Hopes and Tragedy:
The Prague Spring from a Polish Perspective

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The Czechoslovak events of 1968 had a very important impact on the political developments in the former socialist states for two reasons. First, they demonstrated that a peaceful transformation of the communist regime—contrary to the dominant view of Western Sovietologists—was possible. Under the leadership of the reformist wing of the Communist Party, Czechoslovakia started what could have become the peaceful transition from party dictatorship to liberal democracy with a strong socialist orientation. 'The Action Programme', announced on 5 April 1968, while reiterating the principle of the leadership of the Communist Party, proclaimed the intention of the party reformers to change the political system in the direction of parliamentary democracy [Remington 1969: 88–137]. Considering the broad support enjoyed by the party, this was not unrealistic. Historians of the Prague Spring emphasised the historically novel nature of the reform programme, which went far beyond all earlier proposals of communist reformers [Golan 1971, 1973; Skilling 1976]. The fact that the reform movement was crushed by the intervention of the Warsaw Pact forces does not prove the impossibility of a peaceful change of the communist system. It only shows that such change was impossible as long as the Soviet Union remained under the rule of orthodox communists with a neo-Stalinist orientation. Twenty years later—when Gorbachev's reformers replaced the old guard in the Kremlin—this peaceful transformation became a reality.

The British historian Archie Brown, in his biography of Mikhail Gorbachev, emphasised the impact of the Prague Spring on the generation of 'shestidesyatniki'—young communists for whom the period of the early 1960s was the most important political experience [Brown 1996: 40]. Since the future reformist leader of the USSR belongs to this generation, it is evident that indirectly the Czechoslovak reform movement had an impact on his political views. Brown mentions also the friendship between Gorbachev and Zdeněk Mlynář during their university years in Moscow [Brown 1996: 30]. It can only be speculated to what degree the Prague Spring influenced the thinking of the last Soviet leader and through such influence made an impact on the ultimate demise of the Soviet communist regime.

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This was yet to come. The military intervention of 21 August 1968 had a profound and deeply negative impact on the political situation in the Soviet bloc and in the communist movement outside it. The tragic end of the Prague Spring weakened the reformists in the socialist states and isolated the communist parties of the Soviet bloc from their allies in Western Europe who—with very few exceptions—condemned the intervention. The intervention had a profound impact on the reformist tendencies in the countries under Soviet domination, particularly in Poland. Prior to 1968, many reformers believed that if they only avoided the rapid collapse of the political regime (as it happened in Hungary) and maintained political control over events, gradual peaceful change would be feasible. August 1968 destroyed such hopes. Later on—particularly in Poland during the political crisis of 1980–1981—this experience of the Soviet-led intervention in Czechoslovakia was pointed to as the definitive proof that national independence could be endangered if things went too far and too fast.

The tragedy of the Czechoslovak reform movement had, however, a lasting positive effect as well. In the 1970s, it inspired the democratic opposition in Central Europe (particularly the Committee for the Defence of Workers in Poland and Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia) and indirectly contributed to the success of democracy in 1989. In this, Czechoslovakia's aborted democratization was not in vain.

For Poland, 1968 was a dramatic year as well—but for a very different reason. After the death of Stalin and after the limited departure from Stalinism proclaimed by the new Soviet leadership in 1956, Poland and Czechoslovakia moved in two opposite directions. For reasons of history, Poland was by far better prepared to use the new political opportunities for expanding the scope of political independence and for liberalising the internal political system. Under the leadership of the former political prisoner Władysław Gomułka, the reformist majority of the Polish Central Committee was able to push the country along the path of limited but meaningful liberalisation, free it from the most flagrant aspects of Soviet control, and open up new relations with the West. It was the triumph of political realism over traditional Polish romanticism [Bromke 1967].

With the passing of time, however, the political configuration in Poland gradually changed with a new authoritarian faction emerging within the ruling party. Its trademark was manifest nationalism with elements of antisemitism. The most prominent leaders of this faction were former commanders of the communist underground during the Nazi occupation (particularly the minister of internal affairs general Mieczysław Moczar) and the faction was strongly entrenched in the organs of state security. Its antisemitism was directed mostly against the old guard of pre-war communist cadres, a large part of which had Jewish background. In June 1967, the Six-Day War between Israel and her Arab neighbours provided the nationalistic faction a unique opportunity to launch a political campaign ostensibly directed against alleged 'Zionists' but in fact aimed at the elimination of the best-known reformers from the leadership of the ruling party. In 1968, the anti-Semitic campaign reached its peak. It is at this point

that political fortunes of our two countries went in sharply opposite directions. Among the Polish public—particularly the intelligentsia and students—events in Czechoslovakia were met with enthusiastic support as an indication that reforms within the system could go beyond limits of liberalisation. In reaction to such trends, the hard-liners within the Polish United Workers' Party (PUWP)—with at least tacit acceptance offered them by Gomułka—launched a political campaign marked by antisemitism. Among the victims of this campaign were my friends Zygmunt Bauman and Maria Hirszowicz, who after been expelled from their posts at Warsaw University emigrated from Poland.

For me, the events of 1968 had a traumatic impact. My earlier activity in PUWP's reformist wing and my association with the leading reformist philosopher Adam Schaff, whose deputy in directing the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences I had been since 1965, made me suspect in the eyes of the hardliners. My open criticism of antisemitism was met with accusations of an 'anti-Polish' stance. I refused to change my position and survived the purge of 1968 only because when in peaked I was outside Poland (as Simon Professor at the University of Manchester).

My position during the political crisis of 1968 resulted from my earlier political activity. I joined the party at the age of 18, more because of the realisation that the new political order would remain for many decades if not for the rest of my life and that the future of Poland would depend on the way in which the nation would be able to rebuild its life in the political configuration created by the results of the great war. Having come from a family with strong links to the pre-war Polish regime and having played a minor role in the Polish underground during the Nazi occupation (in the distribution of the underground press), I had been motivated more by political realism than by communist dogmas.

In 1956, as a 25-year-old lecturer at the University of Warsaw I became an active participant in the reform movement. In November 1956, I published my most important early political article ('The Crisis of Internationalism') in PUWP's theoretical journal [Wiatr 1956], for which I received severe reprimands from Soviet, East German, and Czechoslovak critics, who accused me of the most serious political offense: the rejection of the ideological obligation of blind obedience to the Soviet Union. My Czechoslovak critic, Karel Sršeň [1957], emphasised the obligation of communists to fully accept the 'leading role' of the CPSU in the world communist movement, something that I—like all Polish reformers of that period—firmly rejected.

In my 1956 article, I explicitly criticised the Soviet intervention in Hungary as the violation of the principle of sovereignty of the socialist states. At that time it was still possible to express such view on the pages of the main theoretical journal of the party.

In the following years I firmly supported the moderately reformist leadership of Władysław Gomułka, even if it was losing support among a large part of the leftist intelligentsia. I saw no realistic alternative and—until 1968—believed

that this was the best way for Poland in the existing situation of the divided world and the Cold War.

Our experience of 1956 influenced the way in which Polish reformers perceived the then existing situation in the socialist countries. On the one hand, it showed that a deep change in the functioning of the political system was possible, even if opposed by the Soviet leadership. On the other hand, however, it also demonstrated the limits of politically feasible change. For few days in October 1956 we lived in a climate of an imminent threat of Soviet military intervention, which the Poles were ready to oppose with all resources at our disposal. The final outcome—compromise between Polish and Soviet leaders—saved us from a tragedy of the type well remembered in Poland's history.

In the following years the reformist wing of the PUWP underwent a split with its most radical members (mostly from the intellectual milieu) rejecting the very logic of limited reforms. In 1966 Leszek Kołakowski was expelled from the party, a move that led several intellectuals to leave the party in protest. My position was different. Aware of the limits of possible change, I supported the centrist political line of the post-October party leadership.

In the first years after October 1956 Poland remained an isolated island of reformed socialist policy within the Soviet bloc. Gradually things began to change. In the early 1960s reformist ideas began to appear in some other socialist states, particularly in Czechoslovakia and Hungary. When I visited Prague in early 1962, I met the political scientist Zdeněk Mlynář, whose publications on political pluralism reflected a way of thinking that was very close to what has been voiced in Poland by my older friend Stanisław Ehrlich and other reformers. Soon, contacts with Czechoslovak sociologists—particularly with Pavel Machonin—offered me the broad possibility of very interesting exchanges of ideas. In the 1960s five of my books were published in Czechoslovakia, making me one of the trio of Polish sociologists with the closest contacts with Czechoslovak colleagues—along with Zygmunt Bauman and Jan Szczepański. I visited Czechoslovakia frequently, delivering lectures and meeting with reformist intellectuals.

A special field of cooperation I had with Czechoslovak sociologists was military sociology. Since 1958 I was the head of the chair of military sociology in the Military Political Academy in Warsaw—the first such chair in a military academy in the world. In the mid-1960s, at the Klement Gottwald Military Political Academy, a group of sociologists led by colonel Jaromír Cvrček started research and teaching in this field. In the spring of 1967 an international conference of military sociologists from the socialist states took place in Prague. I headed the Polish delegation and presented the key report [*Problémy* 1967]. After the Prague Spring, in which officers from the Gottwald Academy took an active part (and were purged after the intervention), military sociology was dormant in Czechoslovakia for twenty long years.

On the eve of the Prague Spring I had mixed feelings about its perspective. On the one hand, I was impressed by the courageous and intellectually mature

position taken by the Czechoslovak reformers. I wished them all the very best. On the other hand, however, I feared that delayed democratisation in Czechoslovakia would take a too radical direction—particularly in the context of the Soviet retreat from the limited de-Stalinisation of the Khrushchev era.

The military intervention took place when I was vacationing in Yugoslavia. The worst of my predictions came true. I was firmly opposed to the intervention and ashamed of the role Poland played in it. By the end of August I had left my position in the Military Political Academy—a very modest gesture of disapproval for the use of the Polish forces in the intervention.

In the following years my contacts with Czechoslovak sociologists and political scientists gradually withered away. In June 1970 I spent a week in Bratislava at the invitation of the Slovak Political Science Association. It was a dramatic time with my Czech and Slovak colleagues being purged from the party in what was called 'normalisation'. In the following years I had no contacts with Czechoslovak sociologists and political scientists except when visiting Zdeněk Mlynář during his emigration in Austria.

After the fall of the communist regimes in Central Europe I resumed my frequent visits to Prague and Bratislava, rebuilding my contacts with Czech and Slovak political scientists and sociologists. What I find particularly disturbing is the way in which the experience of 1968 is belittled by a large part of the Czech political and intellectual elite. It is understandable that the radical break with the former regime makes the 'Action Programme' and other documents of the Prague Spring look too modest. But it has to be remembered that fifty years ago it was the most far-reaching programme of peaceful democratisation ever presented in a communist state. In my comparative analysis of the democratic transformation of 'post-communist' European states I emphasised the lasting impact of the Czechoslovak reform movement of 1968 on long-term change in Central Europe [Wiatr 2006: 53-56]. Like similar events of the past, the Prague Spring can best be understood from a long historical perspective. Fifty years later, it remains one of the most important events of the 20th century.

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