

Manny Cheema

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### Source Exploration

About the author: My name is Manny Cheema, and I am a fourth-year student expected to graduate in 2025! I am a History of Public Policy and Law Major. My academic interests pertain to 20th-century political, military, and social history, with an emphasis on the United States and Europe. From a young age, I have been fascinated with German history, and since coming to UCSB that fascination has only grown, specifically pertaining to the last 155 years of German history, including German Unification, World War I, the rise of Hitler and the Nazis, World War II, and the Cold War relating to the partition of Germany and reunification.

Source: “Poster Protesting the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact Troops.” The source was captured on August 21, 1968. The link can be found here: [Poster Protesting the Invasion of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic by Warsaw Pact Troops \(August 21, 1968\)](#).

Abstract: This paper explores the depth behind Walter Ulbricht's role in heavily pushing and instigating for the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw Pact. Czechoslovakia was planning to reform around economic and social freedoms known as the “Prague Spring.” This angered hardline communist leaders in the Eastern Bloc, no more than Ulbricht. His persistence and emphasis to Moscow on the “dangers” of the reforms and the necessity of military force to crush them would be granted, as on August 20, 1968. While the reforms would be crushed, East German troops would be halted from the invasion by Moscow due to fears or invoking the trauma of Nazi occupation between 1939 and 1945. Yet, the GDR would maintain the illusion that East Germany played a prominent role in the invasion, painting Ulbricht as an evil despot, parallel to Hitler in the eyes of Czechoslovakians.

**Narrative: “How In 1968 Walter Ulbricht Cemented Himself As A Parallel To Hitler In The Minds Of Millions Of Czechoslovakians”**

**Pabel, Himlar. Poster reading: “German soldiers go home and liquidate Ulbricht, who is a new Hitler! Your people do not agree with your actions!” (August 21, 1968)**  
[https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_image.cfm?image\\_id=2495](https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=2495).

The Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia and the subsequent Warsaw Pact invasion, which crushed hopes for liberal economic, social, and political reforms, made 1968 one of the most crucial years in the Eastern Bloc's history. It should be highly noted that the “crushing” of the reforms and the Warsaw Pact’s invasion was not a decision that came from Moscow alone but was pushed and influenced heavily by Eastern Bloc hardline leaders, such as Wladyslaw Gomulka, Poland’s General Secretary, and more specifically East Germany’s First General Secretary Walter Ulbricht (1883-1973). Ulbricht, with his relentless effort in pursuit of persecuting and destroying the reformist government by endlessly urging Moscow and Eastern Bloc leaders to intervene militarily, did not only further his image as a hardline and megalomaniac authoritarian but, in the eyes of Czechoslovakians, as a bloodthirsty autocrat in the same realm as Adolf Hitler. Alexander Dubcek, secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, ushered in the Prague Spring through the "Action Program," highlighting reforms such as freedom of speech, press, and movement; emphasizing consumer goods; maintaining positive foreign relations; opening up the country to both Western and Eastern bloc countries; and potentially transitioning to a multiparty system under a more democratic socialist system.<sup>1</sup>

Hardline Eastern Bloc leaders, especially Ulbricht, perceived these wide-ranging and groundbreaking reforms as a direct threat to their power and the stability and longevity of socialism in Europe. This is evidenced in his letters by the fact that he was concerned and fearful about “the effects of the cancer” of Dubcekism in his own country.”<sup>2</sup> Ulbricht, a dedicated hardline Stalinist who studied and went into exile in Moscow, demonstrated his commitment to these ideals through his rule over East Germany, where he used his iron fist to combat dissent

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<sup>1</sup> Rebekah Young, “Dubcek’s Failings? The 1968 Warsaw Pact Invasion of Czechoslovakia,” *The View East*, June 27, 2012, <https://thevieweast.wordpress.com/2012/06/27/dubceks-failings-the-1968-warsaw-pact-invasion-of-czechoslovakia/>.

<sup>2</sup> Jiri Valenta, *Soviet Intervention in Czechoslovakia, 1968: Anatomy of a Decision* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).

and calls for reform, as demonstrated by the 1953 East German Uprising. Eastern Bloc leaders posited two "schools of thought" as a result: a moderate stance, such as Hungary's Janos Kadar, that focused on mediating and emphasizing diplomacy between Moscow and Prague, and Ulbricht's hardline stance, which emphasized direct military interventionism. Ulbricht displayed this sentiment at the Warsaw conference in July of that year, emphasizing the need for intervention.<sup>3</sup> Ulbricht, representing the most critical and loudest voice in the hardline and interventionist camp and advocating for military intervention, emphasized that the CSSR's reforms posed threats to the GDR (East Germany), the people of Czechoslovakia, and the Eastern Bloc as a whole. For the GDR, opening up to the West, and in particular West Germany, opened the gates for Western influence and even direct intervention in Central Europe as well.<sup>4</sup> He asserted that the reforms would not serve the interests of the proletariat but rather the intellectuals. He emphasized that the reforms were "antirevolutionary" and a mockery of the Marxist-Leninist ideology he so strongly carried.<sup>5</sup> As a result, he emphasized the need for military intervention in crushing the reforms and everything they hoped to create in Czechoslovakia. March of 1968 would become a crucial period regarding this sentiment, as the GDR's "party line" became that of which the reforms were "counter-revolutionary" to Marxist-Leninist ideology, which would be reflected in the media, military, and ultimately at the Warsaw Pact Conference in Dresden, where he emphasized for the counterrevolution to be opposed vehemently and with strength. Interestingly, the Soviet high command used this notion to justify the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw Pact in 1968.<sup>6</sup>

Ultimately, Ulbricht, being the autocrat he was, was deeply concerned about maintaining his own power and ensuring the stability of the GDR against "counterrevolutionary" ideologies that contradicted his Stalinist philosophy. This is evidenced by the established strong relationship pertaining to travel and vacation between the citizens of the two nations, and if "democratic" or

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<sup>3</sup> Jiri Valenta, *Soviet Intervention in Czechoslovakia, 1968: Anatomy of a Decision* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Antony Kalashnikov, "Factors in the Soviet Decision to Invade Czechoslovakia," *Constellations* 3, no. 2 (May 9, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.29173/cons17209>.

<sup>5</sup> United States Department of Defense, "The Czechoslovakian Crisis of 1968," Defense.Gov, accessed October 31, 2024, [https://media.defense.gov/2021/Jun/29/2002751866/-1/-1/0/FROM\\_SPRING\\_PART\\_ONE.PDF](https://media.defense.gov/2021/Jun/29/2002751866/-1/-1/0/FROM_SPRING_PART_ONE.PDF).

<sup>6</sup> Mark Stolarik, *The Prague Spring and the Warsaw Pact Invasion of Czechoslovakia, 1968: Forty Years Later* (Mundelein, Ill: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 2010).

reformist ideals spilled into the GDR, Ulbricht would be tasked with answering for the regime's human rights abuses and repression of individual freedom.<sup>7</sup> Ulbricht again led the attacks on the reforms at the Warsaw Five meeting in July, highlighting the reforms' potential harm to the Eastern Bloc and the need for the anti-reformist coalition to take "certain actions."

Interestingly, during his "friendly" visit to Dubcek in the south of Eastern Germany, which appeared to be a genuine meeting between two friendly leaders, two NVA divisions, comprising over 16,000 German soldiers and hundreds of Soviet tanks, were prepared for the invasion. According to Mark Stolarik, Ulbricht's eagerness to invade and occupy the country was "without any historical sensitivity" to the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia thirty years earlier. But right before the invasions the two NVA divisions were halted from joining the invasion, instead being sent home after not really participating. Only a few units would be sent on the NVA's part for logistical support, which would be an utter disappointment and extremely embarrassing to Ulbricht.

So, what created the parallel between Hitler and Ulbricht in the minds of Czechoslovakians? The answer lies in Ulbricht and the SED's (Socialist Unity Party of Germany) relentless efforts to make it seem like the NVA played a crucial role in the invasion. Many factors contributed to this, including Ulbricht and the SED's refusal to refute Western media's portrayal of the NVA's "direct" involvement in the invasion, providing ambiguous information about the NVA's role in invasion and occupation in East Germany, and ultimately promoting their own narratives and agendas. This was evident in 1985 when the official East German military publishing house in Berlin published an article stating that the NVA "fought side by side" with their "fraternal" armies as equals in suppressing the "counterrevolution."<sup>8</sup> As a result, the phrase "Hitler 1938, Ulbricht 1968" became widespread, being portrayed in art, posters, chants, and demonstrations by Czechoslovakians in response to what they perceived was the second coming of a despotic German ruler who showed no sympathy for their freedom, sovereignty, and self-determination. While the NVA played a minor role in the invasion and occupation of Czechoslovakia, Ulbricht's endless obsession with crushing the

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<sup>7</sup> Mark Stolarik, *The Prague Spring and the Warsaw Pact Invasion of Czechoslovakia, 1968: Forty Years Later* (Mundelein, Ill: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> Mark Stolarik, *The Prague Spring and the Warsaw Pact Invasion of Czechoslovakia, 1968: Forty Years Later* (Mundelein, Ill: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 2010).

“counterrevolution” in pressuring Moscow and the Eastern Bloc to invade, as well as not disputing and ultimately emphasizing the role the NVA played in the invasion and occupation of Czechoslovakia through state-controlled media and academic institutions, cemented himself as a callous and ruthless autocrat in the Western world. For Czechoslovakians, he was cemented in the same realm of bloodthirsty despots as Adolf Hitler, regarding the absolute disregard of Czechoslovakian sovereignty, self-determination, freedom, and human life, as evidenced by the photo taken by Hilmar Pabel.



### Headnote

- Pabel, Hilmar. “Poster Protesting the Invasion of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic by Warsaw Pact Troops (August 21, 1968).” Ghdi Image. Accessed October 25, 2024. [https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_image.cfm?image\\_id=2495](https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=2495).
  - The Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia was a military intervention on the part of the Eastern Bloc to put an end to “Prague Spring,” which had massive prospects of economic and social reforms, leading to greater individual rights for the Czechoslovakian people. The prospects featured reforms relating both to economic decentralization and democratization. East Germany played a huge role in orchestrating and setting up the logistics for the invasion. Specifically, it was

Walter Ulbricht, the communist hardline autocrat leader of East Germany, who heavily pushed for the invasion, seeing the reforms as a major threat to his own power and stability of socialism in Europe. Despite Ulbricht's claims that two NVA divisions were deployed to fight in the invasion, the reality was that East Germany primarily played a role in logistics support, only sending a few units across the border. As a result, the Czechoslovakians were outraged at the prospect of German troops invading and potentially occupying their homeland, which stoked fears of the Nazi invasion and occupation of 1938/1939. The poster reads, "German soldiers go home and liquidate Ulbricht, who is a new Hitler! Your people do not agree with your actions!"

### **Annotated Bibliography In Chronological Order**

- The Bratislava Declaration, August 3, 1968. Accessed October 28, 2024. <https://web.archive.org/web/20121014010026/http://library.thinkquest.org/C001155/documents/doc41.htm>.
  - The Bratislava declaration was inspired by the Prague Spring. Participants included the communist parties of Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, East Germany, the Soviet Union, and Poland. All nations and their representatives pledged to support the "unwavering" form of Marxism-Leninism. Particularly all pledged to combat the ideals of the international bourgeoisie. East Germany is particularly important, as is the condemnation of West Germany as "revanchist," a threat, aggressive, and full of Neo-Nazi movement. This is important because it has a lot to do with the next source I decided to explore as a result.
- United States Department of Defense, Vol. 1 From Spring into a Long Winter's Night: The Czechoslovakian Crisis of 1968. (1968). DOCID: 3519758. Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 1968. [https://media.defense.gov/2021/Jun/29/2002751866/-1/-1/0/FROM\\_SPRING\\_PART\\_O](https://media.defense.gov/2021/Jun/29/2002751866/-1/-1/0/FROM_SPRING_PART_O).
  - The US Department of Defense's documents pertaining to the "Czechoslovakian Crisis" lays massive blame on Ulbricht and Gomulka for being the first and most prevalent voices surrounding the interventionist stance. They name Ulbricht and Gomulka, seeing the reforms as a direct threat to their power and the start of the

“demise” of communism in Europe. Interestingly, the documents recorded East German troops participating in large-scale military exercises along the Czech border. This makes me wonder about how long before Brezhnev decided that East German troops would be pulled from the full-scale invasion?

- Valenta, Jiri. “The Bureaucratic Politics Paradigm and the Soviet Invasion of Czechoslovakia.” *Political Science Quarterly* 94, no. 1 (1979): 55–76.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/2150156>.
  - Ulbricht represented one of the two stances/schools of thought pertaining to dealing with the Prague Spring. His stance represented the hardline stance, emphasizing crushing the Action Program through military action. The situation was exacerbated by the fact that information provided by the KGB, as well as reports from Ulbricht and Gomulka, emphasized that the reforms signaled a “right-wing takeover” of the Extraordinary Party Congress, which would push the Politburo decision heavily towards taking military action. The author cites Dimitri Simes and Gordon Rocca, "Soviet Decision Making and National Security Affairs;" Simes, "The Soviet Invasion;" A. Grigoryants and V. Rogov, "Leninist Ideas Are Invincible: The Policy of Anticommunism Meets with Failure, Richard Nixon Again;" Weit, “At the Red Summit;" and Pavel Tigrid, “Why Dubcek Fell,” as well as letters and quotes from Dubcek and Ulbricht, respectively.
- Stolarik, Mark. *The Prague Spring and the Warsaw Pact Invasion of Czechoslovakia, 1968: Forty Years Later*. Mundelein, Ill: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 2010.
  - Ulbricht played a massive role in the Warsaw Pact regarding fear mongering around the reforms being a counterrevolution. He turns his nation against Czechoslovakia through a press and media blitz. Ulbricht would ultimately be embarrassed because the GDR was “sidelined” in the actual invasion. Interestingly, I found out through this source that Ulbricht and GDR would spend the next twenty years covering this up. Most people, especially those in the Eastern bloc, would truly believe that East German troops fought and were a big part of the invasion, when the truth was far from it. Shows Ulbricht’s obsession with the hardline communism and military interventionism to preserve the Marxist-Leninist ideology ingrained in him by Moscow, showing no flexibility.

- Kalashnikov, Antony. “Factors in the Soviet Decision to Invade Czechoslovakia.” *Constellations* 3, no. 2 (May 9, 2012). <https://doi.org/10.29173/cons17209>.
  - West German prosperity regarding economic and political strength (which Soviet propagandists labeled revanchism) was a major cause of the invasion. If the reforms were to go through and Czechoslovakia opened up the nation, West Germany would be able to exert massive influence over it. With this sentiment, the East Germans, Soviets, and hardliners were terrified by a power vacuum opening if Czechoslovakia opened up and became a “non-aligned” country, meaning the reemergence of West Germany as at least THE central European power.
- Young, Rebekah. “Dubcek’s Failings? The 1968 Warsaw Pact Invasion of Czechoslovakia.” *The View East*, June 27, 2012. <https://thevieweast.wordpress.com/2012/06/27/dubceks-failings-the-1968-warsaw-pact-invasion-of-czechoslovakia/>.
  - Ulbricht played a massive role in the Warsaw Pact’s invasion of Czechoslovakia. In the months before, he and the SED, alongside other nations of the Eastern Bloc (Polish and Ukrainian communist parties), emphasized the need for strong military intervention to counter the “contamination” and spread of Action Program ideals and hopes. In the meeting of the “Warsaw Five” in May of 1968, he and Polish General Secretary Gomluka took “the most hardline stance.” This is crucial, as at this time Brezhnev was uncertain on what action to take, hoping to take diplomatic measures instead of “limiting” the nature of the reforms to an “acceptable” standard. The author used a myriad of sources, including Jiri Valenta's “Soviet Intervention in Czechoslovakia 1968: Anatomy of a Decision,” Jeremi Suri's “The Promise and Failure of 'Developed Socialism,” Grzegorz Ekiert’s “The State Against Society, Ben Fowkes’ “The Rise and Fall of Communism in Eastern Europe,” Grzegorz Ekiert’s “The State Against Society,” Galia Golan’s “Reform Rule in Czechoslovakia,” as well as quotes from Dubcek himself.



- Karner, Stefan. “Der ‘Prager Frühling.’” Bundeszentral für politische Bildung, bpb.de, December 27, 2021. <https://www.bpb.de/themen/zeit-kulturgeschichte/68er-bewegung/52007/der-prager-fruehling/?p=all>.
  - The GDR, under the hardline communist stance of Ulbricht, was a main actor alongside other hardliners such as Wladyslaw Gomulka (Poland’s General Secretary) in pushing for hard power/military intervention against the Prague Spring and the Action Program of Dubcek's, which called for economic and political liberalization through democratic and social reforms. Particularly for Ulbricht, the reforms were seen as a “threat” to his power. Furthermore, the two hardliners advocated and emphasized that the reforms were “counter revolutionary” to the socialist cause. The SED party backed this claim as they saw the reforms necessary to be met with military action, as specifically “democratization” made the party believe the Dubcek government was taking counter revolutionary methods and were threatening not only for the sake of the GDR but the Eastern Bloc as a whole. Two divisions of the East German army were supposed to join the invasion but were stopped at the last second.
- Hilmar Pabel | Biography - MutualArt. Accessed November 16, 2024. <https://www.mutualart.com/Artist/Hilmar-Pabel/502975603FA69BA5/Biography>.
  - Hilmar Pabel was a German photographer who was initially a Nazi photographer and war correspondent working for the propaganda department. He was assigned to the Lublin Ghetto, where he was infamous for captioning photos with antisemitic remarks. He was able to “recreate” himself in the years after the war after serving some time in prison. He became a photographer for the Red Cross looking for missing children after the war. He worked with magazines “*Stern*” and “*Quick*,” for which he traveled across Asia, North America, and Europe and came to prominence for his photography in Vietnam and Czechoslovakia.