



Serhan Chelariu

# Czechoslovakia 1968 —Remembering the Resistance

Constantine C. Menges

**T**en years have passed since those brief, happy months in the sunshine of the Prague spring. Alexander Dubček and the new leadership tried to move toward greater personal freedom and create "socialism with a human face," but these buoyant expectations of a better future for the fifteen million people of Czechoslovakia were shattered by the massive surprise attack launched by the Soviet Union in August, 1968. During the last forty years Czechoslovakia has been a victim and a symbol of the aggressive power of the twin totalitarian scourges of this century—fascism and communism. In 1938 the divided and fearful democracies tried to appease Hitler by going back on their commitments to defend little Czechoslovakia. That action cost them the support of a brave nation and its fifty well-armed divisions. It also set the

CONSTANTINE C. MENGES was in Prague in August, 1968, before and after the Soviet invasion. His on-the-scene account of the resistance, from which these extracts are taken, was published in *Transaction* in December '68 (reprinted by permission of Transaction Inc. ©1968 Transaction Inc.). Dr. Menges has recently completed, for the Center for Strategic and International Studies, an analysis of Spain's transition to democracy.

stage for a devastating world war that began less than one year later.

After years of Nazi occupation Czechoslovakia experienced a brief return to democratic politics. But in 1948, with Soviet help, the national Communist party suddenly switched from competing for votes and seized power with a lightning coup against the elected government. Thus began nearly two decades of harsh Stalinist rule that often exceeded the degree of repression in the rest of Eastern Europe.

In the spring of 1968 a new reformist group had actually begun to make a transition toward greater liberty and economic reforms that would improve the standard of living. Brezhnev and the USSR Communist party felt that this example might threaten their power by leading to pressure for similar changes in the rest of Communist Europe and even in Russia. They summoned the Dubček government to a summer meeting to work out explicit limits on the liberalization process. The Czechoslovakian leaders agreed to the Soviet demands and pledged their loyalty to the Warsaw Pact—all in the hope of preventing Soviet intervention. But even while Brezhnev was smiling and exchanging toasts of friendship with his "comrades," the Soviet

*invasion was in preparation. We now know that the Soviet-Czech meeting was deliberately staged to lull the Dubček government into a false sense of security. This reduced the chances that army and government would be prepared for armed resistance.*

*Soviet deception was successful; the half-million-man army achieved total surprise. There was no chance to organize a military defense because virtually the entire civilian and army leadership was taken prisoner by Soviet secret police within the first hours of the attack. People woke to find Russian and East German soldiers and tanks smothering their country. But their shock and outrage produced a totally new development: a courageous resistance that used ideas, popular unity, and wit to fight back.*

*Today Czechoslovakia remains under Soviet control. We know that the hardline Communist party leaders took harsh reprisals against 500,000 or more former party members and dissidents. We know that 150,000 more Czechs took the risk of escape and exile rather than continue with life as it was before the temporary spring.*

*Still, in 1978, there is a quiet but deep sense of accomplishment as the people of Czechoslovakia recall how they stood together ten years ago. Jiri Hajek, the foreign minister at that time, said recently: "1968 was our moment of truth—the time when we virtually unanimously resisted the invasion and forced the Soviet Union to release Mr. Dubček. That is an experience which cannot be eradicated from the national consciousness and it gives me a certain hope."*

*This is a good moment to remember and honor the bravery and ingenuity of the thousands who fought Soviet tanks and machine guns without firing a shot. I was there at the time and wrote this account of the spirit and tactics of the resistance.*

Prague, August 28

**I**t was clearly a major surprise to the leaders of the Soviet Union that Czechoslovakia did not dissolve into a state of collapse and confusion after Russia's military invasion and the kidnapping of the principal Czech leaders. Instead, an organized and a popular resistance immediately coalesced. This resistance is a superb achievement. And it may change the political possibilities for Czechoslovakia, for it has—in only seven days—left an indelible imprint upon the country.

The popular resistance avoids violence: It is mainly symbolic. And, in its first phase, it was entirely spontaneous. In the center of Prague thousands of people parade past the Soviet tanks, wearing the tricolor ribbons of the Czech flag or carrying photos of Dubček, first secretary of the Communist party, or Svoboda, the country's president, as well as slogans. They avidly read the thousands of wallposters, cartoons, and painted slogans that virtually flood the walls around Wenceslas Square. They run eagerly to the couriers distributing the papers of the resistance press and pass any news on from one to another.

The popular resistance occupies much of the energy and attention of the occupying troops. It sustains the

morale of those in the Czech police, army, and bureaucracy exposed to direct Soviet pressure. And it acts as a warning to potential collaborators—either opportunists, or the few who might have ideological reasons to side with the Soviets—that the situation is still fluid and the Soviets are not guaranteed a victory yet.

The organized resistance, through the vital clandestine radio transmitters and daily press, informs the people about what is really happening in the country in both large and small ways, provides leadership and focus for the mass resistance. Its primary tasks are to sustain and facilitate the unity of the Czechoslovak Communist party and government organs against the occupation, to maintain the population's morale, and to give both the political activists and masses the sense that they can and are *doing* something against the Soviets. Information and a sense of some potency are undoubtedly the twin ingredients of enduring morale and cohesion.

The invasion occurred at 10 P.M. on Tuesday, August 20; Dubček learned of it at 11:15 and immediately called a meeting of the CCP Presidium. By 1:30 A.M. the party and government had decided to resist the Soviet action with all means short of violence and to follow a policy of absolute noncollaboration with the occupying powers. Dubček and the prime minister returned to their respective offices to wait and were arrested at 4:00 in the morning. By the same evening, August 21, the free radios and some freedom papers had appeared.

According to all information, there had been no plans even of a contingency or exercise nature for resistance against this kind of aggression. But there were apparently some rough guidelines for the key party members, including all members of the Party Congress, in the event of war with the West. There also were arrangements for military radio communications in wartime, which helped in the organization of the mobile and multiple clandestine radio networks.

The radio is the key element because it enables the party and other parts of the organized resistance to function. The best example of this was the calling of the 14th Extraordinary Party Congress on Thursday, August 22. The new presidium selected by this congress was more progressive than the one the Soviets feared would have been chosen in September. The entire weight of the CCP moved with near unanimity to Dubček's side (all but five to ten of 1,200 delegates). The resolutions denouncing the invasion and supporting the integrity of the party and the government and the explicit refutation of the Soviet pretense of an invitation to save the country from counterrevolution was the most central political event in the invasion's aftermath.

But it was an event only because of the free-radio network. It was the radio that broadcast the resolutions of the party, the composition of the new presidium, and the explicit denunciation of the invasion. The radio made this an event inside Czechoslovakia and outside Czechoslovakia—both equally important for Soviet-Czech bargaining. Had there been no radio, the news would have been suppressed or distorted, and the 14th Congress would not have had the immediate unifying effect it did have.

Without the radio the party might not have been able

to organize itself to hold the congress at all, much less quickly. The radio told the party delegates—in code—that there would be a congress and where. Then, when it was discovered that the Soviets had found out about the meeting and were waiting, the radio told the people to spread the word all over Czechoslovakia that the party delegates should not go to the appointed place but to the nearest large factory, where they would receive further instructions. On Thursday thousands of people wore signs and wrote posters telling this to the party delegates. These warnings were highly successful and only a few delegates were caught.

From Thursday on, the free radios—through Czech police sources—got hold of the license numbers of the cars used by the Russian police for arresting people. These numbers would be broadcast, and again the people would watch for the numbers and write them on posters to spread the word. Whenever the cars were spotted, they would be surrounded, the prisoners released, the other occupants beaten, and the car destroyed. But after three days the KGB got around this by getting duplicate license numbers of those held by Czech citizens—and increasing the number of cars, using many as decoys. But three important days had been gained to allow people to hide or leave. And the leadership provided by nameless but trusted and admired voices of the free radios, in combination with the people's chance to participate in a directly useful act, had an enormously exhilarating effect on them. Even talking about these efforts was a great tonic to morale.

The Soviets seemed completely unprepared for these rapidly mobile, well-informed radio stations, which entirely overshadowed their own propaganda efforts and, worse, informed the West of what was happening on an hour-to-hour basis. To silence them, teams of KGB were dispatched in Prague, Pilsen, and parts of Slovakia—their methods restricted to the usual secret police repertory. And on Friday (August 23) the free radio announced that the Soviets were sending in a train packed with jamming equipment. The radio asked the railway workers' union to make sure that the train did not reach its destination, and within hours all over Czechoslovakia the station signs identifying the towns were destroyed or covered up. There were hourly reports from railway-union people saying "All is well," "Train in difficulties," and the like. This was high drama—the radio following the route of its would-be electronic executioners, then announcing toward the end of the next day—"Train lost." On Monday (August 26) the Soviets leapfrogged Czech resistance and flew in jamming and detection equipment by helicopter.

On Thursday, one day after the invasion, more than a score of freedom-press newspapers were being distributed in all parts of Czechoslovakia. In Prague alone there were at least fourteen papers on the streets by Friday. One paper has a verified production of 80,000 per edition, so a circulation of 400,000 for all papers in Prague is a possibility. Most of the papers were put out by the staffs of the regular party, factory, or commercial newspapers, and they carried the same formats as these papers.

All these newspapers have taken a fiercely anti-Soviet, anti-invasion position and emphasize their desire for neutrality, self-determination, and the integrity of the party and government. All support Dubček and Svoboda. The papers publish photos of violent acts by occupation troops, of victims, of burning buildings, of various secret Communist party meetings, and of antioccupation demonstrations. The whole thrust is toward the mobilization of Czech and world opinion to act against the invaders, with all means *short of violence*. The papers relay instructions from the free-radio network to the people and, perhaps most important, keep the population informed about the negotiations between the Czech leaders and Warsaw Pact powers in Moscow. These talks, people feel, will decide the future; but few have any optimism about the outcome.

As with the radio stations, the very existence of the resistance papers—in spite of frenetic efforts to destroy them—has a major impact on morale and on the political cohesion of the Czech party and the bureaucracies. To the people, distributing and receiving papers have in themselves become important acts of nonprovocative defiance. All people, old and young, police and the Czech army, reach out for the papers in a manifest gesture of support.

By Sunday the occupation was increasingly cracking down on the distributors of the press. The tank guard post over every bridge halted all cars going into central Prague and made thorough searches. Soldiers made more determined efforts to catch the walking distributors and a more clandestine operation resulted—there was, for example, much more passing out of papers on the trams, or to the trams in outlying areas. On Sunday, with the sudden imposition of the bridge checkpoints, the first distributions were made by ambulances and Czech police cars that had not been searched. Again this tangible demonstration of unity—the police giving out the papers, at times under the eyes of the Soviet troops—had its effect on both the Czechs and the Soviets. (The radio reported late Sunday night that, after nightfall, Soviet troops had machine-gunned one police car and several ambulances.)

Within twenty-four hours of the occupation the free radios had become accurately informed in detail about events in every part of Czechoslovakia, the West, and in Moscow—to the extent that information was released. Broadcasting twenty-four hours a day and concerned solely with the crisis, the radio stations combined morale-boosting exhortations, intense analysis, and the coordination of popular and organized resistance with reporting on all Soviet occupation moves and countermeasures. How was this possible?

The key was the telephone. Informants would call designated relay stations—i.e., a person sitting by a telephone—with any news of interest. The relay person would filter this information (to avoid duplication, for example), then call a telephone watcher at one of the secret radio stations. There would be the usual news-reporting-system checks for accuracy, then an editor would decide what would be broadcast. Closing the internal telephone system would have hurt the newscasts but would also have brought the economy to a standstill,

and this the Soviets were not yet ready to do. Tapping and tracing all lines was technically impossible. And informers or prisoners had not yet identified the main radio-telephone hookups being used—which, in any case, were changed almost daily.

For external news each radio station had two simple portable shortwave sets. One monitor would listen to news from Western sources and note and collect any items of direct interest. These would then be broadcast. The other monitor followed the Moscow and East German propaganda version of what was happening in Czechoslovakia and would then broadcast a brief resumé of the propaganda line and a refutation if the matter was important or time permitted.

This information funnel was used by the resistance *newspapers* in a very simple way. Each press had several shortwave radios and kept a continuous monitor on the various free-radio stations. First priority for publication was any guidance for mass action that the free radio called for—such as the one-hour general strike on Friday, August 23. Next came news about Soviet-Czech talks, and then the rest of the happenings as decided by the various editorial staffs. Virtually the only source of information for the papers, though, was the radio—the clandestine internal stations and, at times, Western ones.

Czechoslovakia has a complex language that few foreigners speak or read. Without interpreters and helpers, finding the documents or even file drawers needed in the secret police stations, in the military headquarters (emergency plans for radio communication, for instance), and in the party files (addresses, contingency plans) is a much more difficult and time-consuming task. All the more so if fast, last-minute sabotage has produced burned records, facilities in turmoil, and the like.

Prague is an old city with picturesque winding streets that have not yet surrendered to some regular and predictable sequence of numbers. In the older sections, where many writers and intellectuals live or have friends, the house numbering is especially erratic. Take down all street signs and house numbers, destroy all detailed maps of Prague in the tourist and government offices, and *then* let the Soviet secret police hunt for the addresses of their potential victims. There are no scouts, guides, and trailblazers for these colonial masters; they must find their way through the now apparently trackless urban complex alone.

**W**here can you hide a large meeting of 1,200 people when enemy troops and police know the date and the city and are watching? Where can large supplies of paper, ink, press plates, and forging equipment for identity papers be safely hidden when a city is occupied with only hours of warning? Where can people well known to the Russian secret police be hidden while they continue working? Where can couriers come and go with ease? Where are telephone lines so numerous that tapping is nearly impossible? The organized Czech resistance found the ingenious answer: in the large industrial factories.

One worker looks like another as thousands stream in

and out of the factory's many gates. Large industrial plants are indeed jungles of steel and concrete, with many hiding places only the workers would and could know. The 14th Congress was held in one of Europe's largest industrial complexes; the 1,200 delegates easily disappeared in the midst of more than 40,000 workers, and there was enough elbow room to permit films and tape-recordings of the proceedings to be made and smuggled out of the country.

Besides all the advantages of scale and complexity that large factories could offer the resistance, there was a double-edged institutional sword waiting in the heavy industrial centers. The Communist party was always popular with a large minority of workers in heavy industry, and in spite of the party's twenty years of bungling there were still actual as well as nominal supporters in the many cells within the factories. These stood ready to give effective and disciplined assistance to the party leadership. So after twenty years the party of the workers found the working class again.

The party cells also had an armed workers militia in each large factory. Though this total of 7,000 to 10,000 militia could not hold out for long against the armored divisions poured into Czechoslovakia, any Soviet attempt to control entry into the large factories, or to search the premises, would have been possible only after the killing of many, many workers. *That* was the one point where the Czech resistance was determined to threaten violence. And during the first week of occupation the Soviet Union was not prepared to assault the Communist workers' militia. There was also the additional, tacit threat of wholesale sabotage of Czechoslovak heavy industry in the event of a military assault on the factories.

People in Czechoslovakia ask how long the organized resistance can survive. The radio is the spearhead and also the Achilles' heel—there are well-defined techniques for locating transmitters. The press is vulnerable to a shortage of printing supplies as the Soviet control system tightens—its facilities are spread out and separated from the necessary raw materials; road traffic is light and ever more subject to control. Large numbers of foot couriers would give the secret publishing locations away.

But perhaps greater than the dangers posed by the hunters bent on liquidating the resistance are the more subtle political techniques the Soviets may use. The organized resistance constitutes a vital element in the political cohesion that is the sole possible bargaining device the Czechs can use with the Soviet Union. As long as the Czechs remain together, the USSR can rule only by a military government, or try to quash the unity by stepping up the level of terror and violence, as in fact had occurred in stages from Friday to Tuesday, August 23 to 27.

Whatever the future holds, the courage, the creativity, and the prudence of the organized and the popular resistance have astounded the Soviets, heartened the Czechs, made the progressive elements of the Czech Communist party even more respected. They also may make the contemplated reversal of history by violence far less harsh than the Soviets hoped.