

The Prague Spring and Its Aftermath: Some Personal Reflections*

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A peculiar law seems to have governed the history of the Cold War. With the exception of the GDR in 1953, an anti-Soviet and anti-state socialist revolt subsequently defeated by military means occurred every 12 years in one of the Warsaw Pact states that had come under Soviet control as a consequence of WWII: Hungary in 1956, Prague in 1968, and Poland in 1980. (To be sure, in the latter case there was no Soviet intervention, but Wojciech Jaruzelski's regime of martial law was instead justified as a means of preventing it.) The following is another mysterious pattern: Dramatic events to the east of the Iron Curtain followed in close temporal succession to events to its west. There was just one week between the beginning of the Suez crisis on 29 October 1956 and the Red Army's invasion of Hungary on 4 November of that year. And less than three months elapsed between the crushing of the May 1968 revolt and the mass strikes in France on 30 May (accomplished by the threat of military intervention, with French tanks in view, and by de Gaulle's call to stop 'totalitarian communism' from taking over France) and Warsaw Pact troops' invasion of Czechoslovakia on 21 August that same year.

Two days before that date I had arrived on the Yugoslav island of Korčula, where a group of dissident Serbian and Croatian philosophers, the 'Praxis group', had organised a summer school. Despite the defeat of the Paris May, the spirit of the large meeting of Western leftist intellectuals and Yugoslav dissidents was relaxed and confident. I remember Ernst Bloch, Herbert Marcuse, and Jürgen Habermas discussing current events and political forces on a garden bench in the bright Mediterranean sun and evidently having a good time.

As an aspiring young academic, I was an active sympathiser of the German student movement after having spent many of my student days in the circles of the SDS, the Socialist German Student League. The mobilisation and protest activities of the German student movement had peaked between 2 June 1967, the

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date when a peaceful demonstrator protesting a state visit of the Iranian Shah was shot and killed by a police officer, and 11 April 1968, when student leader Rudi Dutschke was shot at and severely wounded by a young man who was presumably misled by the massive anti-student media campaign.

Interest in and knowledge about what was going on on the other side of the Iron Curtain was at the time close to zero in the German student movement, outside a small Trotskyite fringe, that is. By the time Berlin Wall was built (1961), at the latest, Soviet-controlled state socialism had lost all political appeal and moral authority for the emerging West European 'New Left'. Rather than being anything like 'communists', most leftists of my generation born in the 1940s liked to describe themselves as anti-anti-communists.

My own academic interest at the time was in 'technology and society' issues, the topic of my master's thesis (1965). After a short tourist visit to Prague (1966), when someone made me aware of some of the work of Radovan Richta and his group, I read some of it and even wrote a review at the time. Economists who were familiar with the work of Ota Šik were part of my intellectual milieu, as were philosophers who had read Karel Kosík. While these works were clearly superior in intellectual appeal than anything we stumbled upon written by GDR writers, they belonged to the fields of interest of a few specialists in Frankfurt (where I was living at the time).

Back to Korčula. Two days into the summer school, everyone was shocked by the news of the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia. The programme was suspended, protest resolutions were drafted and debated (without people having any clear idea of whom to address them to), and – given the communication technology that existed then – much time was spent by non-Yugoslav participants listening to the German programme of nearby Radio Tirana on a crackling portable radio. Apart from the solid information we got from an Albanian journalist reporting from Prague, comments consisted of vehement condemnation of Soviet imperialism.

Back in Frankfurt, a friend (the late Gero Lenhardt) and I had the idea to jointly write a theatre piece on the Prague Spring and its end. At the time documentary collages were the fashion in the dramatic arts (in which both of us were absolute novices), so we assembled two hours' worth of verbatim quotations from all kinds of actors involved in the dramatic events of the Prague Spring, from its hopeful beginnings to its tragic end. Without much dramaturgical effort, professional actors performed these texts in confrontational dialogues that were combined with informational summaries of the events and passionate pronouncements. We managed to persuade the municipal theatre in Frankfurt to actually perform our piece in November on its studio stage. Unfortunately, the text has now been lost. I remember, however, the fortunate coincidence that Eduard Goldstücker happened to be in town on the day of the premiere and we were able to persuade him to perform himself and read his own words (which we had excerpted from his writings and speeches) on stage.

Shortly before the end of 1968, my co-author and I went on another visit to Prague. Without having any professional or personal contacts in the country, we started up conversations with people (who spoke German) whom we met in pubs or restaurants. Our impressions were devastating: The silence of a graveyard. We could not discern any traces of the spirit of 'Spring'. I remember one elderly gentleman asking me for a favour: Could I send him a catalogue of Neckermann, the German mail order department store? His logic was: since we will never be able to buy the things pictured in the catalogue, we want at least to be able to look at them. I don't think I did him the favour. But when September 1980 came, I travelled for two weeks to Gdańsk, Warsaw, and Cracow to gain first-hand experience and information on the spot. I would probably not have done so without the recollection of my previous experience of (the fate of) the Prague Spring.