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## The Prague Spring Reassessed

NACHTFROST: ERFAHRUNGEN AUF DEM WEG VOM REALEN ZUM MENSCHLICHEN SOZIALISMUS. By *Zdeněk Mlynář*. Translated by *Bedřich Uttiz*. Cologne and Frankfurt/Main: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1978 [Cologne, 1978, under the title MRAZ PŘICHAZÍ Z KREMLU]. 366 pp. Documents. (English translation forthcoming, 1980.)

OSMAŠEDESÁTÝ: POKUS O KRITICKÉ POROZUMĚNÍ HISTORICKÝM SOUVISLOSTEM. *Anonymous*. Typewritten manuscript. Prague, June 1977–August 1978.

Ten years after 1968, Czechs and Slovaks at home and abroad are reassessing the momentous events in a mood of severe self-criticism.<sup>1</sup> As the anonymous author of the unpublished manuscript under review writes, both participants in the Prague Spring and historians are trying to “seek out the truth of past events” and to find “a drastic cure for the old sickness of the schizophrenia of our historical memory.” Both authors examine the roots of failure in 1968 from the perspective of former Communists who were active participants in the reform movement and were later purged during the era of “normalization” under Husák. Although both were established scholars, the studies at hand are not the products of scholarly research but the fruits of personal experience and later reflection under the difficult conditions of exile or police harassment.

Zdeněk Mlynář, a former legal specialist who was prominent in the official planning of political reform, rose to the party pinnacle as Party Secretary in 1968 and therefore writes as someone previously inside the system of power, and as the highest ranking Communist Party functionary in exile. His book is revealing not only for its firsthand description of events in 1968 and its portraits of Dubček and other leaders, but also for his candid self-criticism regarding the course of reform and indeed of his entire life as a Communist.<sup>2</sup>

The author of the manuscript, a former professor, has been employed in manual labor since 1969 and has chosen to remain anonymous. His role in the Prague Spring was that of a publicist whose main influence was in molding popular opinion rather than in formulating party policy. His study contains a radical critique not only of the Communist Party's policy in the 1960s, but also of the role of intellectuals during that exciting year and at other periods of Czech history. His work has been circulating in typescript for more than a year and may soon be published abroad.

1. For an examination of some of these writings, see H. Gordon Skilling, “Sixty-Eight in Historical Perspective,” *International Journal*, 33, no. 4 (Autumn 1978): 678–701.

2. See Mlynář's earlier, more restrained, critique of 1968 in his book which circulated in typescript and was later published abroad in Czech, *Československý pokus o reformu 1968: analýza jeho teorie a praxe* (Cologne, 1975). The U.S. edition of *Nachtfrost, Nightfrost in Prague: The End of Humane Socialism*, trans. Paul Wilson, is scheduled for publication in spring 1980 by Karz Publishers, New York.

Mlynář's volume makes an important contribution to the history of the time because of its inside portrayal of crucial events, such as the vain effort to form a workers' and peasants' government after the Soviet occupation. Contrary to previous reports, these talks took place in the Soviet embassy in Prague, and the proposal was put forward by Ambassador Chervenko himself. Mlynář, who was present, explains that the attempt failed because of lack of agreement over the leadership or the composition of such a government. He also records the adamant refusal of President Svoboda to accept the idea at all.

Equally informative is his account of the "negotiations" in the Kremlin which were surely the most extraordinary in the history of diplomacy. Czechs and Slovaks present were confronted with the fateful question—to sign or not to sign what amounted to a Soviet ultimatum. At one point, Dubček, close to a physical breakdown, declared that he would not sign. In the end, after initial hesitation and doubts, all, including Mlynář, signed what he called "the death sentence for democratic Communist reform" (Mlynář, p. 305). All, that is, except the imprisoned Kriegel, who, Mlynář admits, behaved in a more appropriate manner than the others. "We were in fact in the situation of men who are blackmailed by gangsters, but we maintained the illusion that we were negotiating, as politicians, with other politicians over political problems" (pp. 296–97). Mlynář confesses that their hopes to preserve some part of the 1968 reforms and achieve the eventual withdrawal of Soviet troops by signing the agreement were pure illusions, a fact that was revealed in subsequent months. He clearly implies that, in retrospect, he believes that it was a mistake to sign the protocol.

During the Moscow talks, Brezhnev's major speech, which Mlynář cites at length, revealed the deeper motives for the intervention. These had little to do with the propaganda about a threat from the imperialist West or antisocialist and counter-revolutionary dangers. "His speech expressed one, and only one, simple idea: Our soldiers reached the Elbe in the war, and since that time this is our boundary, the Soviet boundary. The results of the Second World War are untouchable for the USSR and hence will be defended even at the danger of a new war" (p. 301). There was, however, no danger of such a war, Brezhnev stated, as President Johnson had assured him that the American government still recognized the results of Yalta and Potsdam (p. 301).

Still more revealing are Mlynář's opinions on "reform communism," a "stupidity," as he calls it in retrospect (p. 291). At the time, he was convinced that it was possible to dismantle the totalitarian dictatorship by "small steps" (p. 73) and to make a gradual transition to pluralistic democracy. "I was a reform Communist and not at all a non-Communist democrat," he avows (p. 104). Reform was to be accomplished from inside the power structure and would not disturb the hegemony of the party, at least initially. This reflected his concept of politics as "the art of the possible" and of the relevance of Machiavelli to the situation. He did not share the more radical views of reform Communists outside the power structure, and of a few non-Communists, that a two-party system, or a genuine pluralism of political parties, could be attained in the immediate future. Mlynář expressed his "centrist" position in the Action Program and in the materials for the Fourteenth Party Congress, both of which he helped to prepare. He also advocated, in vain, some degree of press censorship and limitations on the formation of political parties, and pressed for early elections and the convening of a party congress in the summer. In light of later events, he admits, he is not at all convinced, and indeed has grave doubts, that even such a course would have been feasible or would have averted Soviet intervention (pp. 181–82, 224). He also acknowledges his own illusions as to the lack of danger of an invasion and gives credit to the more radical reformers for predicting it. This event marked the "failure of reform communism," and indeed showed the "absurdity" of his entire life's effort (pp. 185–86). The capitulation in Moscow represented the logical result of the commitment of

Czechoslovak Communists, including himself, to Moscow and their willingness once again to accept its dictates as they did so often in the past.

The anonymous author of *Osmášedesátý* (*Sixty-eight*) shares many of Mlynář's interpretations but probes more deeply and critically into the historical roots of the failure of 1968. The central cause of defeat, in his opinion, was the "derivative" character of the Communist Party, which, by accepting the Comintern's Twenty-one Points, had been dependent on foreign authority from its very inception. This led to a foreign policy of "servility" to Moscow after 1948, even during the crisis of 1956 and also in 1968, to the acceptance of Soviet interference during 1968, to the failure to prepare for defense against Warsaw Pact intervention, and, ultimately, to capitulation in Moscow. This train of events could be traced back to the Munich crisis and the failure to resist at that time and to the errors and weaknesses of Beneš and the non-Communists prior to 1948. In a deeper sense, it raised the entire question of "the capitulationist complex of the Czech character." In 1968, he believes, there was no excuse for the failure of the leaders to foresee the invasion and to prepare for defense against it.

The other side of the coin of dependence on Moscow was the party's lack of concern for the society in which it existed. After the war, the "principle of exclusion," first adopted in the forced transfer of the Germans on the assumption of their collective guilt, was successively applied to other parties and groups of the population, ultimately including, through the trials and purges of the 1950s, large sections of the party membership. The reform of the 1960s was conceived as a party affair only and was designed to correct the "errors" of the past, to rehabilitate the party, and to preserve its leading role. "The others," the non-Communist majority, were excluded from real participation. By failing to cut the "umbilical cord" with Moscow, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia lost its chance to establish a genuine link with the people it claimed to represent.

Like their predecessors in earlier stages of Czech history, the intellectuals assumed a significant role and bore a heavy responsibility in the tragic sequence of events. The reform Communist intellectuals (a group to which the anonymous author belonged) had helped to create and form the system, and out of a sense of guilt they became absorbed in criticism of "the unmastered past." Enthralled with faith in the power of words and lacking a sense of political reality, the intellectuals did not supplement their criticism of the past with a positive program for the future and did not exhibit the sobriety and self-discipline which their role demanded.

The author of *Osmášedesátý* devotes an entire chapter to the Slovak question, a subject frequently neglected by Czech scholars. He notes the profound differences in historical background and in the modern experience of the two nations which made a common approach difficult in 1968, and he sternly chastises the Czechs for their inability to deal satisfactorily with their sister nation.

The two authors exhibit the critical spirit which was characteristic of their predecessor, Thomas Masaryk, but all too often absent in Czech thinking about their past. It might be said that they apply the motto of the First Republic—"The Truth Shall Prevail"—not in the sense of assuming that the Czech cause, because truthful, will succeed, but in the sense that only truth, not illusions, can serve as a basis for success in politics. Both provide rich material for a reassessment of the great experiment of 1968 and offer warnings, and perhaps guidance, for the next major turning point of Czechoslovak history and for other efforts at reform in Communist Eastern Europe. The anonymous author, writing in the heat of passion, strikes countless sparks which demand attention. In view of Mlynář's former political eminence and his past reputation as a "moderate," his more sober but sharply self-critical judgments are equally deserving of study.

The narrow partisan approach of the leading Communists, their dependence on Moscow, their illusions and lack of realism, and the half-heartedness of many of the

measures taken, can hardly be denied as factors contributing to defeat, and they naturally loom large in the eyes of active participants. A less directly involved but sympathetic observer is still moved to admire the persistent striving for reform during the 1960s, the concrete achievements of 1968, and the courageous nonviolent resistance after the invasion, and to express a guarded optimism as to the potential for still greater transformation of the system had the process not been interrupted by an outside force. One reform, federation and Slovak equality, has even survived, albeit in truncated form and with nondemocratic content. Reform communism, although discredited and set back by both the Czechoslovak and Polish experiences of the 1960s and 1970s, seems to remain at least one of several alternatives for the future. More fundamental change would require a decisive alteration in Soviet attitudes as well as a more resolute determination on the part of Czechs and Slovaks, both leaders and people alike.