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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

17 July 1968

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: The Czechoslovak Crisis

The crisis over Czechoslovakia continues but appears to be at a stalemate for the moment. All the parties involved -- the Czech leaders and factions, the Soviets, the other Communist regimes in Eastern Europe -- are faced with agonizing choices. Some unforeseeable move by one or another may suddenly sharpen or resolve the crisis, or it may continue for some time longer.

Prague's Dilemmas

1. Since the downfall of Novotny last January, Dubcek has had to contend with two opposing political currents in Czechoslovakia. The liberal reformers are seeking to convert Czechoslovakia into a different type of Communist regime. Their goal is a pluralistic political order in which the Communist Party is only first among equals, and where the public is offered freer speech, press, assembly, and travel, greater judicial protection, and a larger voice in determining the economic goals of the society. This

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reflects, at least in part, the resurfacing of pre-Communist Czechoslovak tradition. But there are two novelties: the tradition is being espoused by significant numbers of Communist Party members; and it has assumed an anti-Soviet cast. The press in Czechoslovakia has even dared to print accusations that Soviet advisers were mainly responsible for the purge trials of the early 50s, and for the death of Jan Masaryk.

2. Opposed to such tendencies are the relatively conservative, hardline elements in the Party. Most of them supported Novotny; most of them are more pro-Soviet than other Party members; most of them have either been removed from leading positions in the Party, army, or security apparatus, or face that prospect sometime between now and the Party Congress in September. Apparently these individuals have been distributing leaflets against the regime and maintaining direct contact with the Soviets. The letter of the Czechoslovak Peoples' Militia, as printed in Soviet media last month, exemplified their views.

3. Dubcek seems to be trying to steer a middle course. In doing so, he has seemed to some to be weak and irresolute -- unwilling to defy the Soviets, yet unable to keep the party or the country in line. To others, however, he is a skillful tactician,

demonstrably capable of putting his men in key Party and government positions and endowed with a special talent for negotiating with the Soviets. The recent "2000 Words" Declaration of the Czechoslovak ultraliberals did not directly praise Dubcek, while the harsh Pravda article of 11 July, responding to the "2000 Words," did not directly attack him. Perhaps Dubcek himself does not know whether, if Czechoslovakia should go the road of Hungary in 1956, he would play the role of Kadar, the reluctant Soviet puppet, or Nagy, the reluctant national martyr.

4. In any case, the Czechoslovak leadership is not acting on the initiative of Dubcek alone. It includes people like Premier Cernik, Party Secretary Cisar, and Presidium members Kriegel and Smrkovsky, who are essentially liberals, and who, in the face of the most recent Soviet pressures have been resolute, if not defiant. As a group they probably desire to do almost anything to adjust the pace of the reform in order to preclude further Soviet interference in Czechoslovakia. But they feel the need to remove the conservatives from the Central Committee quickly, before those opponents have a chance to unite in desperation, and they are reluctant to move forcibly against the ultraliberals. The people who supported the "2000 Words" Declaration, which Moscow

has found so offensive, represent the elements, Party and non-Party, who triggered Novotny's downfall. For the most part intellectuals, they represent a vital link between the present leadership and the population at large.

5. The regime's dilemma thus is that on the one hand it is under pressure to make some visible concessions to the USSR or risk a Soviet effort to overthrow it. On the other hand, it fears that these same concessions might alienate the intellectuals and a substantial part of the population and lead to public disorders. This too could bring in the Soviets.

The Soviets

6. The Soviets apparently believe that Communist authority in Czechoslovakia is seriously threatened. They fear that the Dubcek regime is either too weak to prevent a takeover by revisionists and counterrevolutionaries or is actually conspiring to bring this about. The Soviets are obviously seeking ways to forestall such a development and to reassert their influence. This would enable them to avoid a final choice between two unpalatable alternatives, active military intervention along the lines of Hungary-1956, or tacit acceptance of Czechoslovakia's defection.

All courses of action, or inaction, in present circumstances are to some degree hazardous and possibly divisive among the Soviet leaders. Some must wish to move quickly and with force; others surely see virtue in some restraint and have not given up hope that Dubcek can be strengthened or brought around.

7. A major concern of at least some of the Soviet leaders must be the opposition to strong Soviet measures expressed by other Communist parties and states. Yugoslavia and Romania have given the Dubcek regime strong public endorsement and condemned the idea of Soviet military action against Czechoslovakia. In Hungary, a Party spokesman explicitly denied the validity of the USSR's comparison between Hungary of 1956 and Czechoslovakia today, and Kadar at the recent meeting in Warsaw apparently tried to counsel Soviet restraint, as he evidently has done on other occasions. Influential non-ruling Communist Parties, especially the Italians and French, are also advising Moscow to stop short of the use of force.

Outlook

8. Partly because of internal arguments and considerations such as these, the Soviet leadership has probably not as yet made

up its collective mind whether to use its troops in Czechoslovakia. It has hoped that strong pressures may yet force meaningful concessions from Dubcek, such as a purge of high-level "revisionists" -- like Party Secretary Cestmir Cisar, a man already attacked by name in Pravda -- and a silencing of "counter-revolutionary" elements in the Czech press and radio. Or, failing this, it may still have hopes that such pressures can be used, to turn Dubcek out.

9. Very much depends, of course, on what now happens inside Czechoslovakia. Some appropriate concessions from Dubcek would remove the occasion for drastic Soviet action, at least for a time. So would a successful conservative move against Dubcek. But the eventual consequences of either event are simply not calculable. Dubcek, for example, should he seek to appease Moscow might then come under open attack by liberal and moderate forces; the conservatives, even should they gain power, might find themselves faced with opposition in the streets. The Soviets might then once again be confronted with the same old dangerous questions.

10. The possibility will exist for some time that the Soviets will choose to intervene rather than permit Czechoslovakia to

drift or to move decisively toward what would appear as open disavowal of Communism or of the Warsaw Pact. The disadvantages of such intervention -- by no means inconsiderable in their view -- would simply have to be borne. This certainly was their conclusion in 1956, and though they now have more to lose through intervention than they did then, they probably could not bring themselves to suffer the loss of Czechoslovakia and all that that would imply for their position in Eastern Europe as a whole.

11. We know of no way of foretelling the precise event in Czechoslovakia which might trigger such an extreme Soviet reaction, or of foreseeing the precise circumstances which might produce within the Soviet leadership an agreement to move with force. Some particular events in the recent past which were essentially unpredictable -- e.g., the "2000 Words" -- seem to have especially alarmed the Soviets and may have led to specific countermoves. Similar events could in the future affect the opinions of one or another Soviet leader; there is always a danger, we think, that outspoken and impatient Czechoslovaks could, in effect, force the Soviet Politburo into a militant consensus.

12. There is also no way of knowing in advance the precise way the Soviets might choose to use their military power in Czechoslovakia. Moscow, however, would prefer to intervene at the invitation of some kind of pro-Soviet Czechoslovak authority -- perhaps a Kadar-like regime -- and might wish to do so in the name of restoring public order. Thus a Soviet move might be preceded or accompanied by Soviet-instigated civil disorder and the formation of a pro-Soviet rump regime.

13. So long as the Soviet troops remain in Czechoslovakia, there will be danger of strong popular reaction. It may by now have occurred to Moscow that its troops in Czechoslovakia are, in effect strengthening anti-Soviet sentiments, stiffening the resolve of even the moderate nationalists in the leadership, and hurting the cause of the pro-Soviet conservatives.

14. Should Soviet forces in fact be completely removed, the Dubcek government would have some breathing room at home. It would then have a better opportunity to restrict the ultra-liberals, at least for the time being, and in this way save some Soviet prestige. After several months, and if, as seems likely,

he consolidates his control over the Central Committee during the Party Congress in September, Dubcek would then feel safe in resuming a measured pace of reform.

FOR THE BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES:

Abbot Smith

ABBOT SMITH
Chairman