

The Prague Spring: In a nutshell



When and where was the Prague Spring?

- 1968 January to August
- Czechoslovakia (Capital – Prague)

What was the Prague Spring?

- An attempt by Czechs to liberalise their lives by introducing political, social and economic reform.
- It was partly in response to growing discontent with falling living standards and more restrictive political control.

Who was the much hated leader of Czechoslovakia that Brezhnev replaced?

- Anton Novotny.
- Considered a 'hardline' communist. 'Little Stalin'
- Novotny had invited Brezhnev to Prague hoping for support: Brezhnev, surprisingly, replaced him in the hope that events in Czechoslovakia would settle.

Who replaced him?

- Alexander Dubcek: a committed member of the communist party.
- Proper title: First Secretary of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the Communist Party!
- January 1968 to April 1969.

What happened between January and August 1968?

- Dubcek introduced many reforms: freedom of speech, release of political prisoners, travel made easier, non communist political parties legalised etc.

What term was given to the reforms and what did this imply?

- **Socialism with a human face**
- Meaning - retain the main principles of socialism but get rid of the oppressive elements- e.g strict censorship, powerful secret police, lack of individual liberty.
- Dubcek said he would **not** follow an independent foreign policy nor would Czechoslovakia leave the Warsaw Pact or COMECON



Why did Brezhnev order tanks and 500,000 Warsaw Pact troops into Prague on 20/21 August 1968?

- Moscow was still concerned the reforms would weaken communist control in the Eastern Bloc (satellite states). Czechs were becoming too westernized.
- + Hardliners within the Czech central committee of the communist party did not like what Dubcek was doing. They sent a letter to Brezhnev for assistance.
- This gave Brezhnev the perfect excuse / justification.

- It became known as the **Brezhnev Doctrine**: the USSR had the right to intervene militarily if the unity of the Eastern Bloc / Warsaw Pact was threatened.
- Brezhnev declared that the USSR would not allow the countries of Eastern Europe to reject communism, "even if it meant a third World War."
- To the USSR it was important to hold onto Czechoslovakia which had the strongest industry in the Eastern bloc.

How did the Czechs respond to the invasion?

- **Passive resistance**: standing in front of tanks, offering flowers to Soviet troops.
- There was no mass uprising or violence.
- They jeered and chanted at the invaders, daubed walls with anti-Soviet slogans and painted out all signposts **except** those pointing to Moscow.
- However, Jan Palach, a student set fire to himself (self immolation & became a martyr)



What was the response of the West?

- Condemnation- but nothing more.
- Events were taking place in the Soviet 'sphere of influence'.
- US policy did not include the rollback of communism.

What were the main outcomes.

- Dubcek forced to resign from power (April 1969) and **Gustav Husak** (a hardliner) became leader and restored an authoritarian government
- c.100 Czechs were killed, c 500 injured
- The reforms were suppressed (The communist called this process: **normalisation!**)

