The 1968 Czechoslovak Crisis: Reconsidering Its History and Politics

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The 1968 Czechoslovak Crisis:
Reconsidering its History and Politics

MAUD BRACKE


I’m convinced that if we could have taken the steps that we had planned, perhaps Europe as a whole would look different today.
Venek Silhan
The tanks turned the Prague Spring into a legend, but legends don’t have to justify themselves with answers to questions about what would have happened if they hadn’t been legends.
Zdenek Mlynar

The past few years have seen the publication of a number of important contributions to the historiography of the Prague Spring of 1968, the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia in August that year and the process of so-called ‘normalisation’ in the country and the wider communist world. The Czechoslovak crisis of 1968–9 has never really ceased to inspire either scholarly research or passionate public and

1 Venek Silhan was elected first secretary of the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party by the Extraordinary 14th Congress on 22 August 1968, in the absence of Dubček. He became a well-known opponent of the post-1968 regime in Czechoslovakia. This quote is taken from an interview with Miklos Kun: Kun, Prague Spring Prague Fall, 197.

2 Zdenek Mlynar was a member of the Secretariat of the Czechoslovak Communist Party during the Prague Spring and a central leader of the political reform programme. He was expelled from the Party in 1970 and was later a prominent member of the Czechoslovak dissident movement. This quote is from Gorbachev, Mlynar, Conversations with Gorbachev, 72.
political debate. It has attracted even more attention, though, since its thirtieth anniversary in 1998, and a state-of-the-art essay seems appropriate.

Among the numerous studies on the Czechoslovak crisis written in the 1970s and 1980s, a number of works not only retain their value as a basis for research today, but have acquired the status of classics in the broader field of the study of communism. In particular the studies by Gordon Skilling, Golia Golan and Karen Dewisha should be mentioned, which either offer an encompassing view of the events or focus on specific aspects of it, such as the origins of the Soviet decision to invade. A general strong point of these works is that they balance the ‘technical’ analysis of the mounting crisis in the communist world in 1968 with more ‘political’ discussions regarding the ideological content of the Prague Spring and socialism more generally. On the other hand, many of the books from this period suffer from a certain mystification of the Prague Spring due to its early break-off. This tendency afflicts not only former witnesses to the events, but also scholars and public opinion in the West.

A new era has begun in scholarly research on the Czechoslovak crisis since the fall of communism in Europe and the subsequent opening of new archives in Moscow and other east European capitals. In terms of filling in the details of the narrative of the events in Czechoslovakia and the wider communist world, much progress has been made since the early 1990s. This is demonstrated, for example, by the studies carried out by Mark Kramer and the Cold War International History Project, on the basis of thoroughly studied documents from several former communist party archives. Moreover, the Prague Spring Foundation in Czechoslovakia has systematically collected, declassified, translated and interpreted documents relating to the Czechoslovak crisis and its wider context, which resulted in 1998 in the


5 Among other things, this was probably to do with a general malaise and feeling of guilt with regard to the minimal pressure from the West on the ‘normalised’ communist regime in Czechoslovakia to limit the post–1969 repression.

publication of a monumental collection of translated documents. As is the case with many other aspects of communist history, the pieces that have been added since 1991 to the complicated puzzle of the Czechoslovak crisis do not dramatically upset previous general understandings of the events, but favour certain existing interpretations over others. First, with respect to the crisis in the wider communist world, a picture has emerged of Czechoslovakia being only the last straw in a deep crisis in the communist bloc institutions, such as the Warsaw Treaty Organisation (WTO) and Comecon (CMEA). This took place in a situation of ‘centrifugal tendencies’ in the wider communist world since the early 1960s. The Soviet Union appears, more clearly than in previous research, as a weak hegemon: its leadership was divided, pressured by its Polish and East German counterparts, seriously troubled by Romanian dissent and worried about domestic developments. At the same time, newly discovered documents bear witness to the determination of the Soviet leadership to put a halt to the course of reform in Czechoslovakia. It becomes clear just how strongly the Soviets considered Czechoslovakia to be a most urgent matter of internal politics. Although non-violent means of pressure were preferred, the Soviet leadership started seriously considering a military invasion as early as May 1968. Furthermore, although the well-established thesis holds that the Soviet Union decided to intervene in Czechoslovakia mainly because of the domestic course it was taking and the challenge this posed to Soviet orthodoxy, recent archival findings have put new emphasis on the question of Czechoslovakia’s foreign alignment and military loyalty. Light has also been shed on the nefast role played by both the Czechoslovak secret services and the Soviet KGB. As to the Prague Spring, a picture emerges of a reform and revival movement with many faces. The domestic political position of Dubcek seems to have been somewhat weaker than previous research had assumed, especially in the months and weeks prior to the invasion. Better documented now is the opposition to Alexander Dubcek among the conservatives in the Czechoslovak Communist Party (CPCS) leadership who wrote the ‘Letter of Invitation’ to Leonid Brezhnev. In addition, it has become clear that support for Dubcek from some key

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8 Navratil, Prague Spring ’68, xviii.
9 This is emphasised for example in Kusin, From Dubcek to Charter 77, 15.
12 The ‘Letter of Invitation’, which was surrounded by a great deal of mystery, is now published and translated in Navratil, Prague Spring ’68, 324–5.
figures such as President Ludvic Svoboda and General Martin Dzur, the Defence Minister, was ambiguous and weak.13

While the ‘technical’ details of the Czechoslovak crisis have been studied to an enormous extent, more fundamental questions related to what the Prague Spring actually was in ideological, intellectual and political terms, and what it tells us about the nature of communist politics and society, are not often raised explicitly in the recent literature. A critical and sophisticated understanding of the political project of the Prague Spring itself is to some extent lacking. This might be achieved by studying the Prague Spring in the wider perspective of the longer-term history of Marxist thought and communist rule in Europe in the twentieth century. Some of the questions here would involve the intellectual and ideological sources on which the Prague Spring drew, how and why these met in Czechoslovakia in 1968; how important contexts were, such as the rise of the new left in western Europe and East–West détente; and how the memory of the Prague Spring, consequently, inspired dissident movements in eastern Europe as well as Marxist thought in the West.

The location of the Prague Spring in the longer-term history of Marxist thought indirectly raises the question of the value of the Prague Spring as a political and ideological project beyond its specific context. The reason why the literature of the last fifteen years has avoided this issue has to do with a wider political and intellectual climate in (east and west) Europe, in which much uncertainty exists as to how to relate to the communist past. Although one might argue against the explicit mixing of a historical analysis of the events with a political value judgement of the Prague Spring, the fact of the matter is that many authors have implicitly formulated value judgements on the Prague Spring. Many authors have argued that the Prague Spring was not a coherent project and was therefore a weak one, as many different – and sometimes contradictory – visions existed on the general direction of the reform programme.14 The counterfactual statement has often been made that the Prague Spring as a political project was not viable, even without the constraints of communist bloc politics.15 Although recent archival findings underscore the interpretation of the Prague Spring as a blend of very diverse critiques on established rule and as a merger of very different ideological traditions, the argument might well be inverted: the pluralist character of the Prague Spring in itself was part of the necessary liberalisation of politics, and as such a sign of the strength of the movement of intellectual revival rather than a sign of weakness or division.

13 Many details on the position of these two individuals – and others – remain unknown.
14 For example, Pavel Tigrid, Why Dubcek Fell (London: McDonald and Co, 1971).
15 Gordon Skilling escaped this trap by explicitly raising the counterfactual question as to how the Prague Spring would have evolved in an international vacuum; his conclusions still seem today very balanced and acceptable: as the planned 14th Party Congress would almost certainly have elected a majority of reformers into the leading party organs, some sort of moderate reform course was probably to be continued, although this would have been tempered by conservative opposition. Skilling, Czechoslovakia’s Interrupted Revolution, 840–3. It might be said, however, in the light of the recent re-evaluations regarding the domestic opposition against Dubcek, that Skilling’s view on Dubcek’s political power position on the eve of the invasion was somewhat too optimistic.
As a more ‘technical’ discussion of the Czechoslovak crisis, *The Prague Spring and its Aftermath* by Kieran Williams is highly valuable on three points: first, the international dimension of the crisis and the mounting tension between Moscow and Prague up to August 1968; second, the post-invasion political chaos in Czechoslovakia and the onset of the politics of ‘normalisation’; and third, the role of the secret police under Dubcek, which is dealt with in a separate chapter. It fails, however, to offer a new problematised understanding of the Prague Spring itself. The analysis of the deterioration of relations between the Soviet and Czechoslovak communist leaderships – and on a personal level between Brezhnev and Dubcek – is convincing, and rightly highlights the importance that was accorded in the communist world to ‘trust’ and even ‘love’ between leaders (pp. 110–11). With respect to the political consequences of the invasion, Williams manages to make sense of the confused political situation in Czechoslovakia more clearly than has been done before. He draws a coherent picture of the ‘realist ascendancy’, that is to say the step-by-step formation of a pro-Soviet power centre inside the CPCS leadership following the invasion. In old Leninist tradition, it succeeded in putting itself in a strategic centrist position between, on the one hand, Dubcek and the reformers, and, on the other, the conservatives who, after the invasion and despite the failed formation of a puppet government, found their political position reinforced by the presence of the Soviet troops (pp. 192–209).

Furthermore, Williams demonstrates in a clear-cut way how Dubcek and those moderate reformers who stayed in power after the invasion unintentionally facilitated the restoration of authoritarian rule. They did so, first, by providing powerful incentives for public self-constraint, and second, by relocating political decision-making from the wider party and political institutions back into small groups of high-rank leaders (pp. 144–64). Williams argues that not only the CPCS reformers but also the reform-minded society at large made the ‘normalisation’ possible by disarming themselves intellectually (p. 183). This, however, raises a more complicated matter, which Williams does not address appropriately; namely, which other options, if any, remained for the advocates of reform, either party leaders or intellectuals, after the invasion and in the context of continued Soviet occupation? Although this obviously sensitive matter has been much debated, especially by the former Prague Spring leaders themselves and by émigrés, it is still not clear where exactly room for manoeuvre for the Czechoslovak leaders lay in the post-invasion situation. Williams, while making implicit judgements, does not formulate a clear answer to this question.

The Hungarian historian Miklos Kun has published a collection of ten interviews with former protagonists of the Czechoslovak crisis. On the whole, the book offers

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16 On the personal relations between Brezhnev and Dubcek in 1968 see also some of Williams’s previous work: Kieran Williams, ‘Political Love’s Labours Lost: Negotiations between Prague and Moscow in 1968’, *Slovo* (March 1994).

17 The question of alleged ‘capitulation’ of not only the CPCS leadership but also society at large has been vividly discussed in the Czechoslovak literature, for example by Vaclav Havel and Petr Pithart.
an important contribution to our knowledge of the events; a great quality is Kun’s choice of interlocutors: he has collected the testimonies not only of Prague Spring ‘heroes’, but also of some of the most outspoken opponents to reform. For obvious reasons, the latter have generally been little inclined to talk about the events, unless in overly biased ways. Of Kun’s ten interviewees, four are former Prague Spring reformists, one, Vasil Bilak, is a former pro-Soviet conservative CPCS leader and the remaining five are former Soviet high-rank military and political leaders. All of these individuals are key – or even sole – witnesses to one or more crucial episodes of the crisis. Three (Chervonenko, Slavik and Fominov) have never published their memoirs, while four others (Bilak, Shelest, Mayorov and Yakovlov) have had their memoirs published only in Czech or Russian.

What, then, are the ‘blank spots’ that this book fills in? Probably most revealing is Slavik’s statement on plans that circulated during the summer of 1968 in the Czechoslovak People’s Army to order the state of alert in support of Dubcek, and to suggest military resistance against a possible invasion (pp. 44–5). As to the Prague Spring, Vaculik paints an enriching picture of the pressure which the reformist intellectuals felt from a conservative backlash in April–May 1968. His famous ‘2000 Words Manifesto’ was a direct response to this (pp. 204–5). Some existing theses with regard to the decision-making process in the Soviet leadership are confirmed by Yakoulev: the important role of the KGB in pressing for and preparing the military invasion, and the disagreement between Brezhnev and Kosygin (pp. 166–8). The central role played by Bilak as a source of information for the Soviets in the period preceding the invasion is reassessed by Shelest (pp. 112, 129). That Bilak handed over the ‘Letter of Invitation’ to Shelest in Bratislava during the negotiations there in early August is confirmed by both Bilak and Shelest, although their recollections are not congruent (pp. 88–9, 125). As to the timing of the decision to invade, support is given to the hypothesis of an early decision in the Kremlin: first, Mayorov gives testimony to the existence of a detailed map of military operations in Czechoslovakia which he saw in April 1968 (p. 138), and second, Shelest gives an account of a conversation he had with Kosygin regarding an invasion during the Bratislava conference in early August (p. 132).

18 Vaclav Slavik, secretary of the central committee of the CPCS in 1968 and expelled from the party after 1969; Bohumil Simon, the very popular first secretary of the Prague party committee in 1968; Venek Silhan, secretary of the central committee who was elected first secretary in absence of Dubcek on the Vysočany congress; and Ludvik Vaculik, eminent intellectual and author of the famous ‘2000 Words Manifesto’.

19 Stepan Chervonenko, Soviet ambassador to Prague; Gennady Fominov, officer on the Czechoslovak Desk in the CPSU administration; Piotr Shelest, leader of the Ukrainian communist party and present at all important meetings; Aleksander Mayorov, general in command of the invasion and of the Soviet Group of forces in Czechoslovakia up to 1972; and Aleksander Yakovlev, who led the ‘agitprop’ force that was sent to Prague immediately following the invasion.

20 Slavik tells that General Pchlik was the main instigator of the plan, which, as he recalls, was not approved by Dubcek and Cernik.

21 Much uncertainty still exists regarding the number of copies of this letter, who signed it, and the circumstances in which it was handed over.
The shortcomings of this book are typical of its genre. First, there is a strong emphasis on facts and detail, which only the very well-informed reader will know how to contextualise. Kun’s introductions to each of the interviews, besides being sometimes written in an overly passionate style, presuppose a high level of detailed knowledge on the part of the reader. Moreover, they do not always provide a balanced historical and historiographical frame in which to highlight the specific relevance of each interview. Furthermore, as some of the new bits of information provided by the interviewees contradict other primary sources or each other, their validity is impossible to verify. While, on the one hand, some interviews raise more queries than they answer, on the other hand the question might be asked as to the relevance of the level of detail offered.

III

The Rise and Fall of the Brezhnev Doctrine by Matthew Ouimet deals with the longer-term impact of the Czechoslovak crisis and the Brezhnev Doctrine on Soviet foreign policy up to 1989. For its fortunate choice of a longer-term perspective, this book is a major contribution to our understanding of the Czechoslovak crisis and its effects on the wider history of the communist world. Very different, even contradictory, interpretations have been offered in the literature on the meaning of ‘1968’, halfway between ‘1945’ and ‘1989’. While recent archival studies have documented how serious the crisis of cohesion and authority in the communist world was in the 1960s, there is still much uncertainty regarding the 1970s. Conflicting arguments support two opposing theses regarding 1968: first, the Czechoslovak crisis further undermined the coherence of the communist world and Soviet dominance over it; and second, one effect of the 1968 crisis was that coherence and Soviet power in the communist world were reinforced. Recent analyses balance elements of both points of view. First, a consensus seems to emerge that, with respect to 1956 and the ‘centrifugal tendencies’ in the communist world during the 1960s, 1968 marked the temporary restoration of Soviet rule and ‘orthodoxy’. At the same time, the 1968 crisis brought to the surface the more acute problem of political legitimacy, which in the long term was to undermine the bases of communist rule in the Soviet Union and eastern Europe.

Ouimet’s central thesis is that the Brezhnev Doctrine, although in theory abandoned only in 1985, was in practice fundamentally transformed during the 1970s and definitely abandoned after the Afghan crisis of 1979. Throughout the 1970s socialist internationalism was increasingly replaced by national interests and national preservation— not yet in discourse or theory but in practice. The background to this was ideological innovation and a redefinition of national interests with an increasing

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22 For example, a short, well-structured life chronology of each of the interviewees would have been useful.
focus on domestic stability (pp. 3–5). According to this perspective, neither the Polish crisis of 1980–1 nor the coming to power of Gorbachev in 1985 are moments of disruption, the crucial changes having taken place earlier and more gradually. The author demonstrates his thesis through well-documented analyses of Soviet foreign policy in Czechoslovakia (1968–9), Afghanistan (1979) and Poland (1980–1).

As to the emergence of the Brezhnev Doctrine in Soviet foreign policy, Ouimet is roughly in line with a widely accepted thesis that, although the practice of limited sovereignty was not new, the Brezhnev Doctrine of 1968 did constitute a moment of rift, as it expressed the need felt by the Soviet leadership to legitimise the practice in terms of ‘orthodox’ doctrine (pp. 68–9).24 The Brezhnev Doctrine constituted the end of the ‘post–1953 permissiveness’ of Soviet rule over the (European) communist world (p. 60). It was even more restrictive in terms of the limits of acceptable ‘national variations’ with respect to 1956, as, unlike the Hungarian uprising of that year, the Prague Spring was not an open revolt. The need felt by the Soviets to put an end to a reform movement which explicitly called itself socialist and was carried out by the communist party, reveals, Ouimet argues, the ‘Achilles heel’ of Soviet rule over the communist world after 1968, namely, that it could rely only on military force and not on political legitimacy (p. 98). As to the abandonment of the Brezhnev Doctrine, Ouimet is in disagreement with some of the literature. While some authors have argued that the Soviets were by no means willing to risk the ‘loss’ of Poland in 1980–1,25 in Ouimet’s view the Polish crisis illustrates that international socialist interests had become largely subordinate to domestic interests (p. 98). Furthermore, Ouimet claims that the relative stability of the 1971–6 years in the communist world was only possible thanks to a fortunate economic situation and to a consensus on the policy of détente vis-à-vis the West (p. 65). The decline between 1976 and the early 1980s, Ouimet argues, was caused only superficially by the Comecon oil shock of 1976 and the Afghan crisis of 1979. More fundamentally, it was a result of the slumbering crisis of political legitimacy in being since 1968, or even 1956.

Despite its qualities, this book suffers in some respects from a narrow perspective. First, it analyses and documents only one half of its core thesis, namely, Soviet reliance on military force. The problem of political legitimacy, the other key element in the argumentation, remains a vague issue. It does not suffice to state, simply, that communist rule had no political legitimacy. The conditions of communist rule varied greatly over time and space, and the problem of political legitimacy took on a different shape in different contexts. That the Prague Spring and the invasion directly raised the issue of the political legitimacy of communist rule has been stated many times before. The new source material at the disposal of historians today should enable us to gain a deeper understanding of how communist regimes dealt with the problem of legitimacy and the strategies they developed, successfully or unsuccessfully, to

24 For a similar line of argument, see for example: Robert A. Jones, The Soviet Concept of Limited Sovereignty from Lenin to Gorbachev: The Brezhnev Doctrine (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990).

circumvent it. Another set of problems arises from the fact that Ouimet's book focuses solely on the Soviet outlook and draws almost exclusively on Soviet sources. Thus, for example, the outcome of the Polish crisis, which is crucial to the argument, remains partly unexplained. The Polish communist leadership's response to the crisis are not well documented; as a consequence, understanding of Soviet abandonment of the Brezhnev Doctrine during the Polish crisis remains limited.

Finally, this book has missed the opportunity to investigate the interplay in the late 1960s and 1970s between politics inside the Soviet sphere of influence and East–West détente. Soviet policy towards its East European allies cannot be understood without considering the foreign policy field that increasingly mattered to the Soviet Union, namely Westpolitik. One of the major motivations behind the invasion of Czechoslovakia was to reinforce internal bloc coherence as well as the position of the Soviet Union as undisputed leader, in the face of upcoming negotiations with the West – the United States and West Germany. In the mid-1960s it became increasingly clear that Soviet, East German and Polish détente were not one and the same. Particularly with respect to the German question and the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, a true divergence of interests had occurred. Admittedly, the invasion of Czechoslovakia forcibly imposed a ‘consensus’ on the definition of détente, namely, a policy that would always have to pass through the superpowers. Nevertheless, the divergence of interests with respect to détente, the fundamentally unrevolutionary character of this policy, and the connection with Soviet imperialism and superpower behaviour, had been understood by the East European communist leaderships once and for all. Thus Ouimet's statement that between 1971 and 1976 ‘détente proved an effective cause around which to rally the bloc’ (p. 70) oversimplifies the matter. Although it might be true that during this phase no overt major disagreements between the communist leaderships arose on this issue, no consensus existed on the very basis of and the longer-term goal of the strategy of détente. It has been pointed out that détente in the 1970s played an ambivalent role with respect to Soviet dominance over Eastern Europe: while, on the one hand, the post-1968 definition of détente implied for the Soviet Union its recognition as the prime negotiator with the West, on the other hand, it weakened the communist regimes, again, in terms of their domestic political legitimacy.

26 The situation in 1968 was indeed urgent from the Soviet point of view: while Romania had in 1967 officially initiated talks with West Germany; in April 1968 Willy Brandt's collaborator Egon Bahr unofficially visited Dubcek. Furthermore, the Soviet Union wished to engage in talks with the United States on disarmament (SALT and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty) as an equal partner.


29 This is a central thesis in Timothy Garton Ash, In Europe's Name. Germany and the divided continent (London: Cape, 1993).
discussion of this, in the light of the periodisation which Ouimet proposes, would have been particularly interesting.

Like Ouimet’s book, Conversations with Gorbachev also emphasises the continuity between 1968 and 1985. This volume is a collection of conversations held in 1993–7 between Zdenek Mlynar, one of the architects of the Prague Spring reform programme, and Mikhail Gorbachev. The two friends discuss and confront their recollections of the Prague Spring and perestroika, and more generally reflect on the historical and political significance of socialism/communism. This document can be read on different levels; its value should thus be assessed accordingly. First, it is a collection of the memoirs of political leaders looking back on two crucial episodes of communist history. Second, it is a historical analysis of reform communism in two different contexts and followed by two different outcomes. A central question is the impact of the Prague Spring on perestroika, both in terms of ideas and in terms of the political development of the communist world between 1969 and 1985. Third, it is a political essay on the meaning of socialism today. For all the variety of questions it raises, this book is an interesting read, not only for scholars of communism, but also for a wider audience interested, either historically or politically, in socialism. First, the two authors are such important historical figures that their recollections merit serious attention. Furthermore, the book is at its best when they critically reflect on the contradictions inherent in the reform processes they initiated. The frankness of the questions with which Mlynar challenges Gorbachev allows for quite profound critical analysis.30 A general shortcoming of this work has to do with its cross-over character: the historical analyses of the authors are inevitably coloured by hindsight and by apologetic biases, and the political thinking is limited in its creativity by the dramatic nature of past experiences.

As far as the historical interpretations of the Prague Spring are concerned, some of the recollections offer a genuine contribution to the literature – although, obviously, the usual caution with respect to testimonies of political protagonists needs to be observed. This is the case, for example, for Mlynar’s discussion of how, in Czechoslovakia’s intellectual climate in the 1960s, he came to reflect upon a connection between socialism and democracy (pp. 57–9).31 Touching on an issue for which he has been criticised strongly, Mlynar also explains why in 1968 he did not favour the installation of a true multi-party system, in which different parties would have an equal status and the communist party would have ceased to play a ‘leading role’.32 As to the continuity between the Prague Spring and perestroika, it is illustrated how this lies especially in the definition of the problems of ‘actually

30 Generally, the reflections on the perestroika policies are more critical when compared with Gorbachev’s memoirs: Mikhail Gorbachev, Gorbachev: On my Country and the World (New York: Colombia University Press, 1999).

31 This can usefully be confronted with the research carried out on the intellectual roots of the Prague Spring, for example Vladimir V. Kusin, The Intellectual Origins of the Prague Spring. The Development of Reformist Ideas in Czechoslovakia 1956–1967 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971).

32 Instead, Mlynar favoured the reactivation of the National Front of the 1945–8 period, inside which other political and social organisations would exist (based mainly on common interests, such as trade unions, women groups, farming groups and so on) next to the communist party, which would maintain
existing socialism’ (economic, in terms of the monopoly of political power and in terms of intellectual freedom), in the general tendency of the solutions proposed and the ‘phases’ of reform. Although he does not escape a mystification of the ‘Prague Spring ideas’, Gorbachev’s analysis of their influence on his own thinking is particularly interesting and sheds some light on the extent to which this was a wider generational phenomenon in the Soviet Communist Party in the 1980s. Both authors roughly adhere to the ‘beginning of the end’ thesis, that is, the Prague Spring is considered, at least on the level of political consciousness and legitimacy, as having caused a break in the evolution of European communism towards its decline and fall. Mlynar carries the point one step further, by arguing that the ‘political failure’ of the Prague Spring, and the ideological contradictions inherent in it, were at least one reason for the fact that reform communism was no longer considered an option in the Soviet Union and eastern Europe in 1989 (p. 64).

Unfortunately, some of the essential debates on the longer-term history of communism are avoided. The point of departure of both authors as to a general historical interpretation of the nature of the societies and political systems which called themselves socialist in Europe, is that, despite certain ‘socialist elements’, their central characteristic was totalitarianism (p. 117). Totalitarianism is, however, not further discussed, nor is the important question regarding the – historical and ideological – link between communism and totalitarianism. A second issue is the tension between ‘reform from above’ and ‘freedom of choice’. While the authors acknowledge that this was the core unresolved problem in the Prague Spring as well as in perestroika and reflect at length on the issue, their conclusions seem unsatisfactory. Gorbachev here restates his thesis that in a totalitarian system reform can only be initiated top–down and should be guided (p. 96). Obviously, this leaves many questions unaddressed with regard to the transition to a democratic system and the extent to which pluralism can be planned. These issues directly refer to the wider problem of democracy and pluralism in socialism. As both Gorbachev and Mlynar explicitly defend the possibility of democratic forms of socialism, they might have spelled out more precisely how (political, intellectual, . . . ) pluralism in a socialist context can be imagined. Nevertheless, Mlynar convincingly demonstrates how a critical historical reassessment of the Prague Spring does not undermine its value as a unique point of departure for reflecting on wider issues regarding democracy, solidarity, pluralism and freedom.

a special status and special rights. See Skilling, Czechoslovakia’s Interrupted Revolution, 334–7. Furthermore, Mlynar advised Gorbachev against installing a free party system in the Soviet Union in 1990. Gorbachev, Mlynar, Conversations with Gorbachev, 115.

33 Interesting parallels can be drawn between these two examples of top-led reform of communism, in terms of the phases of reform policy: changes in party personnel, reform of the communist party internally, the ‘creation of a freer intellectual climate’, reform of the wider mechanisms of power and so on. Gorbachev, Mlynar, Conversations with Gorbachev, 66–75, 110–17.