

The crushing of the Prague Spring

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The climate of détente resulted in a less turbulent period for international relations, but crises remained. The break in relations between Moscow and China was confirmed in 1962 and sparked military clashes around the Sino–Soviet border in 1969. In the East, opposition to the Soviet bloc mainly came from Czechoslovakia. The Communist Party had held power in Czechoslovakia since the 1948 Prague coup. In January 1968, the Stalinist Antonin Novotný was overruled and replaced by Alexander Dubček, a liberal Communist who sought to reconcile Socialism and freedom. The liberalisation of the regime began in the spring of 1968. Censorship was abolished, and Czech citizens were permitted to travel abroad. The First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), Leonid Brezhnev, expressed his dissatisfaction, but Prague refused to comply. In fact, as the pressure increased, so did the liberalisation.

On 21 August 1968, troops from the Warsaw Pact countries, with the exception of Romania, took advantage of extended training operations to invade Czechoslovakia and arrest the ‘deviant’ leaders. Although Dubček retained his post for a while after his release, he was soon to be replaced by the pro-Soviet Gustáv Husák, who oversaw a return to normality.

The USSR had demonstrated once more that it would grant only limited sovereignty to its Socialist brothers.

The Western powers and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) reacted to the invasion of Czechoslovakia only with declarations of regret.