of our flat because, from the very outset, the shooting was ferocious. We left for work at 9 a.m. In front of the radio building, we chatted with young Russian soldiers who, surrounded by Czechs, looked at us, startled. After we left, the fighting resumed. We went on like that for four days and five nights. The Soviets shot at people for no obvious reason and in unexpected places. Helicopters flew overhead to monitor the situation on the ground. From 10 at night until 9 in the morning, we cannot go outside. Despite the conditions, we continue to go to work. We go to work, and then we go home.

The only weapons that we have are leaflets and the slogans on the sides of buildings. To confuse the invader, there are no longer any numbers on our houses, and the streets have no names. The fact that street maps and road signs have disappeared makes it very difficult for the invading troops to deploy. Only two signs remain: Moscow — 1 800 km and Berlin — 300 km. There is outstanding unity and fraternity amongst the people. The statue of St Wencelas is draped in the Czech flag as a symbol of the resistance, and it is covered in posters in Russian saying, *'What will you tell your mother? Will you tell her that people have died here in Czechoslovakia?'* *'Soviet troops, go home!'*

There has never been such a foolhardy invasion throughout history, nor such united resistance. Under the pretext of coming to our aid, five 'fraternal' states have invaded us, and they probably do not even know why. They have not found any politicians to form a government. These foreigners have arrested our First Secretary, Alexander Dubček, our Prime Minister, Oldřich Černík, our President of the National Assembly,

Josef Smrkovský, and the Chairman of the National Front. The troops immediately took control of the Communist Party offices and the Ministries. The President of our Republic, Ludvík Svoboda, is a prisoner in the Castle.

But one day ...

Our transmitters are not illegal, as foreign radio stations are claiming. They are legal broadcasts which, because of this attack, have been forced to go underground. The Special Congress of our party is not illegal. It is our 'brothers' who have forced the legitimate authorities, the President, the Government, Parliament and the newspapers to operate underground. They have also forced the Communist Party in a sovereign and allied state to operate clandestinely. And we continue to work! Newspapers are being published, even though the newsrooms and print shops are under occupation. The radio is working. Eleven transmitters in eleven Czech and Slovak regions are broadcasting around the clock. How are they managing? We shall tell you later. But the radio plays a crucial role, since it is our only means of direct contact. Cultural life has come to a total standstill; theatres and cinemas are closed ... (Damn it! There is more gunfire in front of our house ... and it's midnight!) In a matter of days, Prague has become a city under siege!

When the invading troops ask us questions, we know nothing and nobody. After debating with them, which unfortunately proved to be useless, we have decided to ignore the occupier. One leaflet says, 'The Soviet circus is back in Prague ... Do not feed them, and do not give any water to the occupier. Do not provoke them.'

On the night of 25–26 August, there was more shooting in our street. Yesterday, they shot at a rescue vehicle, and they killed a motorcyclist. It is still happening, and it is becoming worse and worse.

Remember us, and help us by telling and broadcasting the truth! The mail and phone lines have been cut. Please try to send me a simple postcard to let me know that you have received my letter. They are checking everything, of course. One day, this game will have to respect certain rules. For the moment, there are none, so nobody can be sure of anything.