



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Czechoslovak resistance to Soviet occupation, 1968

Time period notes: *It should be noted that resistance to the occupation continued until August 1969, however the scope of this campaign looks at the week of protest leading to the Moscow Protocol.*

The tactics used after the first week of protest are present in the narrative, but not in database fields. The case could be made that the 'campaign' actually extends until Soviet forces crushed protests in 1969.

21 August

1968

to: 27 August

1968

Country: Czechoslovakia

Country: Czech Republic

Country: Slovakia

Location City/State/Province: *mostly Prague*

Location Description: *at time of campaign the region was Czechoslovakia*

Goals:

To resist Soviet military occupation and attempts to install a puppet regime

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 025. Displays of portraits
- 030. Rude gestures
- 033. Fraternalization
- 037. Singing
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 120. Withholding or withdrawal of allegiance
- 129. Refusal of assistance to enforcement agents
- 172. Nonviolent obstruction
- 180. Alternative communication system › social networks through secret radio

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 033. Fraternalization
- 049. Camouflaged meetings of protest
- 110. Slowdown strike
- 120. Withholding or withdrawal of allegiance
- 140. Hiding, escape, and false identities
- 180. Alternative communication system › social networks through secret radio

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 026. Paint as protest
- 033. Fraternalization
- 120. Withholding or withdrawal of allegiance
- 130. Removal of own signs and placemarks
- 180. Alternative communication system › social networks through secret radio

Methods in 4th segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 033. Fraternalization
- 120. Withholding or withdrawal of allegiance
- 180. Alternative communication system › social networks through secret radio

Methods in 5th segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 033. Fraternalization
- 120. Withholding or withdrawal of allegiance

Methods in 6th segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 033. Fraternalization
- 120. Withholding or withdrawal of allegiance
- 180. Alternative communication system › social networks through secret radio

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support › International solidarity protests
- 107. Sympathy strike › International strikes in solidarity
- 192. Alternative economic institutions

Classifications

Classification:

Defense

Cluster:

Democracy

Group characterization:

- Czechoslovak citizens

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Czechoslovak communist party, Czechoslovak Congress, Czechoslovak Communist First Secretary Alexander Dubcek

Partners:

villagers in Upa, Czech Radio Broadcasters, military who turned over secret broadcasting locations, the Horka Poricany Agricultural Cooperative

External allies:

Solidarity actions in Italy, Austria, France, and Holland; other Communist parties from around the world

Involvement of social elites:

Czechoslovak political elites helped organize and voice protests

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Czech communist party
- villagers in Upa

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Czech Congress

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

- Horka Poricany Agricultural Cooperative

Additional notes on joining/exiting order:

Italian, Austrian, French, and Dutch citizens who demonstrated in solidarity, timing unknown

Segment Length: about 1 day

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Soviet leaders and troops; military units from Poland, East Germany, Hungary, and Bulgaria

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

The occupiers distributed their own leaflets justifying the occupation

Campaigner violence:

Some resisters threw Molotov cocktails (homemade gasoline bombs), destroying some tanks and killing the tank crews.

Immediately after these incidents, Dubcek denounced violence over the radio. Even still, some unorganized violent resistance did occur further.

Repressive Violence:

Soldiers opening fire on protesters, killing and wounding some; 70 citizens were killed overall and hundreds more were wounded by soviet troops

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

3 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

The Czechoslovak delegation accepted the 'Moscow Protocol,' which allowed most Czechoslovak leaders to remain in power, but implicitly condemned the post-January reforms. The agreement demanded the increased suppression of opposition groups and tighter censorship policy. It also allowed Soviet forces to remain in Czechoslovakia. So while the resistance did keep Dubcek in power a while longer, Soviet occupiers remained in the country. For this reason many protesters saw the campaign as a failure. This would eventually lead to Dubcek's ousting and further repression from Soviet forces.

Resisters persisted throughout the occupation, with many sentiments of the campaign leading to later protest and eventually the Velvet Revolution. However, after the initial week of protests, the resisters became exhausted and partly demoralized.

The campaign grew tremendously immediately after word of the invasion spread, involving many sectors of society. However, after the initial week of protests, the resisters became exhausted and partly demoralized.

For the first eight months of 1968, the Czechoslovak Communist Party engaged in limited but significant reforms known as 'Prague Spring,' including declarations of freedom of expression and organization. The reform movement began in January, when moderate Alexander Dubcek replaced the Party's hard-line First Secretary.

Communist leaders in the Soviet Union and satellite regimes in Central Europe saw these reforms as a threat and took action to stop them. On the night of August 20, 1968, at least 300,000 Soviet troops, plus units from Poland, East Germany, Hungary, and Bulgaria invaded the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. Czechoslovakian forces were largely outnumbered; it was hoped that in the chaos of invasion, Dubcek's leadership could be quickly destabilized and possibly replaced. Soviet forces shut down Czechoslovak borders, seized airports, and swiftly occupied most towns.

Resistance to the invasion started immediately. Civilians met soldiers with arguments and condemnations. Signs and graffiti denounced the invasion. People brought pictures of Dubcek into the streets and gave wrong directions to invading soldiers. The night of the invasion, the Czechoslovak military was told to stay in the barracks. The morning of August 21, statements from the Czechoslovak Communist Party Presidium were read over Prague radio denouncing the invasion, and pleading that civilians 'stay calm'.

Soon after, youth demonstrated in the streets, forming human blockades in front of tanks, later using overturned buses and vehicles. Radio broadcasters advocated 'passive resistance,' alerting the public that the invaders were looking for an excuse to attack.

Hundreds gathered at iconic statues in Prague, where they fraternized with Soviet soldiers. Demonstrators sang the national anthem and chanted 'Dubcek'. Banners and protest messages appeared throughout the city, denouncing the occupation and urging the soldiers to leave.

On the afternoon of August 21 villagers in Upa formed a human blockade across a bridge, blocking the route of invading tanks. After some time, the tanks turned and left. In some confrontations in Prague and other cities, rude gestures and calls for Soviets to go home led to the soldiers opening fire, killing and wounding protesters. Some resisters threw Molotov cocktails (homemade gasoline bombs) in return, destroying some tanks and killing the tank crews. Immediately after these incidents, Dubcek denounced violence over the radio. Even still, some unorganized violent resistance did continue to occur. Shortly after, Soviet forces captured Dubcek, along with other prominent Czechoslovak reformers.

That evening, radio broadcasters discouraged even mass demonstration. Instead, resisters heavily used radio, leaflets, newspapers, and signs to spread a message of opposition and condemnation of the occupation. Resistance leaflets were distributed by Czechoslovak police cars using their sirens and lights in order to get through Soviet checkpoints. Civilians gained access to secret radio broadcasting stations set up by the military (unclear which military), which they used to set up social networks to spread instructions of resistance. Reports indicate that organized bodies formed through radio and telephone this way to organize and disseminate information.

On the morning on August 22, the Fourteenth Congress of the Communist Party (national governmental congress of Czechoslovakia) held an emergency meeting in a factory outside of Prague. Some reports claim that the delegates disguised themselves as workers to make it past Soviet troops. Almost 1,192 delegates attended. The Congress issued a statement that condemned the invasion as unjustified, stated that there had been no Czechoslovak counterrevolution, called for leaders to be released and reinstated, and called for a one-hour protest strike the next day if troops did not withdraw.

More leaflets were distributed. A petition circulated calling for the release of Dubcek. Newspapers and magazines continued to publish, often with the words 'legal' or 'free,' indicating that they were not in the hands of the occupation. Some printed messages to the occupying soldiers in Russian; graffiti in Russian was also common. The call to strike was broadcasted over the radio, in addition to calls for a go-slow of railway workers, which successfully delayed the transport of radio jammers to the occupiers. The radio served other functions as well, assuring parents of the whereabouts of children in summer camp, and relaying updates about negotiations in Moscow.

On August 23, Soviet leaders agreed to let Czechoslovakian President Svoboda travel to Moscow for negotiations. He insisted that Dubcek and others be present at the negotiation table.

That evening in Prague, radio broadcasts warned of potential arrests. Civilians painted over street signs to confuse the occupiers. Some rioting and looting did occur as well as Czechoslovakians conspiring with occupying forces.

The next day, August 24, Soviet forces intensified the occupation, removing signs and graffiti (which resisters quickly replaced), conducting searches, and distributing their own leaflets justifying the occupation.

International solidarity protests to the occupation occurred through August 27, which included demonstrations in Italy, a general

strike in Austria, work stoppage in France, and a moment of silence in Holland. Soviet troops showed signs of decreasing morale, with some defying orders to disperse crowds. Farmers worked extra hours; the Horka Poricany Agricultural Cooperative announced it would donate over 5 tons of potatoes to citizens in Prague during the resistance.

After four days of negotiation in Moscow, the Czechoslovakian delegation accepted the 'Moscow Protocol,' which allowed most Czechoslovakian leaders to remain in power, but implicitly condemned the post-January reforms. The agreement demanded the increased suppression of opposition groups and a tighter censorship policy. It also allowed Soviet forces to remain in Czechoslovakia. One person, Chairman of the National Front Frantisek Kriegel, refused to sign the protocol; he was stripped of all official duties and was later expelled from the party.

Public reaction to the protocol was mixed, with many seeing it as a failure of the resistance. Mass resistance is said to have lasted for about seven days, after which the resisters became exhausted and partly demoralized.

Soviet forces would linger in Czechoslovakia for months, pushing their political agenda. But public resistance to the occupation didn't stop completely. In early November there were mass demonstrations in Prague, Bratislava, Brno, and other cities. Later, tens of thousands of students conducted a four-day sit-in in high schools and colleges, with factories sending them food in solidarity.

In mid-January 1969, Jan Palach a college student set himself on fire in Wenceslas Square to protest the occupation and the removal of civil liberties. His funeral turned into a protest demonstration and the next month another student, Jan Zajíc, burned himself to death in the same square. In April, Evžen Plocek committed the same act in Jihlava.

Soviet forces cracked down on further protest demonstrations later in the year with full force. Dubcek was ousted soon after demonstrations in March and replaced with a Party hard-liner who reversed Dubcek's reforms and purged the party of any opposition. Protests in August 1969 were brutally suppressed. These turned out to be the last mass demonstration against the invasion. In total about 70 people were killed during the invasion and up to 1,000 were wounded in shootings.

Research Notes

Influences:

The Velvet Revolution would nonviolently overthrow the Czechoslovak communist twenty years later; direct influence not known (2)

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Additional Notes:

It should be noted that resistance to the occupation continued until August 1969, however the scope of this campaign looks at the week of protest leading to the Moscow Protocol. The tactics used after the first week of protest are present in the narrative, but not in database fields. The case could be made that the 'campaign' actually extends until Soviet forces crushed protests in 1969.

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