

## REMEMBERING 1968

Michael Platzer

January 2018

Last year a group of colleagues from the Regional Academy on the United Nations (RAUN) went to the popular Wenceslas Square in Prague, the football-field-size public space, full of restaurants, bars, shops, outdoor cafes, overlooked by the National Museum at the high end.

Here it was that it is there that Alois Jirasek read the Czechoslovakian Proclamation of Independence in 1918, after World War I.

Fifty years later, in March 1968, 150,000 Czechoslovakians gathered on the square to celebrate the victory of their ice hockey team over the Soviet Union; it is said this event sparked the 1968 "Prague Spring." Unfortunately, however, some of the merrymakers trashed the Aeroflot office on the square and this was used later by the Soviets to justify the need for "normalization."

Five months later, in August 1968, the square was filled with Soviet tanks, marking the end of the brave attempt by Alexander Dubcek's government at "socialism with a human face". Photos of the Russian takeover went around the world.

On 16 January 1969 a twenty-one-year old student from Prague, Jan Palach, set himself on fire in Wenceslas Square to draw attention to the loss of liberties in his country. He called for his compatriots to hold a general strike and for other students to immolate themselves for the cause.

On 25 February 1969 another student Jan Zajic burned himself to death on the same place (a memorial to the two is in front of the museum). Evzen Plocek burned himself to death in Jihlava and other public suicides followed. Their heroic acts have been memorialized in street names, statues, songs, plays, and

films in France, Italy, Netherlands, Bulgaria, Croatia, Poland, Norway, and Mauritius.

What motivates young students to take such drastic action? As a member of the class of '68, who marched against the war in Vietnam, was a member of Students for a Democratic Society, wrote his Master's thesis on the Prague Spring ( and has many Czech and Slovak friends who fled or remained dissidents in their country), I will briefly describe the atmosphere of 1968.

## USA

The war in Vietnam had reached its high point (the Viet Cong launched the Tet offensive in April 1968 and were attacking South Vietnamese cities; 549,500 US soldiers were now in the country and casualties were mounting; the American Government was drafting students en masse). Martin Luther King, Jr., who also spoke out against the war, was assassinated while organizing his Poor People's march. His followers, the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee, originally led by Trinidad-born Stokely Carmichael turned to more radical tactics ( but even more radical were the Black Panthers who advocated terrorism).

Riots broke out in Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Detroit, Kansas City, Newark, and Washington. The anti-war movement gained traction within mainstream politics (The respected journalist Walter Cronkite's discouraging report from Vietnam contributed) and thousands of students flocked to support the "peace" candidate, former academic Eugene McCarthy.

In April 1968, the Students for Democratic Society (SDS) organized "Ten Days of Resistance" in rallies, marches, sit-ins, and teach-ins which culminated in a one-day strike. A million stayed away from classes – the largest student strike in US history. Students were protesting that universities were cooperating with army recruiting agents, providing information to draft boards, and benefiting from donations by the US chemical companies providing Agent Orange used indiscriminately against plants and people by the US military in Vietnam. In

addition to the free speech movement in Berkeley where demonstrations, meetings, and strikes resulted in the shutdown of the University; activists at Columbia University occupied five buildings. There were now at least 66 SDS chapters on American university campuses. Many students were being arrested by police while others burned their draft cards in a show of defiance.

## FRANCE

Meanwhile in France, there were occupations of universities, demonstrations and massive general strikes against capitalism, consumerism, American imperialism, traditional values- which culminated in a nationwide wildcat strike involving 11 million workers (22% of the population of France) for two weeks continuously.

These student occupations and protests were met with forceful confrontations by university administrators and police. De Gaulle's attempts to quell those strikes only inflamed the situation, leading to street battles in the Latin Quarter (De Gaulle fled to a military base in Germany). Some 20,000 students, teachers, and supporters marched on the Sorbonne to protest the invasion of the campus by police on 6 May. They were met by tear gas and police charges, and massive arrests followed.

The High School unions joined the protests and there was a wave of sympathy across France when the police actions were shown on television (allegations were that police, through agent provocateurs, were throwing Molotov cocktails and burning cars). On 13 May, one million people marched through Paris. The Prime Minister Georges Pompidou finally succeeded in calming the populace by dissolving the National Assembly and calling for new elections. Although, there was a resurgent street demonstration in the Latin Quarter on 14 July led by socialist students and harshly suppressed by the police, the country returned to normal before the summer holidays.

However, the spirit of “May 1968” resounded for decades in French cultural and political movements. In October 2017 President Emmanuel Macron announced he planned to commemorate the May 68 riots, saying they “helped liberate things within French society”. Many films, music, and literature featured the events of “68”. Francois Truffaut, Jean Luc Goddard, Louis Malle, Bernardo Bertuccli, song writer Leo Ferre, the Rolling Stones, and Vangelis popularized the revolutionary feel of 1968.

## GERMANY

Many German students joined their French counterparts. Their specific grievances centered around time limits on studies, limiting the number of students „Vergangenheitsbewaeltigung” (many Professors from the Nazi period were still teaching), curbing the influence of the right-wing press (Springer publications), stopping the “Notstandsgesetze”, ending the Vietnam war (German support for South Vietnam), and improving conditions in the Third World.

Germany had its own SDS (Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund) which took up these issues but confrontation escalated when an unarmed student, Benno Ohnesong, was shot by a policeman in a protest against the Shah of Iran’s visit in 1967.

The students in Berlin took over the Free University. In autumn 1967 there were organized protests at nearly all universities in Germany. At Easter 1968 there was the attempted assassination of the one of the most important members of the SDS, Rudi Dutschke. Students were outraged because the Springer publication “Bild” named Dutschke as a public enemy; they attempted to block the delivery of Springer publications and demonstrated in front of the Springer buildings. During these protest actions 400 students were injured and two died.

In May 1968, 80,000 students and members of workers unions protested unsuccessfully in Bonn to stop the emergency legislation, Notstandsgesetze. As

in France, the lasting effect of the “68er Bewegung” was to end conservatism at the universities and in society, influence the education and raising of children, and initiate social, environmental, and political action at the local and regional level. Many of the student activists of 60s and 70s later became ministers in the Gerhard Schroeder government. Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer was a sixties activist who became a leading figure in the Green Party in Germany. His friend, Daniel Cohn-Bendit who was a leader of the first student occupation in Nanterre, France, later became deputy mayor of Frankfurt and in 1994 Member of the European Parliament.

## ITALY

In May 1968, many universities in Italy were occupied. In the same month, one hundred artists including Gio and Arnaldo Pomodoro, Ernesto Treccani, and Gianni Dova occupied the Palazzo della Triennale in Milan for 15 days. The 1968 movement, “Sessantotto” had its roots in the strikes and student occupations of the 1960s.

Initially, left- and right-wing students protested together, for example, in the Battle of Valle Giulia in front of the Architecture faculty in Rome on 1 March 1968, where 480 students and 150 police were injured and 200 were arrested. On 16 March, the University Sapienza was occupied by left-wing students.

However, the story in Italy is more complicated because Catholic students and priests inspired by the recently concluded Vatican Council with its emphasis on lay involvement in social justice were also supporting the “Catholic liberation” theologians and worker priests in Latin America but also work among the poor in Italy. Don Torres, a Colombian priest who took up arms was as popular as popular as Fidel Castro and Che Guevara in the Italy of that time. The founders of Red Brigades, Renato Curcio and Mara Cagol, later responsible for violent acts of terrorism in the 70s and 80s, met as students at the University of Trento. The roots of this group were in the Sociology Department of the Catholic University.

## CZECHOSLOVAKIA

The “Prague Spring” was also driven by intellectuals, particularly writers and economists. While an internal Communist reform was taking place under Alexander Dubcek, together with the Central Committee which approved the removal of the Stalinist Antonin Novotny as Secretary General and a Reform Action Program, at the very same time, a mass movement of optimism was unleashed, perhaps inspired by events in other countries.

French intellectuals did visit Prague in early 1968. In March, thousands marched to the graves of Tomas Masaryk, the first President of Czechoslovakia and Jan Masaryk, son and foreign minister of the Second Republic, killed on the orders of Stalin. They now demanded a restoration of a functioning Parliament and free elections. The press simply took advantage of the internally check-mated Communist Party (the Stalinists vs the moderates) and published freely about the corruption of Novotny, past injustices committed under Communism, as well as a poll that found 90% of the population wanted a multi-party system.

A group of victims of incarceration for “anti-socialist” activities met in March; by May a petition for their rehabilitation and indemnification was signed by 50,000 (Vaclav Havel estimated that there were 80,000 political prisoners.) In June, a “letter of 2,000 words” signed by 70 intellectuals criticized the progress of democratization and demanded that corrupt officials be exposed, investigative newspapers started, special citizen committees set up, the National Front revived, and the incompetent apparatchiks fired from their cushy jobs.

The re-orientation in foreign policy was even bolder: Austrian style neutrality, reconsideration of membership in COMECON, expanded trade with the West, acceptance of loans offered by the US, Germany, and the World Bank; development of closer relations with Romania and Yugoslavia. At the May Day processions, anti-Soviet slogans appeared. While the Action Program contained many progressive ideas: student organizations independent of the Communist Party; unrestricted travel abroad (10,000 took advantage to “summer” in

Western Europe); minority rights for Hungarians, Poles, Germans, Ukrainians, Roma, and Jews; strengthening independence of the judiciary; division of security function (state security only deal with groups from abroad; local police deal with common crimes); a system of checks and balances (power should not reside in one individual or organ); separation of Slovakia from Czech Republic; the articulation of divergent views be allowed (freedom of speech) and private ownership of property- THE REFORM PROGRAM WAS PROBABLY DOOMED BY THE END OF SPRING

### THE SOVIET RESPONSE

Communist observers in East Germany, Poland, and the USSR were increasingly anxious about developments in Czechoslovakia, the abandonment of the “leading role” of the Communist Party, and the increasing anarchy. First, the carrot of a \$100 million credit was offered by USSR.

On 1 May Dubcek flew to explain anti-Soviet May Day slogans but returned empty-handed, no loan, and the Soviets halted the wheat shipments. Bulgarian, East German, Hungarian, and Polish leaders then met in Moscow on how to deal with the Czechs. A Soviet military division moved close to Czech border in southern Poland. The Czechoslovak Ministry of Defense refused to allow Warsaw troops to maneuver on their territory for the annual joint exercises. On 16 May, a Soviet military delegation arrived and Soviet Premier Kosygin came to Karlovy Vary to reach an agreement. Novotny was suspended from all his Party and Presidential functions and Dubcek called for a Party Congress in September; it appeared the economic reforms would be allowed to continue.

At the same time, Soviet Army units crossed into Western Bohemia at the end of May, to remain until 20 September. In early June, more Soviet troops were deployed with specialists without the knowledge of the Czechoslovak Ministry of the Interior. A Soviet General offered aid to “faithful” Communists and the Soviet Pravda newspaper published that “Czechs are two faced- enemies hiding behind

slogans of democratization". The continued delivery of iron ore and gas to Czechoslovakia was now threatened by the Soviets.

The Czech Presidium issued a statement condemning the progressives' demand to continue the purge of conservatives. 40,000 people signed a resolution to continue the purges. Another attempt at reaching a compromise took place in July at Cierna na Tisou near the Soviet-Slovak border where the Czechoslovak leaders reaffirmed their loyalty to the Warsaw Pact and promised to curb "anti-socialist" tendencies, control the press, and prevent the revival of the Social Democratic Party.

On 3 August, the "Warsaw Five" met in Bratislava and affirmed their unshakable fidelity to Marxism-Leninism and proletarian internationalism. The Soviet Union expressed its intention of intervening in a Warsaw Pact country if a "bourgeois" system – pluralist system of parties representing different factions of the capitalist class – were ever established. This became known as the Brezhnev Doctrine. During the night of 20-21 August, 200,000 troops and 2,000 tanks entered the country. Czechoslovakian troops were confined to their barracks and surrounded. Dubcek called upon his people not to resist.

#### POPULAR RESISTANCE AND AFTER-EFFECTS

Just before the military intervention, one million Czechoslovaks signed a letter "Tell them we need democracy, calm and time to become better socialists". Following the invasion, popular opposition was expressed in numerous spontaneous acts of non-violent resistance. Road signs were removed confusing the Warsaw Pact conveyors or painted over indicating the way to Moscow. Small villages renamed themselves "Dubcek" and other civilians gave the wrong directions to invading soldiers. Soviet tanks were surrounded in Wenceslas Square and even set on fire. 72 Czechs and Slovaks were killed (19 in Slovakia), 266 severely wounded, and another 436 injured. 70,000 people fled the country immediately with an eventual total of some 300,000. Dubcek was replaced as first secretary by Gustav Husak and given a job as a forestry official. Press



censorship was re-introduced and commentary on politics forbidden. The only significant change that survived was the federalization of the country.

Nonetheless, the Prague Spring has been remembered in literature, songs, and film. Twenty years later the entire Soviet empire collapsed; many see a direct thread to “Perestroika”, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Velvet Revolution in Prague, the Croatian Spring in Yugoslavia, the Beijing Spring, and even the Arab Spring.

## 1968 ELSEWHERE

Meanwhile, back in the USA, the iconic artist Andy Warhol and presidential candidate Robert Kennedy were shot in July. The Republicans nominated Richard Nixon on 8 August in Miami. The Democratic Convention opened in Chicago on 26 August. Abbie Hoffman and his “Yippies” organized a “Festival of Life” in contrast to what they call the Convention’s “Festival of Death.” Mayor Richard Daley set the Chicago police against the demonstrators. The police beat some marchers unconscious, sent at least 100 to emergency rooms while arresting 175. For many Americans, what happened outside the Convention was remembered longer than what happened inside—Hubert Humphrey becoming the presidential candidate. The Women’s Liberation groups targeted the Miss America Beauty Contest in Atlantic City, in September, with theatrical demonstrations of ritual disposal of traditional female roles into the “freedom ashcan.”

## MEXICO

Inspired in part by what had happened in Prague, France, Germany, Italy, and the USA, students from 70 universities and preparatory schools rocked Mexico to promote social, educational, and political reform in the summer of 1968. “It was a time of great hope...Students were out in the streets, in the plazas, on the buses, forming brigades, going to the people”. The subsequent confrontations with the

police were sparked by the attack of riot police in July on a vocational school where the authorities gave \$3 to each policeman for every student they clubbed.

On 1 August the Rector of the National Autonomous University of Mexico led 50,000 students in a peaceful protest against the repressive actions of the government and violation of university autonomy.

In September, with the opening of the Olympics approaching, President Diaz Ordos—determined to stop these demonstrations—ordered the army to occupy the UNAM campus. The police again beat and arrested students indiscriminately. Students began to prepare for defensive operations in other institutions.

On 23 September, the students at the Polytechnic campuses of Zacatecas and Santo Tomas held their campuses against the army occupation for more than 12 hours against bazookas and sophisticated military equipment. One thousand bullets were fired, randomly, according to students; 15 students were killed, more than 50 seriously injured.

On 2 October, 10,000 university and high school students gathered in the Plaza des las Tres Culturas to protest the government's actions and listen to speeches. Many men, women, and children from the neighborhood came to watch. Suddenly two helicopters appeared and three flares illuminated the square. 5,000 soldiers with 200 tanks and trucks had surrounded the Plaza and indiscriminate shooting into the crowd started. The Olympia Battalion, a secret government branch made for the security of the Olympic games advanced into the Plaza to arrest the student leaders. It was later revealed that members of the Presidential Guard were instructed to fire on military forces to provoke them. In the end mounds of mounds of bodies soon lay on the ground including students, journalists, and passersby.

Numerous attempts to get at the truth of the Tlatelolco massacre have failed, although former President Luis Echeverria was arrested on charges of genocide (charges later dismissed) The US Pentagon had sent military radios, weapons,

ammunition and riot control training material to Mexico before the crisis and the CIA was known to have been carefully monitoring the situation with the students before the Olympic Games.

The subsequent iconic “black power” salutes of Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the games joined the emblematic photos of 1968-: the Parisian student revolt (“Bloody Monday”), the Russian tanks in Wenceslas Square, the burning of draft cards in the USA, the Battle of Valle Giulia at Rome University, the attempted assassination of Rudi Dutschke in Germany, the murder of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy.

But one often forgets the massive peaceful student marches in Prague, Rome, Mexico City, Bonn, and Washington which in the end changed a generation’s way of thinking and acting about injustice.