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Meaning of the Crisis of Czechoslovakia

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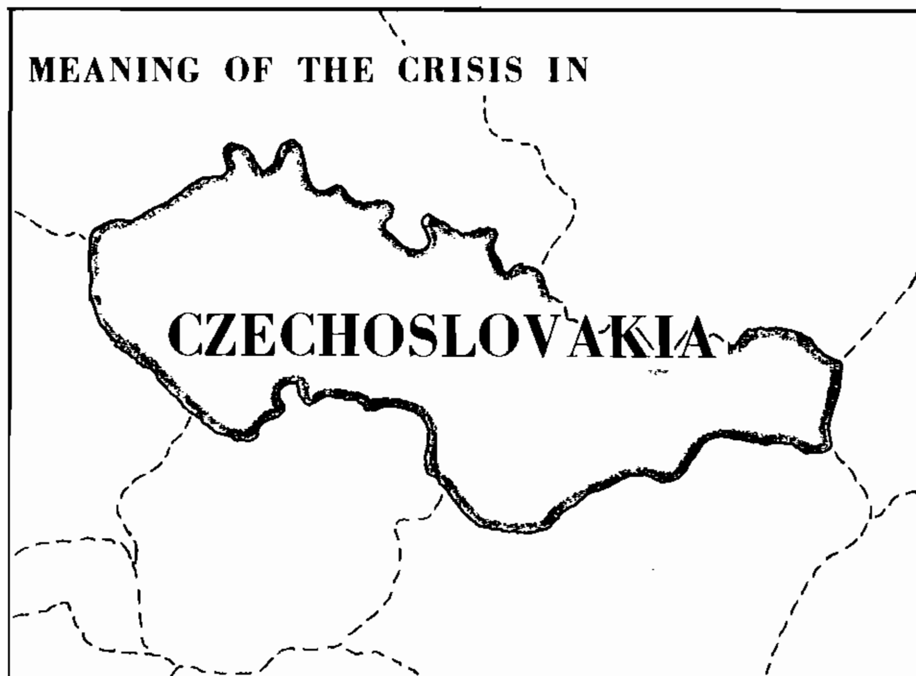

by

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A lecture delivered at the U.S. Coast Guard Academy

on 25 October 1968

Mr. Penrose, Admiral Engel, Admiral Whelan, Honored Guests, Gentlemen of the Corps of Cadets of the U.S. Coast Guard Academy, Ladies and Gentlemen; it is a distinct honor you pay me by inviting me to be your speaker tonight, both because of its distinguished sponsorship by the Newcomen Society and the distinguished academy to which Newcomen itself does honor. I have chosen to speak on "The Meaning of the Crisis in Czechoslovakia."

International life, international relations, never are still life, frozen relations, although they sometimes appear to be for a time--enough so that we speak of "eras," of "phases," or of regimes, and administrations. Yet, underneath, movement and change are incessant. Who would deny, for example, that President Johnson's rapport with his fellow citizens over his policies has varied--a phenomenon more usual than unusual for Presidents. Just be-

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neath the surface of whole "eras" one sees ferment, ebbing and flowing ferment, until suddenly the era goes and is replaced.

Not so long ago it was popular and usual, although far from completely accurate, to see and speak of a cold war era in which a so-called "free world" faced a so-called "monolithic Communist camp" dominated by the Soviet Union, with the Soviet Union in turn dominated by a dictator--Josef Stalin. As with most stereotypes, there had to be considerable truth in this view for it to endure very long as a description of reality. Bnt this view always glossed over much which did not fit. Obviously, in the "free world," the "free" part of the description meant most as common denominator if applied as meaning "free from commnnism," and it meant least if applied to mean everywhere within it, possessing "free institutions," in an American sense. The same difficulty existed when one tnrned to the other side of the Iron Curtain, for even Josef Stalin, at the height of his personal power, was unable to bring Tito of Yugoslavia to do his will, to say nothing of Mao of China. Tito's defiance throughout most of the post-World War II era is well known. Less well known is the Communist Chinese disregard of Stalin's advice to them in 1946-1947 to make peace with Chiang Kai-shek since, said Stalin, the Communists were too weak to win in China.

So, too, if we look more closely at an Eastern Europe dominated by the Soviets after 1945, we detect the unrest beneath the surface breaking forth here and there and from time to time, and, of course, more strongly after Stalin's death. East Germany in June of 1953, Poland and Hungary in the fall of 1956, Romania slowly but surely in the 1960's (although with no one dramatic event but rather with a refusal to slow industrialization for Soviet purposes, and later a recognition of West Germany). And, finally, we see Czechoslovakia between January and August of 1968 challenging Soviet control. Certainly the monolith was not quite that in Stalin's time and obviously it became less so after Stalin's death.

Yet, beginning with the overnight occupation of Czechoslovakia on 20-21 August of this year, one might be tempted to say that the monolith again exists, as a half-million Soviet troops and assorted East German, Polish, Hungarian, and Bulgarian units ponred into Czechoslovakia. But appearances may be deceiving even here--and even once again--if one assumes that the clock has been stopped or turned back.

What I want to do tonight, with the events of 20-21 August as focus, is to explore what has been happening behind the Iron Cnrtain to lead up to these events, and what the futnre consequences may be. I want to look at the prelude and the postlnde.

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The prelnde can be viewed from several perspectives, each shedding light on the total picture. There is the Soviet perspective, the German perspective, and the East European perspective.

The Soviet Union between the two World Wars was engaged in a struggle to exist within an exterior environment to which it was largely hostile--a hostility reciprocated in its turn. Within shrunken frontiers (compared to Tsarist times), with early hopes of socialist revolntion all over Enrope evaporated and replaced with a hold-the-line "socialism in one country," the Soviets turned much of their energies inward, but with a wary eye on events outside their frontiers. Cooperation with defeated Germany was permitted in the 1920's and until after Hitler was in power. It included permitting German armaments to be prodnced on Soviet soil, and even German tank maneuver exercises. But Russia continued to eye German recovery with an anxious eye. In the territories

strung out in Eastern Europe between Germany and Russia were anti-Communist regimes, hostile more to Russia than to Germany. In Asia there were clashes between Soviet and Japanese troops, but the danger there was much mitigated by the fact of Japanese preoccupation, especially after 1931 and after 1937, with the conquest of China. If Germany would be contained by the West Europeans while China kept Japan busy, all might go well. But the Soviets suspected France and Britain of wanting German energies directed eastward. In 1935, with the conclusion of a pact between Russia and France (and between Russia and Czechoslovakia), it appeared that the Soviets had decided that the better alternative was to aid in containing Germany. But the events of Munich fatally disrupted this tentative drawing-together. The Soviets made a deal with Hitler to divide Poland and were expelled from the League for their attack on Finland. How Hitler reunited the coalition by his attack on Russia in June 1941 is well known.

The Soviet Union emerged from World War II battered but victorious, determined to control her western approaches (i.e., Eastern Europe) and keep Germany weak. She succeeded and for a long time appeared to be in a position quite strong and unchallengeable. This was Stalin's heyday, when the image of the monolith was truest--although with the qualifications made earlier. Khrushchev, "depressurizing" both the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, presided over the Eastern European crisis of 1956. Luckily the Suez war of 1956 rescued him from much of his troubles and marked a severe falling-out of the major NATO allies. With *Sputnik* in 1957 Khrushchev's ambitions took on more energy as he battered on Berlin politically in 1958-1961, threatening a separate peace with East Germany that would "end Western rights in Berlin." Khrushchev's enthusiasm there led but to the Berlin Wall in 1961, a back-handed "victory," and led next to his overreaching himself in Cuba with his missiles. In the meantime, relations with Communist China steadily disintegrated, culminating in an open break by 1962-1963 which has not been mended by his successors--and is not likely to be.

Germany (that is, West Germany), during all of this played no important role of her own, except as a member of NATO. Adenauer, convinced that the path of progress for a discredited, dismantled, despised Germany necessitated a strict choice of priorities, chose economic, spiritual, and political rebuilding supplemented by a new respect and prestige as a member of NATO. In theory this policy, carried even further by membership in the Common Market, also led ultimately to the reunification of Germany. The theory was, as Dean Acheson argued, that a "position of strength" had to be created which would deter Soviet advances and lead in the fullness of time to a Soviet unilateral pullback. The promise was there for Germany, a promise which seemed full of meaning until, or unless, one asked how this was to happen, as to why the Soviets, confronted with a growing military challenge in the West, would react by a withdrawal which would be a confession of weakness and which might well in turn lead to the loss of all that had been won at so great a cost.

With the passing of Adenauer a new look came, slowly but steadily, to German politics. Internally the "Grand Coalition" of the major parties produced the political strength for new departures; externally this had the result of a new German political initiative in Eastern Europe whose first fruit was recognition by Romania and whose second fruit was scheduled to be recognition by Czechoslovakia. This "bridge-building" to the East scared the Soviets half out of their wits. While Willy Brandt talked of relaxing German-East European tensions, what the Soviets saw

was an inroad to their control, a thrust into a vulnerable political position.

As we turn to our third perspective we must begin by asking how and why, were, and are the Soviets vulnerable in Eastern Europe despite the enormous magnitude of their military power.

Eastern Europe's history is on the whole an unfortunate one--if one assumes that living in peace and freedom to follow one's own way of life is a fortunate condition. Dominated, much of it, by the Ottoman Empire in the south for long centuries, Bulgaria, Romania, and large areas of Hungary were suppressed and fought over. In the north, Poland was actually divided between Russia and Germany (and Austria-Hungary) and disappeared altogether from the map for much of moderu times. Later the area came into contest between Russia and Austria-Hungary, leading as a prime cause to World War I. Still later these nations found themselves booty yearned for by both the Soviets and the Germans--a prime cause of World War II. How little have most of them for very long been free! Even Czechoslovakia was held by Austria-Hungary and came to enjoy iudependence only for a fleeting 20 years between the two World Wars. So Eastern Europe has yearned for freedom aud rarely had it, for fate has decreed them a geographical position between rival empires or great powers. In its latest formulation, after 1945, with no Austria-Hungary then in existence, and with Geruiany temporarily weak, they have been dominated by only the one great power left in the area. Eastern Europe's freedom thus rests precariously on the opportunity to balance great power ueighbors against one another in something approaching a stalemate that does not in turn lead to division by common consent. When one considers how unfortunate this is, one can be moved to pity. But since this is all Eastern Europe has to work with, one can hardly wonder if they use all that is at hand. For, Communist or not, they want to be free also to be themselves. Consequently, when West Germany extended the hand of friendship, and raised thus visions of economic and political gain, Eastern Europe began to move to exploit it--all except East Germany and Poland, to whom West Germany is a clear threat although of different sorts. East Germany's very future is at stake while Poland can make peace with West Germany if it decides to, even though 40 percent of its territory was formerly German. Czechoslovakia held back temporarily over the Sudentenland-Munich complication, although this was never a serious problem with Germany.

So Eastern Europe (with exceptions mentioned) welcomed West Germany's reappearnee, so long as West Germany's reappearance did not take on the dimensions of displacing Soviet hegemony with a new Germany hegemony (assuming that that would be at all possible).

The Soviets, watching the immediate results of Romania's new relations with West Germany, including 640,000 Western visitors in 1967 to Romania, with 400,000 of them West Germans, grew apprehensive. When Czechoslovakia appeared ready to follow the same route, with the imminent prospect of perhaps a million East Germans and a million West Germans meeting annually (in effect dismantling the Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain), apprehension turned to downright alarm. Even without the liberal trappings of the new Czechoslovakia (including free press and permitted political opposition), the Soviets had grounds for fears. With these added, and with their implicit threat even to Soviet institutions in view of Soviet internal unrest, the die was cast and the occupation made.

So much for prelude. What of postlude?

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The Soviet position in the world, since World War II's first postwar hal-

cyon years, strategically speaking, has on the whole been worsening in Europe and on its own flank frontiers, while improving somewhat in the areas further away from the homeland. On Russia's western flank is a revived and restless Germany. On Russia's eastern flank is a newly unified, increasingly strong, and very restless China. Overall is the threat represented by American military strength, and among its allies the United States can count not only Germany but others in NATO in Europe, and Japan in the Far East. China and Japan are no longer engaged in an endless struggle with each other, and China's main grievances territorially are with Russia. Were it not for the United States-China tension and the Vietnam war, Russia would be even more seriously alarmed. Certainly no Russian rulers have ever in modern times been faced with a series of threats of this magnitude. On the plus side (looked at through Soviet eyes) is NATO's disarray (marked by the intransigence of Gaullist France), an inroad of new influence in the Middle East, and a growing capability to exercise maritime power on a worldwide scale designed to outflank, as it were, the flankers. But maritime power's foremost use is traditionally to protect the homeland by meeting the threat far away from one's own shores. Can Soviet maritime power accomplish this in view of the continental dangers existing on either Soviet land flank? And is the Soviet involvement in the Middle East a distinct and lasting advantage, built as it is on the far side of strategic blocking points from the Soviet homeland (entrance to North Sea, Gibraltar, exit from Black Sea, et cetera.) and depending primarily for its political effects on an everlasting Arab-Israeli tension? Are these indeed real compensations to all the rest? I think the answer is clearly no, on balance, regardless of the anxiety felt naturally in the West because of these Soviet overseas maneuvers.

Closer to home, on the land flanks, can the Soviets improve or consolidate their positions? One can doubt that China can be converted into a friend. The most the Soviets can hope is that China be embroiled with or distracted by actions of the United States and/or Japan. On the European front, the Germans are unlikely to forego exploiting the possibilities unless they are also resigned to living forever with their country divided and the Soviet troops deployed on and next to German soil.

What of Eastern Europe, and particularly Czechoslovakia? Is the occupation the end of possible freedom there?

At this point I must tell you of a personal reaction after two recent trips to Europe in the spring and summer of this year, first through Eastern Europe and then through Western Europe.

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY

Professor Frederick H. Hartmann holds an A.B. from the University of California and a M.A. and Ph.D. from Princeton University. He also studied at the Graduate Institute of International Affairs in Geneva, Switzerland, was a Fulbright Research Professor at Bonn, Germany, in 1953-54, and did additional research in Germany in 1959 under a Rockefeller Grant.

After instructing at Princeton, he joined the Political Science Department of the University of Florida where he was subsequently promoted to full professor and the Director of the Institute of International Relations. He has lectured at numerous military and civilian colleges and universities and has traveled widely in Europe and Asia. His publications include: *Basic Documents in International Relations; The Relations of Nations; The Swiss Press and Foreign Affairs in World War II; World in Crisis; Germany between East and West* as well as numerous articles for professional journals.

Professor Hartmann holds the Mahan Chair of Maritime Strategy at the Naval War College, is the Special Adviser to the President, Naval War College, and is a captain in the U.S. Naval Reserve.

Looking at the Soviet Union and then at Eastern Europe one is struck (except for Bulgaria) by the profound cultural differences which set Eastern Europe apart from the Soviet Union. In Budapest, Prague, Warsaw, Bucharest, one gains an overwhelming impression on two points: The vast cultural differences with Russia, and the great past glory and prosperity which once were known in such cities, especially Budapest and Prague. One can see why, for all the Soviet progress in missilry and space, that Eastern Europe feels different and indeed superior in culture. One can see that Soviet-type communism has, in effect, meant in Hungary and Czechoslovakia that they have run down economically to serve Soviet interests. One can see, even apart from the lessons of logic and history which tell us this area wants to lead its own life, why from the evidence of one's own eyes, it will not cease in these attempts.

For the moment, it is true, quiet again reigns in Eastern Europe, and by and large caution is the watchword. But the Czechs are far from subdued, the Romanians are far from capitulation, Yugoslavia is far from changing its ways, and Germany has no reason to give up the cards in its hands.

The lessons of history are not obscure as broad pointers to the future even though they never answer the question "when." No large empire endures forever--and for two reasons. There are outside forces arrayed against it; and, within, the people remain restless for freedom.

The meaning of the crisis in Czechoslovakia is this: that the Soviets have had to resort to force to keep an unwilling people in subjection, just as they have helped create a wall to keep people in and fences and minefields on the Iron Curtain for the same purpose. These are evidences not of strength but of weakness. That bayonets do not suffice against such resistance of the human will is clear from all that we know of people. The Soviet "victory" will, in the fullness of time, turn to ashes against this fact. How long it will take no one can say.

If the theory of war does advise anything, it is the nature of war to advise the most decisive, that is the most audacious.

Clausewitz: Principles of War, 1812