



# PERSPECTIVES

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## The Lesson of the 1968 Soviet Invasion of Czechoslovakia: Never Surrender

by Dr. Jiri Valenta

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 932, August 27, 2018

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia is upon us. Before the invasion, Czech leader Alexander Dubcek received suggestions on how to respond to the Soviet threat. The best advice – though Dubcek did not heed it – came from a dissident Ukrainian general who had fought in Czechoslovakia during WWII.

In 1940, Britain had 300,000 men trapped in Dunkirk. The US was not yet in the war, and Hitler, then occupying much of Europe, was about to attack Britain. No one believed Britain could survive such an attack. But Prime Minister Winston Churchill remained unbending. As he famously told the House of Commons on June 4:

Even though large tracts of Europe and many old and famous States have fallen or may fall into the grip of the Gestapo and all the odious apparatus of Nazi rule, we shall not flag or fail. We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be. We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.

In July 1968, Petro Grigorenko, a seasoned general who had fought in Czechoslovakia during WWII, delivered a letter to the Czech Embassy in Moscow. In that letter he gave Alexander Dubcek the same message espoused by Churchill: Never surrender.

To Grigorenko, the Czechoslovak army was “the most capable in Eastern Europe.” Defense was feasible. The borders with which to be concerned were those with the USSR, Poland, and East Germany. In his assessment, “less [*sic*] than a dozen roads

would have to be blocked [en route] to halt the tank armadas. And if they were to add to that the defense of a small number of airports there would be no surprise invasion. And without surprise the entire invasion would fail.”

In Grigorenko’s view, Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev was not likely to risk war if opposed. A military gamble against the strong Czechoslovak army could have set in motion destructive anti-imperialist forces in East Germany, Poland, and, for that matter, in the USSR itself. “The entire invasion,” said Grigorenko, “could collapse.” (The collapse came in 1989-91 instead.)

Grigorenko advised Dubcek to warn Brezhnev that Czechoslovakia would defend itself. He knew there were deep divisions over the invasion in the Kremlin, particularly between hardline KGB chief Yury Andropov and the more moderate prime minister, Alexei Kosygin. Brezhnev himself was undecided for a long time. He understood that a war in Central Europe – with US forces across the border in West Germany – would be dangerous for him and would jeopardize scheduled arms control negotiations with America. This has been confirmed in the memoirs of Brezhnev’s advisers - former Soviet Ambassador to Washington Anatoly Dobrynin, Alexander Yakovlev, and Georgi Arbotov.

As Israeli scholar David Vital has correctly argued, “leaders of small powers with inferior defense capabilities might have an important chance of safeguarding their independence and deterring a military invasion by great powers if they can escalate the potential cost of such an action to a would-be aggressor.” Moreover, historical lessons are important in decision-making. The Kremlin leaders knew the Czechs had not resisted the communist coup in 1948 and had surrendered after Munich in 1938.

Dubcek did not agree with Grigorenko’s logic. “Presenting a military defense would have meant exposing the Czech and Slovak people to a senseless bloodbath,” he wrote to this author. “I am still convinced of it today. The only victory the Czechs and Slovaks could have had was a moral one.”

I respect the late Dubcek, but this is what tearful appeasers always say, and what hopeful aggressors always look for. Czechoslovakia surrendered. There was no victory, moral or otherwise, but rather 20 years of Soviet occupation and denial of freedom. During that period, Czechoslovakia trained terrorist groups like the PLO and provided explosives to Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi.

The invasion began with a Soviet surprise attack on Ruzin airport. (It is worth noting that the Russians could not land for hours at another military airport because the Czechs had poured oil all over the runway.) Unfortunately, Dubcek did exactly what Churchill and Grigorenko advised against. He surrendered. (The only Czech leader not to sign Moscow’s surrender dictate was Jewish communist Frantisek Kriegel.)

To Churchill, “never surrender” did not mean turning the war into a senseless bloodbath but preserving British sovereignty and restoring Europe’s freedom. The lesson for Czechoslovakia is that in 1938, 1948, and 1968, their leaders were not up to the task. What they accomplished by surrendering was to destroy the spirit of the people, retard economic development, and turn a prosperous democratic country into the satellite of a foreign power.

After the recent brutal killing of three Czech soldiers in Afghanistan, Prague must not withdraw its forces. President Milos Zeman should instead visit that country once again and restate the Czech commitment to the war against the Islamists. Justice must be delivered to the terrorists and the message reiterated clearly: “The Czechs will never again surrender.”

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BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family