

Ebook on Cold War crises: Berlin, Cuba and Czechoslovakia c. 1957-69 By StudyGuide.pk

Berlin: a divided city

A map of East and West Berlin; The thick black line shows the Wall around the western part of the city, 1961.



After World War II the city of Berlin was divided into four sectors. The American, British and French sectors were part of the western system and the Soviet sector was part of the communist system in the East. Until the erection of the Berlin Wall on August 13, 1961 Berlin citizens were allowed to cross the city's border sectors from West to East or East to West. Berlin.

Why did Khrushchev order the building of the Berlin Wall?

The impact of the Second World War

After 1945, the British, French and American zones of Germany and Berlin were given economic assistance. Eventually, the three zones amalgamated to form Trizonia and with the introduction of the common currency (the Deutschmark) economic recovery began. Stalin wanted to push the Allies from their Berlin

occupation zones because they were situated in the Soviet occupation of Germany. As prosperity returned to the city, Stalin did not want a visible example of economic recovery when those citizens of East Berlin and the Soviet zone were still experiencing hardships. The influx of Marshall Aid only served to highlight the growing gulf between the two areas.

The situation over Berlin came to a head in 1948 when Stalin blocked all land and water communication between the Allied zones in Germany and their zones on Berlin. The result was the Berlin Airlift. For almost one year the Western Allies flew in supplies to feed the 2 million citizens of their Berlin zones. In May 1949, Stalin called a halt to the Blockade. However, the diplomatic situation had now changed – the wartime alliance was now clearly over and a key result of the Blockade was the creation of the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) and the German Democratic Republic (East Germany).

Many East Germans did not like life under communist rule and fled to the West through Berlin. It has been estimated that during the period after the Airlift until the construction of the Berlin Wall, about 4 million East Germans moved to West Germany. Stalin did not want this gap in the Iron Curtain and sought to block it after the Airlift. The Soviet Union became convinced that the USA and Britain used West Berlin as a base for spying.

What was life like in East Germany and East Berlin?

People left after 1949 because life in the East was dominated by the Communist Party. In East Germany the Communist Party exercised greater control than in any other East European state. East Germany was the only Communist country that had, in effect, been created from nothing and it became the model which the other Soviet satellite states were expected to follow. As in all other communist states, no other political parties were permitted and elections involved a selection from a list of candidates supplied by the communists.

Freedom of expression was restricted. Consumer goods were limited and often of poor quality. Sales of foreign goods were restricted. Foreign travel was difficult and currency sales were strictly controlled in an effort to obtain foreign exchange. The Communist Party controlled the media, which meant that there was no legal means of finding out about what was happening in the world on the other side of the Iron Curtain. Newspapers and the radio and television could only report the official version of the news. This was rather more difficult in East Germany because of the ease of movement into West Berlin. It was this issue in particular which began to exercise East German and Soviet leaders in the 1950s.

People were subject to the secret police. Such organisations operated outside the law and there was little that an ordinary citizen could do about their actions. The Secret Police of East Germany (STASI – *Staatssicherheit* translated - State Security) was established with Soviet help. It was responsible for both domestic political surveillance and espionage. Eventually, it employed 85,000 and had hundreds of thousands of informers so that it could monitor the population closely.

The Stasi operated for more than forty years and collected a vast amount of information about the people of East Germany. When its archives were taken over by

the Federal Government, they were found to contain 122 kilometres of paper, including 46.5 kilometres on microfiche, 360,000 photographs, 600,000 negatives, 24,000 slides, 3,850 videos, 730 films and 99,500 sound recordings. Altogether, the Stasi had information on about 6,000,000 people, out of a total population of 16,000,000. In addition to security information, there were also details of debts, drinking habits and sexual preferences. These were used to blackmail unwilling individuals.

What were the benefits of life in the East?

All citizens of the countries of Eastern Europe had a job. Prices were controlled at a low level. Rent, electricity, gas and telephone charges were minimal by western standards. Public transport was very cheap and very reliable. But these advantages were outweighed by the possibility of greater freedom as well as much higher earnings and a much higher standard of living in the West.

Checkpoint: East and West

Why did so many people try to leave the East?

Negative aspects of the East	Attractions of the West

The refugee problem

East Germans fled to the West because they were dissatisfied with the economic and political conditions of a communist society. The forced collectivisation of agriculture and the end of private trading were not popular among the people of East Germany. Moreover, there were shortages of consumer goods, which could be easily bought at low prices in West Berlin. The people of East Berlin and East Germany could readily see the prosperity of the West. It had always been possible for Berliners to travel from one part of the city to another. Many worked in one sector and lived in another. It was easy for them to see what life was like on the other side. Wages were much higher in the West and there was a much higher standard of living. In the West there were no secret police and no censorship. In West Berlin all of these advantages could be clearly seen.

Eventually defectors (the word defector eventually replaced the term refugee) were well-educated engineers, scientists, teachers, doctors and lecturers. They were just the sort of people that the Communist Bloc could not afford to lose as it tried to modernise its industry and agriculture. Defectors also made it very difficult for Khrushchev (Stalin's successor) to prove that the Soviet system was better than the West. He needed to stop the brain drain (the term given to the loss of highly educated professional people) if East Germany was to catch up with the West. By the summer of 1961, the number of defectors rose to 10,000 per week and Khrushchev knew that he would have to step in and prevent such a continued exodus of skilled people.

In November 1958, Khrushchev had demanded that the three Western powers should leave West Berlin. He put forward the idea of creating one neutral city from the four original occupation zones. President Eisenhower of the USA was prepared to discuss the future of the city and it was agreed that he would meet Khrushchev in May 1960. However, the summit conference was tarnished by events following the shooting down of an American U2 spy-plane on 1 May 1960.

The U2 Crisis, May 1960

Relations between the Soviet Union and the USA were worsened by the U2 incident, when a US spy plane was shot down over the Soviet Union on 1 May 1960. President Eisenhower said he would stop all future U2 flight over the Soviet Union, but he would not apologise for the incident. He claimed that the U2 was carrying out weather reconnaissance and was not in fact spying. He did this because he was assured by his aides that if the plane had been shot down, it would have been destroyed and the pilot would have been killed. In fact, the pilot, Gary Powers, was alive and was put on trial in Moscow. The plane had largely survived the crash landing and was evidence that the USA had been used for spying. This came in the middle of a Summit Meeting in Paris and on one occasion Khrushchev famously stormed out of talks with Eisenhower; grabbing the headlines of the world's press as he did so. Khrushchev was able to use the U2 incident to embarrass the USA who had initially lied about the plane. The summit meeting collapsed and relations between the USA and Soviet Union worsened dramatically.

For more information about the U2 incident, including film, click [here](#)

The Berlin Wall

Photograph of the building of the Berlin Wall, August 1961



After the U2 Crisis, the situation in Berlin did not improve. In 1960, the number of defectors rose to 199,000 and in the first seven months of 1961, about 207,000 left East Germany. In September 1960, East Germany forced West Berliners who wanted to travel to East Berlin to obtain a police pass. This was the first time that any restriction had been placed on travel between the four sectors in Berlin. It was clear that the West was not going to leave West Berlin of its own free will. The only way to plug the gap in the Iron Curtain was to cut off West Berlin from East Germany. At the Vienna summit in June 1961, Khrushchev told the new President Kennedy that the Soviet Union was considering signing a peace treaty with East Germany and this would give East Germany control of all communication links between West Germany and West Berlin. This would break the wartime agreements. Kennedy felt that he stood up to Khrushchev in Vienna, but when later asked about the meeting he said –

‘Khrushchev, he beat the hell out of me.’

By the early summer of 1961, East German President, Walter Ulbricht, told the Soviet Union that an immediate solution was necessary and that the only way to stop the exodus was to use force. This presented a delicate problem for the Soviet Union because the four-power status of Berlin specified free travel between zones and specifically forbade the presence of German troops in Berlin. East Germans, seeing the crisis worsen, fled to West Berlin in even greater numbers than ever. In July 1961, alone there were some 30,000.

The construction of the Berlin Wall started at 2:00 A.M. on August 13, 1961 when access routes were blocked by barbed wire. Two days later, the first concrete blocks being put in place and the barrier separating the two parts of the city was constructed in earnest. The Wall effectively sealed off the best escape route open to disenchanted East Germans, thus halting the mass movement of people to the West. After its construction, the number of refugees entering West Berlin and West Germany fell drastically

Data about the Berlin Wall

Total border length around West Berlin: 155 km
Border between East and West Berlin: 43.1 km
Border between West Berlin and East Germany: 111.9 km
Concrete segment wall: 3.6m high, 106 km
Wire mesh fencing: 66.5 km
Anti-vehicle trenches: 105.5 km
Contact or signal fence: 127.5 km
Column track: 6-7 m wide, 124.3 km
Number of watch towers: 302
Number of bunkers: 20
Persons killed on the Berlin Wall: c. 300
Persons injured by shooting: c. 200

For more photographs of the Berlin Wall, click [here](#)

To visit the Wall Museum at 'Checkpoint Charlie', click [here](#)

Why did Khrushchev believe that he could get away building the Wall?

Khrushchev believed that he could get away with building the Wall because John F Kennedy, the US president, had been made to look foolish over the Bay of Pigs (see below). Following the Vienna meeting, Khrushchev decided that Kennedy was inexperienced and could be easily pushed around.

What were the consequences of building the Berlin Wall?

In some ways it made relations between the superpowers better. Khrushchev did not have to worry about defectors and there was also a clear dividing line between East and West. There was less confrontation between the two sides in Berlin. But many Berliners were caught on the wrong side of the Wall and were cut off from their families. Although visits across the Wall began in 1964, it was impossible to reunite families until 1989. Many people tried to escape from the East and 300 people were killed trying to cross the Wall

President Kennedy ordered three increases in the US defence budget in the next two years. He realised that he could not afford to lose out again. He would have to stand up to Khrushchev the next time. In 1963 he visited Berlin and made a speech to hundreds of thousands of West Berliners. In it he said, 'Ich bin ein Berliner'. This was meant to show that he was sharing their difficulties, but it actually meant 'I am a doughnut'. 'Berliner' was a slang term for a doughnut.

Part of Kennedy's speech in Berlin, 1963.

Freedom has many difficulties and democracy is not perfect, but we never had to put up a wall to keep our people in. All free men, wherever they may live, are citizens of Berlin, and therefore, as a free man, I take pride in the words, 'Ich bin ein Berliner'.

Kennedy hoped that his words would echo around the free world, but was probably puzzled by the slow response of his audience at the time. He was unaware that a 'Berliner' was slang for a type of popular pastry and had therefore described himself as a doughnut.

It is important to understand that the pictures of the Wall that are published in books often give a very false impression of its appearance and construction. In many parts of Berlin it was something of a ramshackle structure, which was continuously improved. In fact, for some years, the Wall hardly existed at all in some areas of the city and was patrolled by East German Border Guards to stop people escaping. In Bernauer Strasse, the site of the Wall Memorial, the Wall ran along the front of houses on the south side of the street. It actually ran through some of the houses, so people could escape by going from one room to another.

The Wall was continuously being improved and there were at least four different stages of work. The fourth generation of the Wall was made of reinforced concrete blocks with a rounded top. This was intended to make escape over the Wall very difficult. But these sections are not regarded as being the Wall proper and the only genuine piece remaining is at the Wall Memorial. The main Wall was completed by 1974, when it had 1053 watch-towers and 493 underground bunkers.

There were many attempts to escape across the Wall. Some of the more notable include:

- On 4 August 1984, Josef Hlavaty, a Czech, and his wife and three sons all escaped in a home made aircraft. It was fitted with an engine that came from a Trabant (an East German car) and it flew for 100 km.
- A couple who put a wreath on top of their car and said they were going to lay it at the Soviet memorial in West Berlin. They were waved through the first barrier and then smashed their way through the second.
- One tunnel was 120 metres long and was dug by nine people. There were six men aged 81, 76, 70, 58, 57 and 55, and three women aged 68, 48 and 46. The earth that they removed was hidden in a disused hen-house.
- One girl escaped by hiding in the gap hollowed out between two surfboards, but the most spectacular escape of all was by two families on 6 September 1979. They built a hot air balloon which measured 20 metres by 28 metres and all stood on a plate 1.4 metres square. Their flight lasted 28 minutes in which time they covered 22 km at a speed of 50 kph.

A photograph of East German soldier, Hans Conrad Schuhmann, leaping across the barbed wire fence to West Berlin and freedom, 14 August 1961, two days after East Germany closed the border and began erecting the Berlin Wall.



Photograph of East German soldiers carrying the body of Peter Fechter, 18 back into East Berlin. Fechter was the first person killed trying to escape over the Berlin Wall, 1962. He was shot and left to bleed to death.



For an interactive history of the Berlin Wall, click [here](#)

Checkpoint: The Berlin Wall; better or worse?

The Wall made relations better	The Wall made relations worse

Cuba: The world on the brink of war

How close to war did the world come over Cuba in 1962?

In 1959 **Fidel Castro** seized power in Cuba. Until then Cuba had been under US influence and many companies had invested heavily in the country. The USA cut off all aid to Cuba and reduced imports of sugar by 95%. Castro nationalised all businesses, which were mostly US owned. He was not at first a Communist, but US actions forced him to accept aid from the Soviet Union. In 1960 the Soviet Union signed an agreement to buy 1,000,000 tonnes of Cuban sugar every year. This tied the two countries closely together. There was now a Communist country in the western hemisphere.

In the coming years the CIA tried to murder Castro. There were at least fourteen attempts, all of which failed.

The Bay of Pigs, April 1961

A map showing Cuba, the Bay of Pigs and the Florida peninsula



Towards the end of his presidency, Eisenhower gave the go-ahead for a plan to train Cuban exiles in preparation for an invasion of Cuba. In January 1961, relations between Cuba and the USA became more strained when the USA broke off diplomatic relations. When Kennedy became president, he decided to allow the plan to continue.

The exiles were men who had left Cuba in 1959 when Castro had seized control from Batista. They aimed to remove Castro. Once they had been trained by the USA would invade Cuba and then begin a national uprising which would topple Castro. The US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was granted a large amount of money to train the exiles and bases were set up in Florida and Central America. The exiles soon numbered about 1,500.

The exiles landed at the Bay of Pigs on 17 but were met by Castro's forces numbering about 20,000. The whole episode was a disaster. A ship carrying all of the

ammunition for the expedition was sunk and the invasion was all over within three days. The exiles were all either killed or captured. Kennedy, who had known about it but had not been involved, was made to look foolish.

For photographs of the Bay of Pigs, click [here](#)

For more information about the Bay of Pigs, click [here](#)

In December 1961, Castro announced that he was a communist. There was now a communist country within 90 miles of American soil. The USSR began to offer more and more aid to Cuba.

During the summer of 1962, rumours began that the Soviet Union was sending military aid to Cuba. These were confirmed on 14 October 1962, when a US spy plane took photographs which showed Soviet missile bases being built on Cuba. This meant that all US missile defence systems were now useless.

Why did Khrushchev decide to put missiles on Cuba?

Khrushchev's foreign policy of Peaceful Co-Existence was an attempt to challenge the west and prove that the Soviet system was better than capitalism. He had already sent the first man into space in 1961 and Soviet athletes had performed remarkably at the Rome Olympics in 1960; what better way could there be of proving Soviet superiority than by insulting the USA in its own backyard.

Khrushchev also saw Kennedy as a 'soft touch'; after the Vienna Summit he appeared to come to the conclusion that Kennedy was inexperienced and could be pushed around. He was also annoyed that NATO missiles had been stationed in Turkey on the borders of the Soviet Union and wanted them removed.

The Crisis

The US spy plane took photographs which showed Soviet missile bases being built on Cuba. This immediately created great concern within the USA because the bases meant that almost all US cities could now be attacked by Soviet rockets.

A Map showing the range of the Soviet missiles based on Cuba.



From 16 October, Kennedy spent one week asking his defence chiefs for possible reactions and considering alternatives in Excomm. There were several options and

none was looked with great optimism. An immediate choice was to attack Cuba with nuclear weapons but this might cause a nuclear war. If conventional bombers attacked the bases there was a distinct possibility that Soviet advisers would be killed and this in itself would be a cause for war with the Soviet Union. Some advisers suggested that the United Nations be called in – but others pointed out that the UN was often slow, not always effective and also that the Soviet Union would use its veto to block any US move. Doing nothing was not an option. There was also the idea of placing a naval blockade around Cuba was. Kennedy decided on a blockade (quarantine) because it would halt the build up of the sites and it was not an act of war. The problem with deciding on the blockade was that there was a Soviet fleet moving towards Cuba. There was the possibility of fighting when the ships met.

Recently discovered recordings of the discussions in Excomm have revealed that President Kennedy and his brother Robert were the only members of the committee who opposed the use of force. All others present wanted to tackle the crisis by military action.

From the book '13 days', written by Robert Kennedy and published in 1968

The general feeling in the beginning was that some form of action was required. Most felt at that stage that an air strike against the missile sites could be the only course. It was during the afternoon and evening of 16 October that we began to discuss the idea of a blockade.

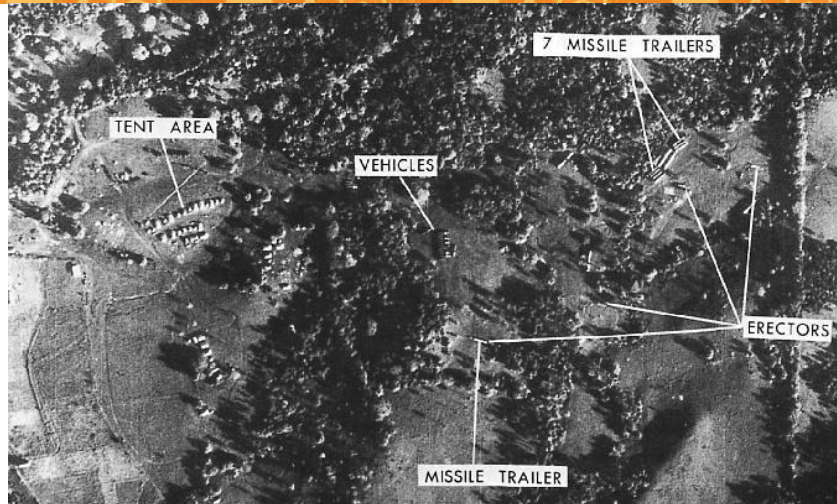
On Wednesday a photograph showed that the missiles were being directed at American cities. The estimate was that within a few minutes of their being fired 80,000,000 Americans would be dead.

Missile crews were placed on maximum alert. Troops were moved into Florida. The Navy sent 180 ships into the Caribbean. The B52 bomber force was ordered into the air fully loaded with atomic weapons.

On 22 October, President Kennedy addressed the people of the USA on television.

We will not needlessly risk world-wide nuclear war in which even victory would be ashes in our mouths – but neither will we shrink from that risk when it must be faced. I call upon Chairman Khrushchev to halt and eliminate this clandestine, reckless and provocative threat to world peace and to stable relations between our two nations. I call upon him further to abandon this course of world domination, and to join in an historic effort to end the perilous arms race and to transform the history of man. He has an opportunity now to move the world back from the abyss of destruction--by returning to his government's own words that it had no need to station missiles outside its own territory, and withdrawing these weapons from Cuba - by refraining from any action which will widen or deepen the present crisis - and then by participating in a search for peaceful and permanent solutions.

Photograph showing the missile sites.



The blockade came into effect on 24 October after Kennedy had given Khrushchev a warning on 22 October.

From a broadcast made by President Kennedy on US radio and television on 22 October 1962

All ships bound for Cuba will, if found to contain cargoes of offensive weapons, be turned back. Any missile launched from Cuba against any nation in the Western hemisphere will be regarded as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States. I call upon Chairman Khrushchev to halt this reckless and provocative threat to world peace.

180 ships were used including a fleet of nuclear submarines was made ready for action and 156 ICBMs were made ready for combat. In addition, Kennedy ordered the air force to be combat-ready. This meant that there were bombers were in the air on patrol throughout the crisis. The US army was placed on combat alert. The USA had the following nuclear missiles ready for launch against the USSR during the crisis – 104 Polaris, 103 Atlas, 105 Thor and Jupiter and 54 Titan together with 600 IRBM and 250 MRBM. The air force was preparing 21,600 long-range bombers.

A photograph of a U.S. patrol plane flying over a Soviet freighter during the Cuban missile crisis



Khrushchev's response to the blockade was a statement accusing the USA of interfering in Cuba's internal affairs. But, the Soviet ships sailing to Cuba slowed down and even began to sail in circles. Khrushchev now sent two letters. One in

public was defiant, the second offered a compromise. The second said that the missile sites would be destroyed if the USA guaranteed to leave Cuba alone.

From a letter by Khrushchev to President Kennedy on 26 October 1962

If assurances were given that the President of the United States would not permit an attack on Cuba and the blockade would be lifted, then the question of the removal and destruction of the missile sites in Cuba would be completely different matter. This is my proposal. No more weapons to Cuba and those within Cuba withdraw or destroyed, and you respond by ending your blockade and also agreeing not to invade Cuba.

On 27 October Kennedy agreed to Khrushchev's offer in the second letter.

I have read your letter of 26 October with great care and welcome your desire to seek a prompt solution to the problem.

You would agree to remove these weapon systems from Cuba and to halt the further introduction of such weapon systems in Cuba.

We on our part would agree to remove the blockade measures now in force and to give assurance against an invasion of Cuba.

At the last minute agreement was almost prevented when a U2 was shot down over Cuba, but Kennedy immediately apologised. The blockade was removed, the sites were destroyed and Cuba was left alone. The sites and Soviet weaponry were removed by 20 November. In a secret meeting between Robert Kennedy and the Soviet ambassador on 28 October, the US government agreed that US missiles would be removed from Italy and Turkey. However as these were in a NATO force it could not be announced immediately. They were removed three months later. Kennedy also suggested that the two leaders should begin talks on arms reduction.

For more photographs of the crisis, click [here](#)

What were the results of the crisis?

When the crisis began, Kennedy realised that he had to make a stand. He had already resolved that he could not allow Khrushchev to make any further progress after the disasters of the U2 incident and the Bay of Pigs. Kennedy had also felt humiliated after the Vienna Summit in June 1961 and the building of the Berlin Wall; whatever happened next, he was determined not to give in. What happened next was the most serious crisis of the Cold War. However, Kennedy was careful not to sound too belligerent but at the same time he showed that he would remain firm. He offered Khrushchev a way out by guaranteeing that in the future the USA would not interfere in Cuban affairs. This allowed Khrushchev to claim a victory of sorts.

From the book 'The Brink', written by a US historian in 1980

John F Kennedy had won. The Soviet government was backing down. It had agreed to dismantle its missile bases and take them home. They took everything away and bulldozed the installations to rubble. It should be noted that three months after the crisis, the United States removed all its missiles from Turkey and Italy.

In his memoirs written in 1970, Khrushchev, wrote

The Caribbean Crisis was a triumph of Soviet foreign policy and a personal triumph in my own career as a statesman. Today, Cuba exists as an independent Socialist country, right in front of the open jaws of predatory American imperialism.

Nevertheless, Khrushchev lost prestige; he was seen to have failed and the Soviet Communist Party removed him from office in 1964. Mao Zedong of China criticised Khrushchev for backing down and it is from this point that relations between the Soviet Union and China begin to deteriorate. On the other hand, Kennedy won praise from all over the western world. He was seen as the man who had at last challenged the Soviet Union and won.

US cartoon published 29 October, 1962



Most importantly, the two leaders were aware of how precarious negotiations had been during the crisis and they agreed to set up a tele-printer 'hotline' to talk to each other directly in any future crisis. During the missiles crisis, there was no direct link between the White House and the Kremlin. Consequently, it had been impossible for the two leaders to communicate directly. There is no evidence that this link was used however until the invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, but it was an important symbol that relations between the superpowers were improving.

The crisis focused the minds of the leaders of the Superpowers on their responsibilities. In August 1963, the Superpowers signed the Test Ban Treaty. This banned all nuclear tests except underground ones and it was to stay in force without time limit. Five years later, there followed the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty, which was designed to stop the spread of nuclear weapons. Those countries signing agreed not to develop nuclear weapons. Talks about limiting arms began in 1969 and these led to the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty in 1972.

For an interactive account of the Cuban Missiles Crisis, click [here](#)

Checkpoint: The Cuban Missiles Crisis

Why did Khrushchev put missiles on Cuba? Why did the crisis end peacefully?

Khrushchev	Peacefully

Czechoslovakia: The Prague Spring

Czechoslovakia after the Second World War

After the Second World War, Czechoslovakia fell under Soviet control. The communists infiltrated the government, police and civil service; the foreign minister, Jan Masaryk was apparently murdered in 1948, when he was thrown from a window and President Benes resigned later in the year. Many Czechs never forgot the way the Soviet Union imposed its control in 1947 and 1948.

Yet, Czechoslovakia gained the reputation of having the most successful spy network of all the communist countries and of being the most successful industrial country behind the Iron Curtain. Nevertheless, there was a low standard of living, as a very high proportion of government spending went on the armed forces. Otherwise, life in Czechoslovakia was very similar to life in any country of the Eastern Bloc. The Czech Communist Party had complete control of public life, the armed forces, the media and education. There was extremely strict censorship and a low standard of living, as a very high proportion of government spending went on the armed forces.

President Novotny became leader in 1957 and he rigidly followed Stalinist policies so that there was little hope of change in the light of Khrushchev's de-Stalinisation speech. When he did introduce change, it was rather slow and did less than some of the other Soviet satellite states. In addition, Czechoslovakia began to experience economic stagnation and this added to the climate of disappointment within the country.

What was the Prague Spring of 1968?

The growth of opposition to Novotny

In 1965, Novotny tried to improve the situation by restructuring the economy when he introduced the New Economic Model. This failed to bring any visible improvements. The main problem was that Czechoslovakia was an advanced industrial country, whereas most of the other communist countries were relatively weak. Consequently, the Czechs were being held back by a Soviet plan to provide support to other countries behind the Iron Curtain.

At the same time there were calls from some writers for greater freedom and for the first time, Novotny experienced widespread opposition. Novotny's poor record concerning housing, living standards and transport was sharply attacked. Alexander Dubcek, leader of the Slovakian Communist Party openly challenged Novotny and then invited Brezhnev, leader of the Soviet Union, to visit Prague. Following Brezhnev's visit, Novotny was replaced as First Secretary of the Czech Communist Party by Dubcek on 5 January 1968. Novotny then gave up his role as President being replaced by Ludvik Svoboda.

Socialism with a human face

Alexander Dubcek



Leonid Brezhnev



In early February 1968, one of Dubcek's closest supporters published an article in the Communist party paper, 'Rude Pravo' (Red Justice) calling for the removal of obstacles which were preventing the introduction of economic and social reforms. The article also called for the elimination of everything that had distorted socialism and had caused the Czech people to lose faith and enthusiasm.

By March 1968, the Czechoslovak leadership was criticised by five iron curtain party leaders; Brezhnev (Soviet Union), Gomulka (Poland), Kadar (Hungary), Ulbricht (East Germany) and Zhivkov (Bulgaria). Ulbricht and Gomulka demanded that Dubcek launch an attack on those who sought to reform communist life in Czechoslovakia. Kadar pointedly remarked that the situation in Czechoslovakia was strikingly reminiscent to the start of the Hungarian problems in 1956.

Dubcek put forward his ideas more clearly in his Action Programme in April. It also came to be known as '**socialism with a human face**'. Dubcek was committed to socialism but wanted to remove the worst aspects of communist rule. He was careful to explain how any reforms would take place under the rule of the Czech Communist Party.

Dubcek announced a series of reforms. These included:

- Political reform which would result in a multi-party state and a new form of democratic socialism.
- the abolition of censorship and the right of citizens to criticize the government. Newspapers began publishing revelations about corruption in high places.
- free speech - it was the duty of party members to act according to his conscience. It criticized the traditional view of members being forced to provide unconditional obedience to party policy.

- the creation of works councils in industry, increased rights for trade unions to bargain on behalf of its members and the right of farmers to form independent co-operatives
- the rehabilitation of victims of the purges of 1950s
- freedom of movement was to be guaranteed
- freedom of assembly and religion
- a reduction in the powers of the secret police

The re-establishment of Soviet control

An extract from 'Hope dies last', Dubcek's autobiography, 1992; here he was describing about an interview with Brezhnev in July 1968.

Brezhnev accused me of returning to capitalism. I responded that we needed a private sector to improve the market situation and make people's lives easier. Brezhnev immediately snapped at me, 'Small craftsmen? We know about that! Your Mr. Bata used to be a little shoemaker, too, until he started up a factory!' Here was the old Leninist canon about small private production creating capitalism 'every day and every hour'.

There was nothing one could do to change the Soviets' dogmatic paranoia. Neither my allies nor I ever contemplated a dismantling of socialism, even as we parted company with various tenets of Leninism. We still believed in a socialism that could not be divorced from democracy, because its essential rationale was social justice. We also believed that socialism could function better in a market-oriented environment, with significant elements of private enterprise.

One problem for Dubcek was that there were many now in Czechoslovakia who demanded further and more rapid change. This alarmed the Soviet Union just as much as Dubcek's reforms did. In July 1968, Dubcek was summoned to attend conferences in Warsaw and Moscow, but refused to go. The whole Soviet Politburo then visited Prague to try to persuade Dubcek to reverse the reforms.

Brezhnev feared any reforms in Czechoslovakia because he could see a potential break from the Warsaw Pact. Czechoslovakia was geographically strategic and if it left the Warsaw Pact would leave a wedge which NATO would be more than ready to fill. Moreover, he did not want Czechoslovakia to act as an example to other Warsaw Pact members – on the other hand, he was being pushed by East Germany and Poland to step in to prevent the reforms.

Checkpoint: The Prague Spring

Why were reforms introduced? Why did Brezhnev intervene?

Reforms	Brezhnev

From an open speech by Brezhnev directed at Dubcek, 5 May 1968

In your country at a May Day demonstration the American flag was waving freely. What does that imply? Does it mean that the Czechoslovak people and the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia are now willing to stand by this flag? And I won't even bother to mention the threats that are made against us, the calls for us 'to get out of Czechoslovakia,' and so on. All this shows that counter-revolutionary forces exist in your country and are becoming more active.

Finally, the economic links that Czechoslovakia was trying to establish with West Germany added to the Soviet Union's concerns. The fear was that West Germany and then other capitalist countries might come to dominate the economy of Czechoslovakia and then the remaining satellite states. Brezhnev then took the decision to invade Czechoslovakia. On 20-21 August 1968, about 200,000 Warsaw Pact troops and several thousand tanks poured into Czechoslovakia. The Czech army did not resist, but many ordinary citizens did. About 100 civilians died.

President Johnson of the USA, speaking on 21 August 1968 about the Soviet invasion

It is a sad commentary on the communist mind that a sign of liberty in Czechoslovakia is deemed a fundamental threat to the security of the Soviet system.

Citizens of Prague attacking a Soviet tank, 21 August 1968



Dubcek disappeared but reappeared in Prague on 27 August and announced that the reforms had been stopped. In October 1968, all reforms were reversed and a temporary Soviet military occupation was announced. The following year, Dubcek was dismissed from the Central Committee of the Czech Communist Party and was sent as Czech ambassador to Turkey. Gradually, all Czech leaders were purged and the new leader, Gustav Husak, re-established a strong communist state.

For more photographs of the events in Czechoslovakia, click [here](#)

What were the consequences of the Soviet invasion?

The Soviet invasion had important consequences for the Soviet Union and its satellite states. In November 1968, the Soviet Union issued what became known as the **Brezhnev Doctrine**:

When forces that are hostile to socialism try to turn the development of some socialist country towards capitalism it becomes not only a problem of the country concerned, but a common problem and concern of all socialist countries.

However, there was some opposition to the Soviet Union, President Ceausescu of Rumania refused to send troops to Czechoslovakia and began to forge his own independent policies.

There were some protests from the USA but 1968 was the height of the Vietnam War and there were many domestic upheavals which diverted President Johnson's attention.

Postscript

On 16 January 1969, Czech student Jan Palach set himself on fire in Wenceslas Square, Prague in protest at the Soviet occupation of his country. Two further protests against Soviet occupation occurred when Jan Zajic burned himself to death in the same place, followed in April of the same year by Evzen Plocek in the town of Jihlava.

The funeral of Jan Palach, January 1969



For more photographs of the funeral, click [here](#)