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# OPERATION DANUBE RECONSIDERED

The International Aspects of the Czechoslovak 1968 Crisis

With a foreword by Peter Bielik

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## 06

# Towards Military Intervention. Prague Spring and Party Representatives in Hungary

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Historians have been interested for a long time in how the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (MSZMP) under the leadership of János Kádár passed from initial support for Alexander Dubček and the Prague Spring to approval by the Hungarian popular army, together with the armies of the Warsaw Pact, then participation in the military intervention against Czechoslovakia. This meant the end of the Czechoslovak process of reform. In the following study, we shall present the most important milestones of those events.

Hungarian and Czechoslovak reforms of the 60's had many common features. When Alexander Dubček became head of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ) it was obvious that the Hungarian reforms differed considerably from the Czechoslovak ones. Czechoslovak reform processes, known as the 'Prague Spring', were created as a result of de-Stalinization, which ended in 1956. Dubček had the support of the whole Czechoslovak society, which put pressure on the party leadership. Dubček could not politicize by excluding the public, and isolate the reforms from social influence. However, Hungary managed to enforce Stalinization to a certain level. The vast majority of Hungarian society got used to the situation after 1956 and not only agreed with it but there underwent a certain 'reconciliation' with Kádár's leadership. The reforms ran in conjunction with no social pressure in their direction and their pace depended exclusively on the political leadership.

## **Tandem Dubček—Kádár**

Dubček was appointed 1st Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (ÚV KSČ) on January 5. 1968. The first official visit of newly appointed members of the party leadership was usually to Moscow. Before

Dubček went to Moscow, he informed Kádár he wanted to meet him. The meeting took place on the 20<sup>th</sup>–21<sup>st</sup> of January 1968 in Palárikovo and in Komárno. The fact that Dubček prioritized Kádár to Brezhnev was an expression of Czechoslovak leadership's distrust of Moscow and at the same time a sign of trust towards Budapest. At the same time also, for the Hungarian party leader it was an excellent opportunity to adopt his own attitude towards the events in Czechoslovakia, and he hoped he would have influence on Dubček.

Kádár was interested in the ideas of the new 1st Secretary ÚV KSČ because he was worried about the messages arriving from the neighbouring countries. Kádár summarized his impressions saying: "It is correct that we accepted the proposal of comrade Dubček, it was an open and honest conversation. Comrade Dubček is a communist with sane, sober and responsible thinking who faces problems"<sup>112</sup>

After Dubček's trip to Moscow,<sup>113</sup> they met again with Kádár on the February 4. 1968. The Czechoslovak politician informed him that the *Action Programme of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia* (Akčný plán KSČ) would be ready at the end of March. Kádár replied with a warning: "to be careful since everyone creates an action programme". Two days later, during the meeting of the political committee MSZMP, he also said that several social groups have programmes that go far beyond the boundaries of current opinions within ÚV KSČ. Kádár and Dubček agreed that "the conditions for future development of Czechoslovak-Hungarian relations and cooperation are favourable."<sup>114</sup> Kádár invited Dubček to Budapest. 1st Secretary ÚV KSČ proposed the renovation of the Czechoslovak-Hungarian Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual help during the year 1968, which was valid until 1969. In his opinion, a new treaty would

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112 MNL OL [National Archives of Hungary], M-KS 288. f. 47/743. ő. e. Similar description was presented during the meeting of the political committee ÚV KSSZ on the 18th January 1968 by the Soviet Ambassador to Prague, Stepan Chervonenko. "Comrade Dubček is without doubt an honest, loyal man, a devoted friend of the Soviet Union" Quotation: Pihója, 1998. 8.

113 The meeting took place during January 29–30, 1968. Secretary General of PB CPSU, Leonid Brezhnev ensured the Czechoslovak leadership on his full support. Document about debates, see: Vondrová—Navrátil, 1995. 39–43.

114 NA ČR [National Archives of the Czech Republic], KSČ-ÚV-02/1. sv. 60. a.j. 67/kinf10.; MNL OL, M-KS 288. f. 5/445. ő. e.

express the narrow cooperation between Czechoslovakia and Hungary.<sup>115</sup> At that time, Kádár did not agree yet with the treaty renewal but he later changed his mind. He expressed his support for the Czechoslovak leadership and in his opinion, also the other socialist countries would agree on the position of Hungarian and Soviet leadership on the events in Czechoslovakia.<sup>116</sup>

Kádár thought of Dubček without prejudice and considered him a talented politician. Dubček was far more open-minded than Novotný, he knew about the Slovak situation and he even spoke Hungarian a little. Kádár also hoped that Dubček could correct the insufficiencies of the previous economic reform and control the group that requested political changes. If he managed to enforce his intentions, it would create favourable international conditions for the approval of Hungarian reforms from January 1, 1968.

### **“... take into consideration our experience with the counterrevolution of 1956!”**

The first serious problems appeared on the 5th April 1968, after the approval of *Action Programme ÚV KSČ* that Dubček had mentioned already during the February meeting. The document was sent to the leading representatives of Socialist countries, Kádár too. The leaders of the member states of the Warsaw Pact agreed on a mutual position according to which the *Action Programme* contained such radical changes they could not agree with. This was the reason why the head representatives of the parties met in Dresden on 23rd March. Another motivation for the summit was the news of the alleged plan to dismiss Novotný, who was set to remain president until the end of January.<sup>117</sup>

The political committee MSZMP had dealt with this situation already on its meeting on March 19. Kádár stated “the Czech do not insist too much for negotiations in Dresden. As far as me concerned, if comrade Dubček sends a notice, we will meet”. The leadership in Budapest was of

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115 MNL OL, M-KS 288. f. 5/445. ő. e.

116 NA ČR, KSČ-ÚV-02/1. sv. 60. a.j. 67/kinf10.

117 On the background of the summit, see: Békés, 2008; Huszár, 1998. 26–33. Brezhnev convinced Kádár during several weeks on the necessity of this meeting. The Hungarian party leader on the contrary tried to reduce the caused tension. Dresden was in the end suggested by Dubček as a “neutral place”.

the opinion that the Hungarian delegation could not influence Ulbricht and Gomulka and Czechoslovakia did not support this meeting. He also said that the ÚV KSČ plenary was to meet in three of four days and the approval of the Action Programme was a ready-made thing, so the Czechoslovak leadership could not be convinced to change its attitude. After the debate, Kádár came to the conclusion that “we will not interfere in the internal affairs of Czechoslovakia nor will we propose any position to them (...) let us tell comrade Brezhnev that we are in favour of meeting, but we are not so eager and we are rather sceptical (...) one cannot interfere in the Czech events, but we can influence their further development.”<sup>118</sup> Kádár called Brezhnev on the same day in the evening, saying the MSZMP leadership did not see any reason for meeting in Dresden. However, they would participate.<sup>119</sup>

In the meantime, (20th March) Antonín Novotný resigned from the position of president. On the next day, the political committee of the CPSU met and decided on the adoption of particular measures for stopping Czechoslovak reform processes.<sup>120</sup> The Secretary General of the Soviet party said that “in order to solve this issue, it is necessary to think in detail the particular steps, we also mean the use of the same solution as in the Hungary case.” Alexander Shelepin mentioned that during the meeting in Dresden, “it would surely be convenient if Kádár reminded the Czech of the Hungarian events.”<sup>121</sup> The Head of the Council of Ministers, Alexei Kosygin, was also talking about the events of 1956 when he said “it was necessary to find new power that we could rely on”.

After these events, on the 23rd March the leading representatives of six parties met in Dresden. The KSČ leadership was united in its position in the subject of Czechoslovak processes of reformation—not only Dubček, Jozef Lenárt and Drahomír Kolder but also Vasil Biľak who was known as a great supporter of the USSR. Gomulka had a flaming speech on the “counterrevolution freely wandering in Czechoslovakia”, while Brezhnev presented the same criticism of the reform wing of KSČ as the one heard in the meeting of the political committee of the CPSU.

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118 MNL OL, M-KS 288. f. 5/451. ő. e.

119 MNL OL, M-KS 288. f. 47/743. ő. e.

120 Pihója, 2000. 276.

121 Quotations from the minutes in Hungarian, see: Huszár, 1998. 42–50

Kádár was more subtle; he acted more in defence of Czechoslovakia against the military East German and Polish political representatives. First he thanked Dubček for his speech, and then he said that as far as the internal situation in the Czechoslovak party was concerned, “the right to present decisions belongs to the Czechoslovak comrades and we do not want to and cannot interfere.”<sup>122</sup> At the same, he said “important events happening in one of the socialist countries are connected with the internal events in the other socialist countries”. He came to the conclusion that “we must help each other and cooperate” and therefore he considered important Hungary showed solidarity towards the present Czechoslovak leadership. If five parties were to support the KSČ, they need to have exact information on what was happening in Czechoslovakia. Kádár wanted to explain why the meeting in Dresden, but at the same time there were intentions to distract from the fact that the Czechoslovak leadership participated in some kind of ‘trial’.

In accordance with the said during the meeting of the political committee of the CPSU, Kádár also mentioned Hungary’s experience in 1956. He stressed that the Hungarian party had not used in any context the term “counterrevolution” in relation to the development in Czechoslovakia. According to the Hungarian leadership, the situation in this country very much reminded of the Hungarian development from February until October 1956 “when there was not counterrevolution (...) in Hungary, until the 23rd October there were no counterrevolutionary elements”. In relation with Imre Nagy he said “that person was neither an agent nor a counterrevolutionary in the meaning of wanting to end socialism in Hungary (...) he became an enemy on 25th or 26th October 1956 when he became part of the enemy side and there was no way back from there.”<sup>123</sup>

János Kádár’s perception is interesting also from the point of view that in the resolution of ÚV MSZMP from 5th December 1956, as a cause

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122 Kádár’s speech in Dresden quoted by Vondrová—Navrátil, 1995. 96–99., records of the Polish party quoted by Garlicki—Paczkowski, 1995. 53–54. The Hungarians did not make any minutes, during the meeting of the political committee MSZMP on April 2 Kádár only mentioned his speech in three sentences. But we do have Kádár’s handwritten notes on one page: MNL OL, M-KS 288. f. 47/743. ő. e. Tibor Huszár did not know the earlier Czech and Polish sources when writing his book (1997–1998) and therefore he did not use them. Vid: Huszár, 1998. 50–59.

123 See: Vondrová—Navrátil, 1995. 97–98.

of the counterrevolution, it was stated that “Imre Nagy and his fellows began to organize a secret anti-state conspiracy in December of 1956, the aim of which was to take over the power and overthrow the Hungarian Popular Republic.”<sup>124</sup> Kádár contradicted his own political theory in order to defend the Czechoslovak reform process and free it from any suspicion of counterrevolutionary. At the same time he said that “similar events can change any of us into Imre Nagy.”<sup>125</sup> That was a sign for Dubček and the Czechoslovak leadership to understand the limits. “Comrades, take into account our experience with the counterrevolution of 1956 because we paid for it with our blood.”<sup>126</sup>

In Dresden, there was no open dispute because Brezhnev and the Soviet leadership, opposed to their previous statements, ensured the “Czechoslovak brethren party” on their full trust. There was no direct intervention in Czechoslovak internal affairs yet. Kádár and the Hungarian delegation made sure also that the Soviet proposal was refused and the communiqué contained a compromise.<sup>127</sup>

But the Soviet leadership did not want to give up on its policy of coercion. On the 4th of May, a four-member delegation travelled to Moscow, Dubček, Černík, Smrkovský and Biľak. Marshall Ivan Jakubovski informed them that the Soviet Union planned to perform a Command-Staff exercise in the territory of Czechoslovakia. The delegation agreed with this plan. During the meeting, the Soviets also clearly expressed that “in case of worsening of the situation, the Soviet Union will give up on its neutral position and in the interest to maintain a socialist Czechoslovakia will undergo the most far-reaching steps.”<sup>128</sup>

Two days later also the heads of the parties and the Prime Ministers of the other Socialist countries travelled to Moscow so Brezhnev could inform them of the results of the debates with the KSČ delegation. Kádár kept the same position as during his speech in Dresden.<sup>129</sup> He repeated that

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124 See: *A Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt határozatai és dokumentumai*, [Documents and resolutions of the Hungarian Socialist Popular Party], 1964. 13–17.

125 This sentence appears in the minutes of the Polish party, see: Garlicki—Paczkowski, 1995. 53.

126 Vondrová—Navrátil, 1995. 98–99.

127 Huszár, 1998. 58–59.

128 Quoted by: Huszár, 1998. 80–81.

129 See Kádár’s speech in: Vondrová—Navrátil, 1995. 201–205.



the MSZMP did not consider the Czechoslovak reform processes as counterrevolutionary. He insisted the problems should not be solved with arms. He reminded attendees also that in 1956 the presence of the Soviet armies had been used as “a good excuse” for the outbreak of counterrevolution.<sup>130</sup> Kádár defended Dubček again, who, in his opinion, fought with the past—that is to say that the current situation was created due to the mistakes of the leadership of Novotný’s era. He stressed that certainly in Czechoslovakia there were those who needed help. Dubček, Kolder and the others were in an extraordinary situation. They had to fight on two fronts, on one hand against the mistakes of the past, on the other hand “against the enemies of socialism, the counterrevolution and imperialist agents”. Kosygin interrupted Kádár asking him what he thought of the Action Programme KSČ. The Hungarian leading representative of the party did not get out of the concept. He said he considered the programme “a big nothing”. Everyone can take of it what they like.<sup>131</sup> “This programme represents a general socialist compromise.”

Kádár also supported the military training planned by Brezhnev. “The longer it takes, the better (...) The military training must take place and we will participate. However, I do want to state that our principal task is to enforce the core of the KSČ leadership and in case this leadership is incapable, new people need to be found to replace it.”<sup>132</sup>

Kádár’s position was modified after Dresden in two fundamental ways. On one side he announced that Hungarian troops would participate in the military training in the territory of Czechoslovakia, which definitely had a political undertone and which would to a large extension influence the balance of power in the KSČ leadership. On the other hand, he declared for the first time that he could imagine changes in the Czechoslovak leadership.

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130 MNL OL, M-KS 288. f. 5/455. ő. e. We need to say Kádár said this for the first time. On 15th December 1956, eleven days after the defeat of the Hungarian revolution, Kádár said something similar during his debate with the Czechoslovak Prime Minister Viliam Široký. Bencsik—Mitrovits, 2018. 421–431.

131 Kádár presented his slightly modified opinion on the Action Programme to Dubček also during the June visit of the Czechoslovak party and governmental delegation in Budapest (see further).

132 Vondrová—Navrátil, 1995. 204–205.

## Dubček in Budapest

Between May 29 and June 1, 1968, another Central Committee KSČ plenary took place that decided on the extraordinary congress of KSČ where new members of the Central Committee were to be elected. During the meetings of district and municipal committees, it became clear that those who supported Moscow could lose their membership. This fact was also perceived by the Hungarian leadership of the party and it affected also the preparations for the visit of the Czechoslovak delegation for the renewal of the Czechoslovak-Hungarian treaty on friendship, cooperation and mutual help. This was not an obvious fact since a short time before the military training of member states of the Warsaw Pact in the territory of Czechoslovakia was approved. Apart from that, the treaty signed in 1949 was to be prolonged until 1969 so its early signing was not only of legal but also of symbolic importance.

The delegation led by Dubček and Černík arrived in Budapest on the 13th June 1968 and already during the first day they had held long debates with the Hungarian leading representatives.<sup>133</sup> The situation turned complicated due to the fact that on the same day, Osvald Machatka's article "Another anniversary"/"Také jedno výročí"/ was published in the magazine *Literární listy*. The text was written on the 10th anniversary of the execution of Imre Nagy and its content contradicted to what Kádár's ideology and propaganda stated. The author of the article was cautious not to mention Kádár's name but everybody knew that the first man in MSZMP played a decisive role in Nagy's execution. Kádár mentioned the article to the Czechoslovak delegation, not during the official debates but later, during dinner.<sup>134</sup> It was obvious he wanted to avoid a scandal because of the article.

During the official debates Kádár did not express only criticism and his worries but he also clearly stated that MSZMP expressed "confidence and solidarity" for KSČ. "The manner, time and way" the Czechoslovak leadership would solve the accumulated problems was their thing. "We agree with everything that strengthens socialism. What we do not agree

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133 MNL OL, XIX-J-1-j Csehszlovákia (Czechoslovakia), 1968. év (year). 23. doboz (box). 001169/35. a 001169/36.

134 MNL OL, XIX-J-1-j Csehszlovákia (Czechoslovakia), 1968. év (year). 23. doboz (box). 001169/34.ß

with? What we think that weakens the positions of socialism”, said Kádár.<sup>135</sup>

Dubček thanked the Hungarian leadership for their understanding of the situation, then informed in extension on the past period and as a conclusion stated:

Different rightist, antisocial elements cannot influence and do not influence the events. Precisely because of that, we stated clearly during the January and February meetings of ÚV KSČ that the most fundamental task is to strengthen the leading power of the party. In addition, it is clear that we shall further support the relations with the Soviet Union and we shall not allow them to worsen, the same goes about the socialist countries. (...) It is not any kind of democracy, our aim is to build a socialist democracy.<sup>136</sup>

Kádár reacted to certain points. In his opinion, the resolutions approved on during the January and February ÚV KSČ meetings, including personnel changes and the Action Programme, belong to internal issues of KSČ: “We cannot do anything else but take note on them”. Kádár had nothing against the May plenary, nor the planned extraordinary congress. However, he reminded Dubček that not everyone who says so is truly also a defendant of Socialism.

Dubček agreed with this, he thought that the times would come when violence will be necessary to intervene against the enemies. Kádár did not exclude such a possibility and at the same time agreed with his partner that it is necessary to imprison and punish those who “violate socialist law”. At the end, he expressed “a wishful thought”: “we have reached the point where we had to make politics with cannons, I do hope you will avoid that.”

During the two-day visit, there were several one-to-one talks. Dubček mentioned the debate in Moscow on the 6th May, to which the Czechoslovak delegation had received no invitation and he did not like the plan of a military training. Kádár tried to calm him by saying he had told the Soviets about “the dangers hidden in the presence of the Soviet army in Czechoslovakia which could cause unnecessary nationalist reactions.”<sup>137</sup>

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135 NA ČR, KSČ-ÚV-02/1. sv. 75. a.j. 101/9.; MNL OL, XIX-J-1-j Csehszlovákia (Czechoslovakia), 1968. év (year). 23. doboz (box). 001169/36.

136 Ibid.

137 MNL OL, XIX-J-1-j Csehszlovákia (Czechoslovakia), 1968. év (year). 23. doboz (box). 001169/44.

While the meeting Kádár in an uneasy position, the Czechoslovak delegation came out of it feeling content. The minutes for the meeting of the ÚV KSČ leadership, that was to take place on 3rd July state that “the debate and dialogue ran in an honest, friendly atmosphere, they showed comrade explicitness and mutual understanding, we agreed on all issues”.<sup>138</sup> The participants stated that the Hungarian party had expressed its solidarity with KSČ and the reform process in Czechoslovakia. The Hungarian party was also ready to offer help in such a form that Czechoslovakia considered adequate and necessary.

### **Military training Šumava**

During the Czechoslovak-Hungarian meeting, an event was mentioned that only particular people knew about: a strategic-military training of commanders in the territory of Czechoslovakia, with the cover name Šumava. Dubček agreed with it willy-nilly on the 4th May during his conversation with Brezhnev, two days later the plan of a military training was approved also by the leading representatives of five socialist countries during the debate in Moscow.

From the member states of the Warsaw Pact, the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Poland, German Democratic Republic and Hungary participated in this military training.<sup>139</sup> When it ended, the Hungarian Minister of Defence openly stated that the aim, content and course of the training were marked by different positions of the participating countries on the development of the political situation in Czechoslovakia. “The atmosphere was often tense and contradictory, which was obvious especially in the verbal attacks of the Czechoslovak hosts with Soviet comrades who led the training.” It was not surprising since the military training Šumava had the aim to interfere with the internal situation and a masked preparation of the occupation. This fact was also stated by the Minister of Defence Lajos Czinege: “The intention of the great military training was that the armies of several countries got further experience in the field of planning, organization, leading and cooperation (...) During the training, the Soviet commanders based on the assumption that there was counterrevolution in Czechoslovakia or it is at the beginning of counterrevolution. The party

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138 NA ČR, KSČ-ÚV-02/1. sv. 75. a.j. 101/9.

139 HL [Military History Archives in Budapest], MN 1968—Zala, 4. doboz (box), 8. ó. e.

and the government are not united, they tolerate counterrevolutionary and anti-Soviet propaganda and conspiracy. State security does not intervene in the internal reaction (...) Czechoslovak military commanders could not fully participate in the military training and protested.” The Soviets did not offer the Czechoslovak military commanders any information “on aims, beginning, end, task description, performance plan, times of particular trainings nor on the number of military units and command staff.”<sup>140</sup>

23,721 soldiers, 6344 vehicles, 279 tanks, 87 planes and helicopters participated in the military training in the territory of Czechoslovakia. If we add the troops that trained in the territories of Germany, Poland, Hungary and the Soviet Union, there were 30,000 to 40,000 participants.<sup>141</sup> The Hungarian People’s Army was represented by the 5th armada and 11th moto rifle division, together 800 persons and 260 military vehicles.<sup>142</sup> The Hungarians represented only a 3.37% of soldiers present during the military training in Czechoslovakia. During this training, the Minister of Defence Lajos Czinege met his Czechoslovak colleague Martin Dzúr and the president Ludvík Svoboda. Marshall Ivan Jakubovski kept looking for excuses so he did not have to meet them. The military training eventually ended on July 2 and the Hungarian troops left the country on the next day.<sup>143</sup>

Kádár was in Moscow at that time, because between the 27th June and the 4th July he headed the Hungarian delegation during the official visit to the Soviet Union where, naturally, the situation in Czechoslovakia was debated. The Soviets presented a large number of complaints on the Czechoslovaks: “they keep going to the right”, “the attacks against the regime sharpen”, “counterrevolutionary powers stronger” and claimed the

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140 The report with the above mentioned statements was created by Deputy Minister of Defence, Gen. István Oláh and Substitute Chief of Staff, Gen. Ferenc Szűcs, delivered to the political committee by Lajos Czinege.

141 Povolný, 2018. 107.

142 HL, MN 1968—Zala, 4. doboz (box), 8. ő. e.

143 The withdrawal of Soviet troops did not go smoothly. Marshall Jakubovski did not reveal when the Soviet units would leave the territory of Czechoslovakia, in spite of being repeatedly asked. Minister of Defence, Dzúr, sent him a letter on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, and Vice President Černík sent another one on the 11<sup>th</sup> of July, but both letters remained unanswered. Černík also asked Brezhnev about the presence of Soviet units in Czechoslovakia during the meeting in Čierna nad Tisou between the 27<sup>th</sup> of July and the 2<sup>nd</sup> of August (Povolný, 2018. 108–109).

Czechoslovak leadership “does not analyse the situation, underestimates the danger”, Dubček “refuses a strict counterattack saying the time has not come yet.” The attack target was also Ludvík Vaculík’s manifesto “The two thousand words/Dvetisíc slov”,<sup>144</sup> published on June 27 and refused also by Kádár.

### **“The roads are divided ...” Preparation of the occupation**

The political manifesto *The Two Thousand Words* (/Dvetisíc slov/) was a good excuse for the Soviets to postpone the troop withdrawal from Czechoslovakia and to announce the summit of the “six parties”. This time, they chose Warsaw for the meeting. The leadership of KSČ with Dubček at its head attended the meeting in Dresden (March 23), they did not get an invite from Moscow (May 6) and they did not even want to go to Warsaw. Instead, Dubček met Kádár in Komárno on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of July, one day before the meeting in Warsaw.<sup>145</sup> In the early morning hours of the next day, János Kádár and Jenő Fock left for Warsaw. Deputy Foreign Minister Károly Erdélyi and Major-General Ferenc Sebestyén were in the delegation as well.<sup>146</sup> Sebestyén’s presence serves as a proof that the Hungarian delegation counted on the fact that in Warsaw, the debates were to touch also military issues. This fact is confirmed also by the political committee MSZMP, on July 12. It is evident from the speeches of those present that they were conscious of what it was really about. The members of the political bureau agreed with the Hungarian delegation being an intermediary. During the debate, there were announcements: “a military intervention

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144 Ludvík Vaculík: Dva tisíce slov—The Two Thousand Words. *Literární noviny*. July 27, 1968.

145 Vasil Bilak and Štefan Sádovský travelled on the same day to Balatonliga. Unfortunately, there are neither Hungarian, nor Slovak nor Czech sources to prove who they met or what they talked about. There is only one entry on their arrival: MNL OL, XIX-J-1-u, Miniszter és miniszterhelyettesi iratok (Erdélyi Károly iratai) (Documents of the Minister and Deputy Minister Károly Erdélyi) 17. doboz (box). We believe the Czechoslovak hosts met with Kádár in Balatonliga. Bilak was the only member of ÚV KSČ who supported the participation on the Warsaw meeting. See: Jašek, 2017. Bilak met with György Aczél on the 6th July and told him “The Two Thousand Words” represented the line of what was bearable and after that “the party should have intervened against the enemies” even using administrative means. MNL OL, M-KS 288. f. 47/743. ő. e.

146 MNL OL, XIX-J-1-u, Miniszter és miniszterhelyettesi iratok (Erdélyi Károly iratai) (Documents of the Minister and Deputy Minister Károly Erdélyi), 17. doboz (box).

can cause damage”, “let us not support a military action”, “let us keep the position we held until now” and “a military intervention is a mistake”.<sup>147</sup>

Also Kádár had to talk with Dubček, since until then he had acted in defence of Czechoslovak events before the other Socialist parties and now he came to the conclusion that Dubček betrayed him. During the one to one meeting, Kádár was nervous because he was conscious of the fact that in Warsaw he had been the only one to defend Czechoslovakia and this was no longer defensible. The allegation that the KSC leadership wanted to keep the friendly relations with the Soviet Union also in the future would not sound true. He also could not defend “*The Two Thousand Words*” in the name of Dubček, he knew exactly how the military training Šumava went and he also got the information the Soviets were preparing a sequel. He received a letter which contained a sharp condemn of the Czechoslovak reform processes and this also contained a passage on a possible “offer of help”. Kádár participated in the preparations for the meeting in Warsaw and commented on this document. He was also in Moscow and—if he had doubted the Soviets’ intentions before—these doubts definitely disappeared after this meeting. He was aware that the primary aim of the Warsaw debate was to put a choice before Dubček and his leadership: if they participate, it will be a clear signal that they abandon the reformist wing; if not, the Soviet leadership will no longer be behind them.

Kádár considered it crucial to convince KSC leadership of its participation in the Warsaw meeting. Dubček was at times aware that the event could end in tragedy, at least it looks like that from the reasons he gave for his absence in Warsaw. In his opinion, it was impossible to adopt a single position “until they did not clear with the particular parties (East Germany, Bulgaria) if it was counterrevolution?”. “Because military orders can be debated and decided this way.” At the same time he complained to Kádár that the Soviet soldiers were still in Czechoslovakia and it was not known when they would leave.<sup>148</sup>

Kádár then informed Dubček on the situation:

The refusal to participate in a multilateral meeting is the biggest mistake you have done since January. This fact has changed the relations between six parties. This is a serious situation and nobody can say what will come next. (...) If the KSC leadership refuses the participation in multilateral debate, then this is our

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147 MNL OL, M-KS 288. f. 47/743. ó. e.

148 MNL OL, M-KS 288. f. 47/743. ó. e.

crossroads. Which way will you go and who with? If you do not come to Warsaw, you will negate your previous positions and at the same time put also the Hungarian party to an uneasy situation.<sup>149</sup>

In Kádár's words, this comment was not expected by Dubček and Černík: 'At that moment they probably realized where this has come to. This phase of the conversation broke them, they started to cry.<sup>150</sup> In such psychical state they declared that all doors have been slammed on them.'<sup>151</sup> Dubček asked what was the reason it was so urgent that the leaders met and Kádár answered: "Don't you know your partners."<sup>152</sup>

15th July in Warsaw really meant the crossroads and door slamming. Also Kádár gave up on his previous positions. However, it was not easy. The Hungarian leading representative mentioned in his speech all possible statements from the meetings in Dresden and Moscow, but he added that the situation was now much worse than before. The crucial question remained, if there was counterrevolution in Czechoslovakia. In Kádár's opinion not yet, but it would not take long to come. Therefore, he suggested keeping the political fight.<sup>153</sup>

After Kádár spoke Ulbricht and attacked the Hungarian leader:

'I was surprised at the analysis presented by comrade Kádár. It is evident, comrade Kádár, that this is not only about Czechoslovakia (...) It is about counterrevolutionary powers. (...) I am not sure, comrade Kádár, do you not see it?

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149 MNL OL, M-KS 288. f. 5/462. ó. e.

150 Kádár's speech in the political committee MSZMP 15th July 1968, See: MNL OL, M-KS 288. f. 5/462. ó. e. Kádár informed on the psychical state of the Czechoslovak leading representatives two days later during the meeting in Warsaw: "They became aware of how serious the situation is only during the talks and that broke them. Especially Dubček who could not speak a word. Both cried." Garlicki—Paczkowski, 1995. Quotation in Hungarian: Földes, 2015. II. 281.

151 In the inform for ÚV KSČ this sentence was as follows: "If they call the meeting for tomorrow morning, that will cause the doors to shut before our position." Vondrová—Navrátil, 1995. 304.

152 The document states: "Nieznáte partnery?" Vondrová—Navrátil, 1995. 303. According to the memoirs of Zdeňek Mlynář, Kádár asked this question three days before the military intervention, on the 17th of August, 1968: "Tell me, do you seriously not know who you are dealing with?" (Mlynář, 1989. 147.) According to other available sources, this question appeared already on the 23rd of July before the Warsaw meeting.

153 Földes, 2015. II. 282–285.



Do you not see that the imperialism will strike in Hungary next? It is obvious that the imperialist centres develop their activities in Hungarian intellectual circles.”<sup>154</sup>

During the debate, Brezhnev came to the following conclusion: “I have the right to evaluate this development of events as representing a direct threat on the position of socialism in the world and our countries. If we oppose to it, it cannot be considered mixing in the internal affairs of Czechoslovakia.”<sup>155</sup> Brezhnev did not say it explicitly, but following his thoughts, it was logical to say that if he evaluates the situation as “dangerous to the socialist movement”, there is only one solution left for the Soviet Union ...

Kádár was not only left alone with his position but he also had to face personal attacks. Therefore, he asked to speak again and said: “As far as the evaluation of the Soviet comrades and the consequences of this evaluation, I completely agree with them and we are ready to participate in any joint action.”<sup>156</sup> Kádár resigned on his previous position and opposed to what he said on 12th July, he agreed Hungary to join in the “common action.”<sup>157</sup>

In spite of the fact that Kádár resigned during the meeting of the ‘five’ on his previous positions, he still believed he could by all means at his disposal prevent a military intervention. It was not acceptable from the point of view of Hungarian reforms if there was a conservative turn in the socialist group. After the debate, Kádár in his conversation with Brezhnev and Kosygin carefully reminded the Soviet leadership of their historical responsibility and of the necessity to use even the smallest opportunity for a peace solution. What he did not dare say before the whole gathering, he expressed in the conversation between six eyes: the situation does not remind the year 1956 in Hungary, but in Poland,<sup>158</sup> therefore, it should be

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154 Ibid., 285–286.

155 Ibid., 300–301.

156 Ibid., 302.

157 The representatives of five parties made a letter addressed to ÚV KSČ that was also published in the Hungarian press. *Népszabadság*, July 18, 1968.

158 This was also a radical turn in Kádár’s position because he himself had compared the Czechoslovak development to the Hungarian event in 1956, better say to what happened before 23rd October. Now he had to use the argument against a military intervention so he used the parallel with the Polish situation in 1956. He also said he did not believe it was a counterrevolution.

considered to call a Soviet-Czechoslovak meeting.<sup>159</sup> Brezhnev promised to do so.

On July 10, some days before the meeting, Major-General Ivan Tutarinov<sup>160</sup> delivered to the Hungarian Minister of Defence Lajos Czinege a message from the Soviet Minister of Defence Grechko—that another military training was to take place in the territory of Czechoslovakia. They counted on the participation of *three Hungarian divisions*: in the first phase, they needed two divisions, in the next phase, one. The military training was to take place in July. Tutarinov referred to a telephone agreement between Brezhnev and Kádár. The Hungarian Minister of Defence answered on the same day to Grechko saying it was a misunderstanding since Kádár did not know about this request. The Soviet military command spoke again one week after the meeting of ‘*the five*’ in Warsaw. On July 22 at 14:00 hours, Tutarinov informed the Staff General and Deputy Minister of Defence Károly Csémi: “Comrade Grechko requests you send at least one division for the training and if that is not possible, a smaller military unit is enough.”<sup>161</sup>

The second possibility was approved in a closed meeting of the political committee MSZMP on 23rd July 1968. At the same time a resolution was approved within which “we will support their proposal during the *planning* of the military training: we will send a *smaller* military unit.”<sup>162</sup> The Hungarian military command sent its decision to the Soviets that the Hungarian party would send a smaller division for the military training. It was also questionable if the Hungarians participate already in the initial phase or later.

The fact that it was not merely a military training is confirmed by Staff General Károly Csémi on 24th July 1968. The political aim of the training was much harsher than in the case of the training Šumava. “To offer help to the Czechoslovak people in their fight against counterrevolution. (...) If the military units are loyal, we will not hurt them, but if they

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159 MNL OL, M-KS 288.f. 5/462. ő. e.

160 Deputy Head of the Armed Forces of the Warsaw Pact in Hungary. Tutarinov was a general in the defeat of the Hungarian revolution in 1956 within the military operation Storm (Vihar).

161 HL, MN 1968—Zala, 4. doboz. 8. ő. e.

162 MNL OL, M-KS 288. f. 5. cs. 464. ő. e.

show resistance, we will take action. (...) Depending on the activities of the Czechoslovak People's Army, there can be an armed encounter.”

The Soviets did not inform on the exact date of the military training but it was expected at any time after 26–27 July.<sup>163</sup>

The Hungarian command chose for the training the 8th Motor rifle division of Zalaegerszeg. According to the military operation plans, the division was to take over the territory of ten thousand square kilometres on the first day of the occupation until 14:00 hours, occupy ten positions of local garrison.<sup>164</sup> Mobilisation in Hungary started five days later (a military training with the cover name “Zala”) and several days later also in Poland (cover name “Cloudy summer—1968”/“Zamračené leto—1968”). However, after the meetings in Čierna nad Tisou and Bratislava (August 2), the order to stop the mobilisation came.<sup>165</sup> The reason of such change was perhaps the fact that even in Moscow there were leading representatives who did not agree with a military occupation of Czechoslovakia.<sup>166</sup> There was no final decision yet on a political level.

## A flash of light

Czechoslovak leadership was aware of the dangers. For this reason another Soviet-Czechoslovak bilateral meeting took place in Čierna nad Tisou from July 29 to August 1. Following this, a similar set of events happened as after the Moscow meeting—on August 6, the representatives of six parties met in Bratislava (East Germany, Hungary, Poland, Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia) and signed a joint agreement. The supporters of the Soviet intervention needed a legitimate base for their planned step.

János Kádár visited Brezhnev in Yalta on August 12–15. On August 13, Brezhnev and Dubček talked on the telephone. The Secretary General of the CPSU asked Dubček a single question: what was to be decided on the meeting of ÚV KSČ? He wanted to know if the Central Committee would take full control over the mass media, for example if it would interfere in cadre matters. Dubček avoided a direct answer and asked for time

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163 János Kádár and Béla Biszka received Csémi's report. HL, MN 1968—Zala, 4. doboz. 8. ő. e.

164 “Zala” 1968., 2012.

165 Ibid., 31.

166 Pihojá, 1998. 22–23.

to discuss these issues during the next plenary of the Central Committee. Brezhnev accused Dubček of swindling the leadership of the CPSU and said the Chairmanship of the Central Committee had no power. Dubček did not offer any clear answers and stated he had nothing to add. “If you think we swindle”, he said “undergo the steps you consider convenient. That is your business.”<sup>167</sup> The Soviet leader became convinced that Dubček would not follow the decisions from the meetings in Čierna nad Tisou and in Bratislava.

Kádár definitely knew about the telephone conversation, because on the 15th of August, after his return from Yalta, he sent a written invitation for a meeting to Dubček to debate the current issues. Dubček in his reply suggested they meet on August 17 at 15:00 hours in Komárno. Kádár informed Brezhnev and promised to inform him on the outcome of the talk. At the same time, Kádár received a message from Brezhnev on the 17th of August in which he asked “in relation with the complications in Czechoslovakia, comrade Kádár to come to Moscow on 18th August at 10:00 hours.”<sup>168</sup> During the meeting with Dubček, Kádár knew there was to be another meeting of ‘the five’. For this reason, Kádár, Erdély, Dubček and Černík met in Komárno in secret.

Kádár did not mention the planned Moscow meeting nor the occupation plan during the meeting. However, from what he did reveal Dubček must have understood that Kádár adopted a decisive position. He was much more critical and from the overall context it was clear what direction the events developing in. He described the meeting in Bratislava as a historic one: ‘because we not only achieved something but we also impeded certain things’<sup>169</sup>—referring to the fact that if there was no joint agreement, the military intervention would already have happened.<sup>170</sup>

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167 See: *Chechoslovatskiy krizis 1967–1969 gg.*, 2010. 851–861.

168 MNL OL, M–KS 288. f. 47/743. ő. e. 190–191, 195–197. The decision fell in the meeting of the Political Committee ÚV KSSS. See: *Chechoslovatskiy krizis 1967–1969 gg.*, 2010. 184.

169 Handwritten notes of Károly Erdélyi are available from this debate (published: Földes, 2015. I. 308–325.). Kádár informed on it also in a closed meeting of the Central Committee MSZMP and the Council of Ministers on 23rd August 1968. (MNL OL, M–KS 288. f. 4/94. ő. e. 9–10.).

170 Dubček and his companions did not understand Kádár. His inform for the Chairmanship of ÚV KSČ proves this. They do not quote Kádár directly, but rather in a neutral

After that, the two leading representatives of the party discussed who had made a mistake “before Warsaw”: KSCĚ or “the five”? Dubĉek insisted it had not been them, but the fault was in the Warsaw meeting and “the letter from Warsaw”. Kádár disagreed. On the first sight it resembled a superficial debate but in fact Kádár wanted to make sure how serious was the Czechoslovak leadership about the agreement from Bratislava. Was it only an obligatory compromise or did the Dubĉek group finally understand it had not been a correct decision not to join ‘the five’ before the meeting in Warsaw. And is Dubĉek serious about his return to the “right path”? “It is not irrelevant what they think because they can separate us again”, said Kádár.<sup>171</sup>—He tried to say the conflict went on.

Kádár considered the meeting in Warsaw a challenge. He had to change his position and retreat. He was obliged to adopt a position he did not agree with. He promised before the gathered that he “will join in all joint actions”. Dubĉek defended the absence of the KSCĚ leadership on the Warsaw meeting also on the meeting on 17th August. It is therefore not a coincidence that during the conversation Kádár shouted: “Where are our rights? We only assist ...”—meaning the MSZMP leadership participated in all meetings on Czechoslovak issues, even in Bratislava, although they did not know what to expect and what was to be debated. He could not explain to Dubĉek the importance of the debate in Bratislava, which consisted precisely in the fact that thanks to them he postponed the plan of military intervention that had been decided already in Warsaw. Kádár felt relieved at least for a while because everything proved that so far he did not have to fulfil his promise given in Warsaw about “the participation in joint actions”.

Kádár criticized especially the fact that the Chairmanship of ŰV KSCĚ did not summon a meeting immediately after the Bratislava debate, where the controversial point would be talked. “In your place, the Chairmanship of our party would have summoned a five day meeting”—he said. Kádár eventually lost balance: “I have not received neither rubles nor zlotys. Simply, there are things that need to be considered. Eight months have passed and one gets the feeling you lack courage to set clear borders.

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form: “The leadership of MSZMP evaluates the meeting in Bratislava and its importance as a positive one.” NA ĆR, KSCĚ-ŰV-02/1. sv. 81. a.j. 126/kinfl.

171 All quotes from notes of Károly Erdĉlyi. Földes, 2015. II. 312–313.

Everything goes as if you were dropping sand through your fingers.”<sup>172</sup> “I believed you from the first day!” Dubček replied: “If you do not give us two weeks, find another first secretary!”<sup>173</sup> [...]

“Tell me, what do I do?” Kádár: “Prepare a congress and take all practical steps!”<sup>174</sup> ÚV KSC̄ however, did not have two weeks to act.

## Occupation

On the next day, Kádár travelled to Moscow, where Brezhnev informed him: Czechoslovakia will be occupied by the armies of the member states of the Warsaw Pact.<sup>175</sup> On August 20, 1968, at 23:00 hours, the operation Danube/Dunaj began under the command of the Deputy Minister of Defence of the Soviet Union, Jurij Pavlovski, the armed forces of the Soviet Union, Poland, Bulgaria and Hungary crossed the border on 18 places and entered the territory of Czechoslovakia. Within the Warsaw Pact, this was how the only and at the same time the last sharp deployment of the Hungarian People’s Army performed in the period after WW2.

From the 18 places to pass the state border, three were assigned to the Hungarian division that entered the country in southwest Slovakia with a large population of Hungarian nationality. From the military operation Zala, some ten thousand soldiers participated in the occupation of Czechoslovakia and together 160 military vehicles of the types T-54/A (93), T-55 (24) a T-55/A (43). From Poland, the most vehement defenders of the occupation plan, the 2nd armada under the command of Florian Siwicki occupied a territory twice as large (20 thousand square metres), and the number of Polish soldiers considerably outnumbered the Hungarians (Polish historians estimate there were 20 thousand). Apart from that, 600 Polish tanks outnumbered the number of military vehicles of the

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172 All quotes from notes of Károly Erdélyi. Földes, 2015. II. 312–313.

173 Ibid 318. Dubček said the same as in the telephone conversation with Brezhnev on 13th August.

174 Ibid 320–321.

175 Kádár announced in his short speech that he had met Dubček on the previous day and their debate was rather unpleasant. He did not find out if Dubček was serious about the agreement from Bratislava. In spite of that, he insisted on a political agreement which would take place after the military intervention which all parties had agreed on. See: Vondrová—Navrátil, 1996. 203–204.

Hungarian division.<sup>176</sup> Until August 25, 27 divisions participated in the invasion to Czechoslovakia (12 tank divisions, 13 motorized and 2 plane), 6300 tanks, 2000 cannons, 550 combat and 250 transportation helicopters.<sup>177</sup> The number of soldiers is estimated at between 200,000 and 250,000. From the data it is evident that the participation of the Hungarian division was of symbolic character. When we consider that Hungary occupied a territory in which it could find the smallest resistance, we can say that the Hungarian participation on the occupation of Czechoslovakia did not have a large importance from the military point of view.<sup>178</sup>

This fact is proved also by the reports on the situation in which there are also an insignificant number of cases of violence against the Hungarian soldiers (one of them happened when a Czechoslovak truck pushed the vehicle of a Hungarian soldier off the road. The soldier was injured and he was treated for 8 days from these injuries).<sup>179</sup> Taking into consideration that until the end of 1968, the occupation had, on the side of the resistance, 137 fatalities and 500 seriously injured, it is evident that the Hungarian soldiers had not entered into “problematic territories”.<sup>180</sup>

During the whole occupation—from the order number 001 of the Commander of 8th Infantry Division on the 29th of July until the complete retirement of the troops on the 30<sup>th</sup> of October, the Hungarian soldiers were not deployed in sharp combat. From the Hungarian division, four soldiers died, only one case occurring during a military action: one T-54 vehicle fell into the river Ipla and the reserve officer in it died; another fatality was caused by heart thrombosis; one person died as a consequence of “accident with a firearm” (one soldier accidentally shot another); and a fourth soldier died while on leave by committing suicide.<sup>181</sup>

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176 For this data, see: Kowalski, 1992. 18.

177 Povolný, 2018. 356.

178 They did not have to count on large resistance because they could rely on the fact that in the territories with Hungarian population people would not attack on Hungarian soldiers. On the other hand, the population in Slovakia was less interested in Prague reformation processes therefore the events of occupation and normalization had a smaller response of the society. See: Pithart, 1993.

179 “Zala” 1968., 2012. 89.

180 Data available online: <http://www.ustrcr.cz/cs/obeti-okupace> (last date visited 30th August 2018). In the territory occupied by the Hungarian army, there were four Czechoslovak victims until 8th September.

181 “Zala” 1968., 2012. 36., 37., 57., 97.

Kádár talked about Hungarian foreign policy on October 24, at the time when the Hungarian army was leaving Czechoslovakia and he chose an unusual place for his speech—a factory for socks in Budapest: “The basic thesis of our foreign policy is that we cooperate with the Soviet Union, the first socialist country and with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.” He added that this happens also when “the opinions of the socialist countries differ or are contradictory or opposed to each other.”<sup>182</sup> A grotesque historical parallel is represented by the fact that in Autumn 1956 also the Czechoslovak leadership rationalised their military position in relation to the Hungarian revolution with a similar foreign policy thesis: “With the Soviet Union forever and never otherwise!” After 1956 as well as after 1968, it became clear that adjusting to the aims of an empire does not allow the subordinate countries to lead autonomous policy. János Kádár could not even defend Hungarian reforms.

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182 *Népszabadság*, October 25, 1968.