
Déjà Vu All Over Again:

Prague Spring, Romanian

Summer and Soviet Autumn

on the Soviet Western Frontier

AMIR WEINER

Abstract

This article explores the complex dynamics that informed Soviet policies on the western frontier – the territories stretching between the Baltic and Black Seas annexed by the Soviets in 1939–40 – and involves several interlocking aspects: the permeability of borders prone to irredentist pressures by socialist satellites, mass tourism from the West and the Soviet bloc, and the increasing flow of information from foreign media sources; the conflicting sentiments that led locals to embrace or reject reforms based on different pre-Soviet memories, the experiences of the Second World War, postwar sovietisation policies and the suppression of the Hungarian uprising in 1956; the impact of Romanian and Czechoslovak policies on the authorities and populations of the western republics and the Kremlin's concerns over the region as key factors in the decision to invade Czechoslovakia; and, finally, the domestic and international consequences for an aging, self-styled revolutionary regime choosing between youthful reform and stagnant stability.

The 1960s and 1970s in the Soviet Union were times of paradox. On the one hand, they bespoke accomplishment and confidence. Following the tumultuous reign of Nikita Khrushchev, the political scene became more predictable, though not stagnant. Violent anti-Soviet guerrillas in the borderlands were long since crushed. Economic management was rationalised, and the economy continued to grow, albeit at a slower pace than in the 1950s. And in the international arena, the long quest for equal status with the other superpower, the United States, appeared finally to have been achieved.¹

Department of History, Stanford University, Stanford, CA 94305, United States; weiner@stanford.edu. Thanks to John Connelly, Anu-Mai Köll, Martina Móis, Benjamin Nathans, Jeremi Suri, Valerii Vasil'ev, Serhy Yekelchuk and the readers of *Contemporary European History* for their contributions to this piece. Special thanks to Mark Kramer for sharing several documents with me and to Augustin Stoica for helping with the translation of Romanian-language documents. The research and writing of this article were generously supported by the German Marshall Fund, the W. Glenn Campbell and Rita Ricardo-Campbell and William Bark National Fellowship at the Hoover Institution, and the Department of History at Stanford University.

1 For a judicious re-evaluation of the era, see Edwin Bacon and Mark Sandle, eds., *Brezhnev Reconsidered* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

On the other hand, behind closed doors the Soviet leadership expressed acute anxiety that in time would translate into the drastic decision to invade Czechoslovakia in 1968. The preoccupation of the Politburo with the minutest details among the volumes of information forwarded by the KGB (State Security Committee) on the emerging dissident movement, in particular from the non-Russian republics, showed that old habits die hard and that even the profound sense of accomplishment could not erase the half-century spent pursuing internal enemies.² Moreover, the punitive organs had a vested institutional interest in magnifying internal threats if only to increase their clout and continue to extract resources. In fact, the absolute numbers of activists and incidents were nothing the KGB could not handle.³ Nevertheless, the agency admitted a certain unease. Relating the lessons of the 1960s to its young apprentices, the KGB directors sounded almost nostalgic for an earlier, simpler age when borders were controllable and the enemy recognisable and straightforward in its tactics and ideology. The decade saw the emergence of foreign broadcast stations as primary transmitters of hostile information into the Soviet Union and the employment of legal means to subvert Soviet order by non-Russian nationalist groups that used international crises and sophisticated propaganda to mobilise and expand their constituencies.⁴

This article explores the complex dynamics that informed Soviet policies on the western frontier – the territories stretching between the Baltic and Black Seas annexed by the Soviets in 1939–40 – and involves several interlocking aspects: the permeability of borders prone to irredentist pressures by socialist satellites, mass tourism from the West and the Soviet bloc, and the increasing flow of information from foreign media sources; the conflicting sentiments that led locals to embrace or reject reforms based on different pre-Soviet memories, the experiences of the Second World War, postwar sovietisation policies, and the suppression of the Hungarian uprising in 1956; the impact of Romanian and Czechoslovak policies on the authorities and populations of the western republics and the Kremlin's concerns over the region as a key factor in the decision to invade Czechoslovakia; and finally, the domestic and international consequences for an aging, self-styled revolutionary regime choosing between youthful reform and stagnant stability.

Indeed, the 1968 crisis raised several key questions for the polity, and as always, the western frontier offered the greatest series of challenges. What price were the Soviets willing to pay for the expansion of their economic, cultural and political horizons? Could the polity sustain pockets of autonomy in key border regions without risking the destabilisation of its interior? Why was a regime as powerful and realistic as

2 Joshua Rubenstein, 'Andrei Sakharov, the KGB, and the Legacy of Soviet Dissent', in Joshua Rubenstein and Alexander Gribanov, eds., *The KGB File of Andrei Sakharov* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 25; Ben Fowkes, 'The National Question in the Soviet Union under Leonid Brezhnev: Policy and Response', in Bacon and Sandle, *Brezhnev Reconsidered*, 76.

3 *Ibid.*, 76–7.

4 Viktor Chebrikov et al., eds., *Istoriia Sovetskikh organov gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti* (Moscow: Vysshiaia krasnoznamennaia shkola KGB pri SM SSSR im. F. Dzerzhinskogo, 1977), 544–5. This KGB internal textbook was prepared for the training of the agency's officers. It is still classified in Russia, but is available at www.fas.harvard.edu/~hpcws.

the Soviet regime unnerved by evidently impotent irredentist rhetoric? How real was the anxiety over a domino effect rolling in from the rebellious satellites? What were the sources of support for the regime in the border regions 2½ decades after brutal annexation and pacification campaigns? Was the regime aware of the growing alienation of its youth from the official ideology and, if so, what did it do about it? Did the 1968 crisis constitute a watershed in the Soviet domestic arena? In the late 1960s all these questions came to the fore.

Nowhere were these questions and paradoxes more evident than on the western frontier. It was the old-new western frontier that the Soviet regime confronted in the second of what would become twelve-year-cycles of crisis across its rocky empire. The brutal suppression of the Hungarian uprising and the ensuing exiles and population exchanges in the borderlands in 1956–7 made it clear that the regime would not tolerate mass public defiance, especially in the critically exposed western republics. At the same time, the polity witnessed the birth and institutionalisation of the dissident movement. Pressures for further cultural assimilation coincided with growing assertiveness in the struggle to maintain indigenous traditions, just as the memory of the great cataclysm of the Second World War continued to run along political, ideological and ethnic divides. The previous decade saw the frontier reclaiming its age-old status as a window to the West as millions of tourists crossed the borders to and from Western Europe, Scandinavia and the Eastern bloc, local populations tuned into broadcasts by foreign radio and television stations and adventurous youth created sub-cultures in the urban centres. The region was still scarred by the bloodletting of the not so distant war and sovietisation policies, but was also unsettled by its peacetime exposure to relative prosperity across the border. It was one of the prices of de-Stalinisation and, in a way, the inevitable result of the expanding economic and political horizons of the Soviet polity. It was also a constant test for a regime sworn to infallible ideology and monopoly over the articulation and dissemination of information. It was a place and populace that sought to reduce ethno-national tensions, yet remained vulnerable to irredentist claims by its socialist neighbours. It was a time and set of circumstances that turned the western frontier from a passive observer into an active participant in international politics.

Above all was the shadow cast by the events of 1956, when the sight of a nearly toppled communist regime and the inflow of alternative information provided sparks that inspired anti-Soviet activists to act on deep-seated ethno-national and political-ideological resentments, offering hopes – or rather illusions for realising their agenda.⁵ For Soviet leaders and citizens anxiously watching the unfolding drama during spring and summer 1968, it was déjà vu all over again. From the Kremlin, Yuri Andropov, director of the KGB, politburo member, and ambassador to Hungary in 1956, observed that ‘the methods and forms taken presently in Czechoslovakia

5 On the 1956 crisis on the Soviet western frontier, see Amir Weiner, ‘The Empires Pay a Visit: Gulag Returnees, East European Rebellions, and Soviet Frontier Politics’, *The Journal of Modern History*, 78, 2 (2006) (forthcoming).

closely resemble the Hungarian ones. This external chaos has its own order. In Hungary, too, it started like this. Then came the first echelon, then the second, and in the end, the Social Democrats'. He urged his colleagues to 'nip in the bud attempts to set up nationalist organisations' in non-Russian republics, especially those in the west.⁶ Andropov's anxieties were probably not eased by the Czechoslovak press running articles on the fate of Imre Nagy, the doomed Hungarian leader in 1956, which triggered a sharp rebuke from Brezhnev.⁷ At roughly the same time the rising maverick writer and son of Evgenia Ginzburg, Vasilii Aksenov, pointedly chose to open his bitter tale of 1968 with echoes of November 1956, a time when marginal youngsters were 'drunk with the damp breeze from Europe that suddenly had started blowing in our direction', only to be crushed by Communist Youth Organisation (Komsomol) vigilantes reminding the police that 'it was young snivellers like these who had caused all the trouble' in Hungary.⁸ Searching for ways out of the debacle, the Soviets constantly looked for cues from the recent past.

Window to the West

While somewhat melodramatic and self-righteous, the KGB's assessment given above was not far off the mark. The second half of the 1960s indeed saw a steady infusion of outside information that pushed the political envelope on the western frontier. By then Estonia (and to a lesser degree the two other Baltic republics) had regained its traditional role as Russia's window to the West. Contemporary Russians referred to the republic as the Russian or Soviet abroad (*russkaia/sovetskaia zagraniitsa*) and intimated to Western correspondents that 'going there is really like going abroad'. It was a place where Soviet citizens could enjoy subversive musical genres: from the first Soviet production of *West Side Story* to the first jazz festival featuring the legendary Charles Lloyd – who received a 'fantastic eight minute and twenty-second ovation' – to religious compositions by Johann Sebastian Bach. Estonian speakers could read translations of Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* and Kafka's *Trial* as early as 1966 and 1967 respectively, earlier than the rest of their fellow Soviet citizens. It was a Soviet republic where avant-garde art moved from private apartments to the galleries of the Union of Artists, something unthinkable in the Russian Republic. It was also the place where the First Secretary of the Communist Party reportedly said at an exhibition of experimental sculpture at the Academy of Sciences in 1967: 'I don't understand them at all. But no, you don't have to remove them. I am not an art specialist'. The comparison with Nikita Khrushchev's vulgar outburst at the

6 Andropov in the course of a Politburo meeting on 15 March 1968, as cited in Rudolf Pikhov, *Sovetskii Soiuz: Istoriia vlasti, 1945–1991* (Moscow: RAGS, 1998), 309; Fowkes, 'The National Question', 76.

7 For Kádár's repeated reading of the situation in Czechoslovakia as analogous to 1956 Hungary, see his speeches at the meetings of leaders of the socialist bloc leaders in Dresden on 23 March and in Warsaw on 14–15 July 1968 in Jaromír Navrátil, ed., *The Prague Spring 1968* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 1998), 67–9, 218; Pikhov, *Sovetskii Soiuz*, 324.

8 Vasilii Aksenov, *Ozhog* (The burn) (Moscow: EKSMO, 1999), 27, 32. The novel was written in 1969–75 but was published only in 1980 in the West.

Manezh gallery exhibition, just five years earlier, was unavoidable. And with Finland assuming an active role in the republic's economy and culture, via steady streams of tourists and television broadcasts, Estonia became a rare enclave where both Soviet officials and ordinary citizens sought a break from the dreariness of everyday socialism.⁹

It only made sense that Vasili Akse nov chose Tallinn as the site of his enormously popular novels, *Zvezdnyi billet* (A ticket to the stars) and *Pora, moi drug, pora* (It's time, my friend, it's time). The novels broke new thematic and stylistic grounds in Soviet literature and celebrated Tallinn as a new mythical Siberia, minus the coercion. "Oh, everybody goes to Siberia now", said Yuri. "Yes, everybody's going east", explained Dimitrii. "That's why we go west!" For the young Russians heading to Tallinn, it was a place where they could 'live on their own, break with the squares, and attend college only when they choose to do so', or just escape failed relationships. There, they could mimic Western popular culture (Brigitte Bardot, Laurence Olivier, and Sophia Loren were the models of choice), create their own dialect, exchange love notes in English, dance the Charleston and listen to calypso music in clubs, and listen to Bach's fugues in the Lutheran churches without being harassed by housing committees or Komsomol cells. When a seventeen-year-old protagonist scolded his twenty-eight-year-old, married brother that 'your career was decided for you before you were born, but I'd rather be a tramp and suffer privation than spend my whole life like a little boy doing only what other people want me to do', it was more than an adolescent rebelliousness. In a society that by and large succeeded in channelling dissatisfaction to acceptable forms, even this quixotic and miniscule pretence of living beyond the Soviet pale – and Akse nov did not endow his characters with more than that – could not be shrugged off lightly, if only because these tales reached a large audience and presented Soviet readers with a real-life location where such dreams and illusions materialised.

This free-going sub-culture was echoed in the political realm (or rather vice versa), with the Estonian authorities pursuing a distinctly lenient line towards former political troublemakers. On 18 May 1965 the republic's authorities terminated the 12 October 1957 decree that banned the return of convicted former anti-Soviet leaders and activists to the republic's territory. For one thing, the meagre number in these categories – a fraction of the 165 still in exile – made their presence in the republic practically inconsequential, argued the officials. But it was their legalistic argument that stood out – namely that the all-Union law should be applied without distinction. Current Soviet laws did not stipulate restrictions on residence for people

9 The above account draws on the excellent essay by V. Stanley Vardys, 'The Role of the Baltic Republics in Soviet Society', in Roman Szporluk, ed., *The Influence of East Europe and the Soviet West on the USSR* (New York: Praeger, 1975), 147–79, here, 159, 163, 165; and Romuald Misiunas and Rein Taagepera, *The Baltic States: Years of Dependence, 1940–1990* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 156–72. Although its political and cultural atmosphere was more cautious than Estonia's, and despite having socialist Poland as its window to the West, Lithuania was attractive enough to bring some one million summer vacationers from the Russian Federation by 1968. Misiunas and Taagepera, *The Baltic States*, 172.

who did time for especially dangerous state crimes and rendered the ban unnecessary, concluded the Estonian officials.¹⁰

The loose political control in Estonia on the eve of the Czechoslovak crisis was particularly evident in the influx of Soviet Germans. On 7 May 1968, Johannes Käbin, the First Secretary of the Estonian Communist Party, received a note that several thousand ethnic Germans had settled in the republic over the past two years. The republic's security officials, seemingly unaware of this population movement, informed the party that while only eleven ethnic Germans had settled in 1966, two hundred more had arrived in 1967, and by May 1968 the number had reached more than 1,200 and rising. Alas, this migration was instigated by local party and state organs that had recruited Germans who had been deported to the Central Asian republics during and after the war. According to the Tajik KGB officials, Estonian agitators who recruited ethnic Germans to work on new state farms also hoped to drive Russians out of the republic.

This was all the more astounding in the light of the final cleansing of the republic of the several hundred remaining Germans at the end of the war. Many of the recruited Germans were initially deported from Ukraine and Moldavia, including convicted wartime collaborators, and had relatives in Germany with whom they kept up correspondence, expressing their wish to emigrate, as well as their satisfaction at living in Estonia 'since it is closer to the Motherland'. The KGB viewed this group as a security risk and recommended an end to their recruitment.¹¹ Whether these Germans were indeed targeted by foreign intelligence services cannot be confirmed. More relevant for the unfolding crisis in Czechoslovakia was that the Estonian–German episode revealed a region where political alliances were formed on the bases of religious (Lutheran) and ethnic (non-Slavic) affinities, as well as the relatively favourable treatment by the Germans during the war and a strong sense of victimisation at the hands of the Stalinist regime. Remarkably, Estonian Communists did not try to conceal the vulnerability of their republic, and the Baltic region in general, 'where the influence of Western propaganda is more noticeable than in other places', as one of them confided in late June 1968.¹²

Socialist irredentism

Still, Estonia paled in comparison with western Ukraine and Moldavia, where the integrity of postwar borders was coming under direct challenge from deviant socialist satellites. With the sovietisation of their neighbours, the justification for annexations as liberation from imperialist oppression became obsolete. Having claimed that borders cannot breed conflict among socialist countries, Khrushchev went on to

10 Eesti Riigiarhiivi Filiaali (ERAF) arhiivifond 17–2, arhiivinimistu 1, säilitusühik 306, leht 42–45, 48–49 (hereafter ERAF rhiivifond/arhiivinimistu/säilitushüik/leht).

11 ERAF 1/302/86/14–17. Not surprisingly, the ethnic Germans continued to arrive – there were 10,281 of them in Estonia by 1974 – and to demand publicly the right to emigrate to Germany. ERAF1/302/225/1–4, 8, 11, 95; Ludmilla Alexeyeva, *Soviet Dissent: Contemporary Movements for National, Religious, and Human Rights* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1985), 172.

12 ERAF 1/301/151/43.

prophesy in early March 1959 that with the worldwide victory of communism, state, and even ethnographical boundaries would become irrelevant, nothing more than '[recording] the historically evolved fact that this or that nationality inhabits a given territory'.¹³ Barely three years after the Hungarian uprising, the ethno-national shockwaves it sent throughout the region had become lost in the vision, or rather delusion of 'communism around the corner'. Always inhospitable to utopian claims and interpretations, the international arena offered an immediate challenge. Unwittingly, the Soviet leader opened the door for commonsensical inquiries about the reasons for preventing the unification of ethnic minorities such as the Yugoslav Macedonians and the Soviet Moldavians with their ethnic brethren in socialist Bulgaria and Romania respectively. In an ironic twist, the successful spread of the socialist system across the border deprived the Soviets of the viable tool of ideology and the role of dynamic external homeland while bringing back entrenched historical claims.

The problem was particularly thorny in Bessarabia and the northern Bukovina where ethnic Romanian and Ukrainian components were joined with the Soviet republics of Moldavia and Ukraine in 1940. The territories, with nearly two-thirds of their inhabitants ethnic Romanians at the time, had been under Habsburg rule since 1774 (Bukovina) and the Russian empire since 1812 (Bessarabia). From 1918 until the end of the Second World War – with a brief spell of Soviet rule in 1940–41 – they fell under Romanian rule. As tensions between Romania and the Soviet Union intensified, the disputed territories resurfaced with a vengeance and apparently to the great surprise of the Soviets. The Soviet–Romanian split involved a whole range of issues, from assertion of autonomy within the Soviet bloc, the withdrawal of Soviet troops, trade relations, allegiances in the Sino-Soviet rift, and Romania's independent diplomatic course with the West. Interestingly enough, Khrushchev, who claimed to have a high opinion of the Romanian leadership, speculated that the core of the Romanian dissatisfaction was their 'misunderstanding' of the Soviet historical claims to Bessarabia. In intimate circles the thin-skinned Khrushchev gave full vent to his concerns: 'The *Mamalyzhniki* [a derogatory nickname for Romanians] are not a nation, but a whore . . . pernicious nationalistic and anti-Soviet attitudes are developing in Romania, even in the ranks of its Communist Party, [and they] must be cut off at the root'.¹⁴

Earlier in the decade, the Soviet leader claimed to have reminded the Romanians that 'even if you don't like us, the fact remains that history has made us neighbours . . . now that Romania is a socialist country, there is no reason for us not to have fraternal relations'.¹⁵ And yet, the not-so-tactful warning went unheeded. In line with his standard modus operandi, Khrushchev sought to intimidate the Romanians by using the highly sensitive issue of the territorial integrity of their country. By late 1963,

13 Cited in Robert King's insightful discussion, *Minorities under Communism: Nationalities as a Source of Tension among Balkan Communist States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 99–101.

14 Arkadii Shevchenko, *Razryv s Moskvoi* (New York: Liberty Publishing House, 1985), 126. *Mamalyga* is a traditional Romanian porridge.

15 *Khrushchev Remembers: The Last Testament*, ed. Edward Crankshaw and Jerrold Schechter, trans. Strobe Talbott (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974), 231.

Soviet leaders and academics started referring to Transylvania as an unresolved issue. A prominent Romanian visitor to the Soviet Union was alarmed by the prevalent notion that ‘Transylvania is a region lying only temporarily under Romanian control, a region that Romania does not really own’, and that such arguments relied on Hungarian sources and were advanced by Hungarian scholars in the Soviet Union. Simultaneously the Soviet tourist agency distributed a pamphlet, ‘Visiting the Soviet Union’, to foreign tourist agencies, highlighting a holiday route along the Danube from Vienna to Ukraine that included a map on which portions of Romania – parts of Maramureş and Transylvania – appeared as part of the Soviet Union.¹⁶

Infuriated, the Romanians turned the tables on Khrushchev and invoked their own grievances over the 1940 annexations. That year the Romanian leadership authorised the publication of obscure comments by Karl Marx and an equally forgettable letter by Friedrich Engels that denied the legitimacy of the Ottoman transfer of Bessarabia to the Russian Empire. The existence of Marx’s notes in Amsterdam, which he wrote in the margins of a book by the French historian Elias Regnault, had been related to the Romanians by a Polish scholar as early as 1957. But aware of the explosiveness of the revelation and afraid of an anti-Soviet provocation by another socialist country with its own axe to grind, Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, the Romanian leader, initially ordered a scholarly verification regarding the authenticity of the text, and then authorised a limited edition for internal party use.

But with the rift becoming public following the so-called declaration of independence adopted by the Central Committee of the Romanian party in April 1964, Dej ordered the printing of a larger number of copies of Marx’s *Însemnări despre români* (Notes on the Romanians). Now all hell broke loose. Adding fuel to the fire was the change of guard in the Kremlin, with Leonid Brezhnev, the one-time leader of Soviet Moldavia, now at the helm.¹⁷ At the same time the Romanians began operating a powerful radio transmitter in Iaşi, the capital of historical Moldavia located a few miles from Soviet Moldavia, broadcasting primarily programmes about Romanian culture, history and literature, and reminding Soviet Romanians that they were not forgotten. A publication appeared featuring the blunt statement: ‘Finland is Finnish, Poland is Polish, Bessarabia is Romanian. There is no question of bringing together various populations dispersed and related who could be called Russian. This is a brutal and undisguised conquest of foreign territories; this is theft pure and simple’.¹⁸

16 Charles King, ‘Sidelights on Soviet–Romanian Relations in the 1960s’, paper presented at the Second International Congress of Romanian Studies, Iaşi, Romania, 6–10 July 1993. I thank Professor King for providing me with the unpublished paper. See also his invaluable analysis of the Moldavian dilemma from its Soviet incarnation to the present: Charles King, *The Moldovans: Romania, Russia, and the Politics of Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

17 This account is based on a series of interviews with Paul Niculescu-Mizil, then head of the Propaganda Department of the Romanian Central Committee, in his *O istorie trăită* (Bucharest: Enciclopedica, 1997), 51–3, 135–7.

18 Nicholas Dima, *From Moldavia to Moldova: The Soviet–Romanian Territorial Dispute*, East European Monographs 309 (Boulder: East European Monographs, 1991), 48, 50; King, *Minorities under Communism*, 226–7.

By mid-decade the dispute was already spilling over into the international arena, especially with the incitement of the Chinese, who were eager to add another weapon to their arsenal in the bitter rift with the Soviets. Already, in January 1957, Zhou En-lai, the Chinese premier, claimed to have urged Khrushchev to 'make proper arrangements for the territorial issues covering Japan, China, the Middle East and the Eastern European countries including Finland'. Although he did not receive a 'satisfactory answer', the issue was not addressed in public at the time.¹⁹ A few years later all inhibitions disappeared. When a high-level Romanian delegation travelled to the Crimea to debrief Khrushchev on a meeting with the Chinese in March 1964, the Soviets were unnerved by the fact that the Romanians '*did not express any disagreement with what the Chinese had said about Bessarabia*'. This conversation left a nasty taste in our mouths. We began to suspect that maybe the Romanians still held a grudge against us for returning Bessarabia to the Soviet Union after the war'.²⁰

He was right. Ion Maurer, the Romanian premier and head of the Romanian delegation not only confirmed Khrushchev's account, adding that 'both of us knew who was right, but for us [Romanians] it did not matter much since we were in their [the Soviets'] hands'.²¹ The Chinese did not let up and in the course of a meeting with a delegation of the Japanese Socialist Party on 10 July that year, Chairman Mao pointedly stated that it was time to put an end to the allotment of foreign territories by a country with a population of only 220 million [but] a territory of 22 million square kilometres. 'There are too many places occupied by the Soviet Union', said Mao, offering a laundry list of Soviet annexations that started with Mongolia and the Kuriles followed ominously by Romania, East Germany, Poland and Finland.²²

If the volume and tenor of the Soviet reactions were the measures, then Mao clearly touched a raw nerve. Simultaneously displaying insecurity and resolve, common-sensical realpolitik and reflexive emotions, the Soviets challenged Mao's assertion regarding the redrawing of borders. Even if this could be done peacefully, where should people born on these territories be moved to? How would they be compensated for their life's work? If people refused to move voluntarily along with the territory, would they be moved by force? What nation would allow its land to be dismembered? And who was going to be the supreme judge deciding which nation had land in abundance or a shortage, from what country land was to be taken away, and what country was to be added to, and how much was to be taken away and how much added?²³

One could easily mock the self-righteousness of the Soviet objections. After all, the Soviets deftly practised all of the above in carving their western borderlands.

19 Denis Doolin, *Territorial Claims in the Sino-Soviet Conflict: Documents & Analysis*, Hoover Institution Studies 7 (Stanford: Hoover Institution on War, Revolution, and Peace, 1965), 45–6.

20 *Khrushchev Remembers: The Last Testament*, 232 (emphasis in original).

21 Maurer also dispelled the common view that the Romanians went to Beijing to mediate between the two communist giants. Rather, Maurer went there to convince the sceptical Chinese that Romania was trying to steer an independent course away from Soviet hegemony: Lavinia Beta, *Maurer și lumea de ieri. Mărturia despre stalinizarea României* (Cluj-Napoca: Dacia, 2001), 176–7.

22 Doolin, *Territorial Claims*, 43.

23 Doolin, *Territorial Claims*, 67–8.

Now, however, they found themselves in an unfamiliar position of having to defend what they considered as indisputable gains.

Second, the emotional reaction to any alteration of the borders drew on the experience and legacy of the Great Patriotic War, an event already established as a foundational myth for the polity. In the course of meetings with German journalists, Aleksei Adzhubei, Khrushchev's son-in-law and the editor of *Izvestiia*, repeatedly referred to the borders as sacred, inviolable, guarded not only by 'our entire military power but also the hearts of all our people', and concluded, '[But] there are "border problems" which cannot be the subject of political talks or of a political deal. This refers primarily to the frontiers that took shape in Europe after World War II. But then, this also refers to our frontiers as a whole. There can be no appeal to sentimentality on this matter. Here justice triumphs, which is expressed for us in the single word which will be remembered all our lives – victory'.²⁴

The Romanian leaders displayed many characteristics. Naiveté, however, was not one of them. Gheorghiu-Dej, Maurer and Ceauşescu were seasoned revolutionaries and politicians who knew the ins and outs of Soviet politics. Did they actually believe that the Soviets would relinquish territory to which they had credible historical claims? Or was it just one more tool in a prolonged struggle to establish their independence, raising one issue in order to squeeze concessions elsewhere? Or was it meant for domestic consumption, with the aim of mobilising their population under a nationalist flag? In public, Romanian officials did not shed much light on their motives and expectations, even during the rare occasions when they discussed them with their Soviet counterparts. Discussing the issue in late 1967 with a Soviet counterpart, Romulus Neagu, a Romanian representative at the United Nations, admitted that the Romanian leadership understood that a distinct Moldavian nation was being created in Soviet Moldavia, independently of the Romanian people.

This was a marked change from 1948–54 when the Moldavian peasants Neagu had met then expressed their wish to live in Romania. Now, however, a young generation was coming of age and attaching its fate to the Soviet Union.²⁵ Neagu may not have been aware that barely five years earlier Gheorghiu-Dej had stunned the Moldavian leader by stating bluntly that the Romanian and Moldavian languages are one and the same, just as Romanians and Moldavian are one and the same people. In the company of his advisors Dej was even more assertive: 'If, at the end of the [Second World] war, Bessarabia, northern Bukovina and the Hertza County had been reincorporated into the Romanian national unitary state, the Romanian people would have greatly appreciated Stalin and the Soviet people. As long as the current situation lasts there is serious friction between us and the Soviets. The problem must be solved in accordance with the rights and interests of the Romanian people'.²⁶ Whatever reasons drove the Romanians to revive irredentist claims, they did not let

24 Doolin, *Territorial Claims*, 46–7.

25 Tsentral'nyi derzhavnyi arkhiv hromads'kykh ob'iednan Ukraïny (TsDAHOU) 1/25/22/1–2.

26 Niculescu-Mizil, *O istorie trăita*, 175; Paul Sfetcu, *13 ani în anticamera lui Dej.*, ed. Lavinia Betea (Bucharest: Fundaţiei culturale Române, 2000), 250.

up. Behind the façade of an academic, historical debate, and without much hope of regaining the lost territories, they continued to pursue the issue in public, repeatedly unsettling the Soviets.

Few were more agitated than Petro Shelest, the hard-line Ukrainian boss. From early on Shelest hammered home at any opportunity the tight linkage between the events across the border, the loss of monopoly and control over information, irredentist sentiments and the fragile state of the western regions. A poster child of the Stalinist system, Shelest embodied its contradictions. He owed his rise to the terror of the 1930s, yet was bitter about its human and psychological costs. He took special pride in chairing one of the rehabilitation commissions of Gulag prisoners in 1956, but was spiteful about the violence meted out against communists in Hungary and the Soviet leaders' need for protection while visiting the socialist satellite.²⁷ Like the rest of the non-Russian communist leaders, even more so after the 1956 crisis, Shelest's own career and identity were rooted in a dogged determination to pre-empt irredentist claims and separatist, nationalist revival in his own jurisdiction. Memories of the civil war of the late 1940s and the upheaval caused by the Gulag returnees during the Hungarian uprising were all too vivid.

In late April 1965 Shelest warned Moscow about the impact of Romanian irredentist claims on the frontier. The region was abuzz with rumours about the impending return of Bessarabia and northern Bukovina to Romania. Romanian tourists informed locals of the specific date of the transfer, and villagers who claimed to follow foreign radio broadcasts told fellow peasants about an ultimatum issued by the Western powers and China to the Soviet Union to recognise the 1939 borders, or else they would be forced to do so. The rumour campaign was accompanied by growing hostility to Soviet citizens in Romania, and the mailing of anti-Soviet literature that referred to the annexed regions as Romanian.²⁸

At this point, the Moldavian Communist Party organisation was brought in. On the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the annexation to the Soviet Union, the Moldavian official organ issued a sharp reminder of the Romanian party's persistent support for unification throughout the interwar years.²⁹ Shortly thereafter Brezhnev demanded and secured Ceauşescu's formal reiteration of Romania's acceptance of the postwar borders. But with the apparent lack of goodwill on both sides, the Moldavian attacks on Romanian claims soon resumed. In his speech to the congress, Bodiul condemned 'bourgeois apologists [who] are striving to discredit and denigrate the conquests of the Soviet Union, sow hostility between the socialist countries, fan nationalism and chauvinism, make territorial claims against the Soviet Union and other socialist countries, and demand revision of the results of the Second World War'. The strong words, however, were accompanied by the open admission of the impact of Romanian propaganda that gave rise to 'unhealthy influences' in the

27 Petro Shelest, 'Spravzhnii sud istorii shche poperedu', ed. Yuri Shapoval (Kiev: Geneza, 2003), 70–1, 111–13, 118–19.

28 TsDAHOU 1/24/6047/79–82.

29 'Dokumenty internatsional'noi proletarskoi solidarnosti', *Komunist Moldavii*, 6 (June 1965), 33–9.

republic.³⁰ Retaliating on 7 May 1966, on the occasion of the forty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the Romanian Communist Party, Ceaușescu raised the stakes by denouncing resolutions of both the interwar Romanian Communist Party and the Comintern that endorsed the Soviet annexation of Bessarabia and northern Bukovina. In a sharply worded speech, Ceaușescu condemned the severance of territories that were overwhelmingly inhabited by Romanians from the Romanian ‘unitary state’.³¹ The avalanche of counterclaims emanating from the Moldavian Republic indicated that the Soviets were shaken.

By then, history (re)writing had already become a key arena in the growing rift. Party regional committees on the frontier reported on mass-circulation monographs, such as ‘History of Stephen the Great’ by the late nationalist historian Nicolae Iorga that was also circulated in Ukraine, and referred to the disputed territories as Romanian lands, and the 1966 revised edition of a school textbook on the history of Romania that stated that the territories were transferred under Soviet ultimatum.³² In early September that year, Shelest ordered the Institute of History of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences to get involved in the all-Union project ordained by Moscow, entitled ‘On the Further Working Out and Clarification of Problems in the History of Soviet–Romanian Relations’, and the Ukrainian Politburo devised a plan to intensify propaganda work in the regions bordering on Romania, including the improvement of radio and television broadcasts in the Romanian and Moldavian (*sic!*) languages.³³

The village of Krasnoil’sk in the Chernivtsi region embodied Shelest’s nightmares of the uncontrolled spread of separatist–nationalist sentiments among a receptive Romanian population. The 5,083 ethnic Romanians who formed an absolute majority of the 6,457 villagers were susceptible to the propaganda flowing from across the border. Shelest forwarded Moscow a leaflet by an alleged secret organisation ‘Free Bukovina’, that referred to the Bukovina as a Russian colony, complained about the Russian discrimination against the Romanian population, demanded that the Russian capitalist–colonizers depart for home before they were kicked out by the workers, boasted that the long awaited liberation was approaching, since Ceaușescu promised to liberate the Bukovina, and would keep his sacred word, and concluded with rousing battle-cries, ‘Long Live free Bukovina! Long Live Romania! Long Live Ceaușescu the Liberator! From His Grave, Antonescu, the Most Beloved of Men, is Rising to the Bloody Battle!’³⁴

Throughout 1967, Romanian tourists and officials continued to agitate their Soviet counterparts with talk about the coming return of the Bukovina (‘it was given to the Soviet Union for twenty years as reparation’), referring to the territories as their

30 King, *Minorities under Communism*, 232.

31 King, *Minorities under Communism*, 233–5; Stephen Fischer-Galati, ‘The Moldavian Soviet Republic in Soviet Domestic and Foreign Policy’, in Szporluk, *The Influence of East Europe*, 245–6; Dima, *From Moldavia to Moldova*, 51.

32 TsDAHOU 1/25/24/1–3; 22/27. Notably, the 1956 edition referred to the 1940 border changes as liberation, a mutual and conclusive agreement.

33 TsDAHOU 1/24/6137/127–8; 25/22/14–21.

34 TsDAHOU 1/24/6313/8.

'own' while visiting the Soviet Union and defending Israeli policies in the Middle East, A major-general in the reserve, Paul Marfei, told visiting Soviet citizens that 'in 1939–40, the Soviet Union captured Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Bessarabia, Vyborg, and in 1945 a part of Prussia. But for these actions the Soviet Union is not considered as an occupier. So why Israel is now condemned as aggressor when it liberated ancient Jewish lands?'³⁵

On 25 April 1968 an angry Shelest presented to the Ukrainian Party Moscow's position on international issues. Amid brutal attacks on Israeli and 'World Zionist' aggression in the Middle East and on the Czechoslovak leadership, the Ukrainian Party boss lashed out at the Romanians' 'special' position in international affairs, especially their deviation from the principles of Marxism–Leninism and their inflaming of nationalist passions with the aim of forming 'Greater Romania'. As a direct neighbour of Romania, Ukraine was especially sensitive to those who were 'alien to the spirit of proletarian internationalism and socialist solidarity', stated Shelest, and he concluded with an ominous warning that the CPSU and its sister parties would not allow Romania to paralyse the Warsaw Pact.³⁶

Ultimately Romania was not invaded, for a variety of reasons, not least of which was its leaders' adherence to the strictures of single-party dictatorship and non-market economy that neutralised the challenge to the Soviet domestic order. This would not be the case with Czechoslovakia, the other socialist satellite that fomented anxieties over Ukrainian territorial integrity, this time in the perennially contested Transcarpathian region. Indeed, one of Dubček's vivid memories from his dealing with the Soviet leadership prior to the invasion was Shelest accusing him of harbouring plans to reincorporate the Transcarpathian region into Czechoslovakia.³⁷ Since Subcarpathian Ruthenia had been part of the interwar Czechoslovak Republic, many on the Soviet side of the border viewed such an event as likely. To the dismay of the Ukrainian authorities, Czechoslovak party leaders themselves were ambivalent when asked by their constituencies in the course of mass public meetings whether the region that was taken illegally from Czechoslovakia would be returned.³⁸ Their uneasiness was increased by the appeal of the 'Action Committee for a democratic and socialist Czechoslovakia, whose borders were established fifty years ago' that had been posted throughout Czechoslovakia that summer. Denying (correctly) that the region had ever belonged to Russia or that the people there were considered Ukrainians until the postwar annexation, the authors provided a detailed account of the Czechoslovak struggle to regain the region after its occupation in 1939 by Hungary and the eventual forced annexation by the Soviet Union. They concluded with a ringing call: 'Now,

35 TsDAHOU 1/24/6387/91; 6386/192.

36 TsDAHOU 1/25/97/30–5.

37 Navrátil, *The Prague Spring 1968*, 305.

38 Here according to Jan Koscelanský, the first secretary of the East Slovakia regional party committee in a conversation with the secretary of the Transcarpathian region on 29 April 1968. TsDAHOU 1/25/27/57. For an English translation see the excellent annotated compilation edited by Mark Kramer, 'Ukraine and the Soviet–Czechoslovak Crisis of 1968 (Part 2)', *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, 14/15 (2003/4), 273–368, here 283–6.

in connection with the fiftieth anniversary of the Czechoslovak Republic and the restoration of legality in the state and the establishment of a federation, each of us must make every effort to create a federation that includes the territory of Bohemia, Moravia, Slovakia, and Subcarpathian Ruthenia'.³⁹

To many on the western frontier, the above scenario appeared plausible, especially after the election of Ludvík Svoboda as the Czechoslovak president. Identified with the struggle for national liberation in both world wars, and persecuted during the 1950s, the former general who fought on the Soviet side during the war was viewed by some as the future unifier of the Czechoslovak lands. 'President Svoboda demanded that the Soviet Union return Transcarpathia to Czechoslovakia. Svoboda will carry out his plans and not yield on them because he fought with the Transcarpathians against fascist Germany', related a stoker at the Khust ceramic factory. Others accepted at face value the Czechoslovak right to the region or wished for a border change that would entail the restoration of the interwar social and economic system.⁴⁰

Socialist borders, non-socialist information

The situation in the western Ukrainian provinces was further complicated by the Ukrainian diaspora community across the border in the Presov region of Eastern Slovakia. Fifty- to sixty-thousand strong, the Presov Ukrainians were concentrated in the mountainous regions and, most importantly, were the least collectivised nationality in Czechoslovakia. Following a ruthless campaign against bourgeois nationalism and the dominant Greek Catholic (Uniate) Church, and growing tensions with the Slovak population and authorities, many in the community that had traditionally identified itself as Ruthenian and Russian-oriented came to adopt a more pronounced Ukrainian profile. Running its own Ukrainian-language newspapers and radio broadcasts that enjoyed a large readership in the western provinces, the Presov press established itself as a primary source of information for Ukrainians on both sides of the border, and in other socialist countries as well. Starting in 1967, the leading Presov newspapers breached Soviet taboos with growing vigour. Their issues included an interview with Ivan Dziuba, the literary critic and author of *Internationalism or Russification?*, who placed himself in the mainstream of 'critical Europeans', and a letter by a Kievan Ukrainian who pointed to Czechoslovak Ukrainians as the best representative of the Ukrainian national idea and mourned the loss of hundreds of Ukrainian writers executed or imprisoned in concentration camps ('an accomplishment no other literature in the world can boast of') as well as 10 million others who died in the famine of 1932–3 as a result of collectivisation. They also reprinted letters from Soviet Ukrainians that expressed gratitude to Czechoslovak Ukrainians, who taught them 'how to defend our spiritual and cultural treasures', and condemned Stalin's repression of Ukrainian culture. Finally, and most controversially,

39 Kramer, 'Ukraine and the Soviet–Czechoslovak Crisis of 1968 (Part 2)', 312–14.

40 TsDAHOU 1/25/28/107, 154–5.

strong protests against the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia were published in *Nove Zhyttia* and *Duklia* immediately after the invasion.⁴¹

The Prague Spring had an immediate impact on dissidents on the frontier. In a letter to Shelest from his Kiev prison cell dated 15 May 1968, Valentyn Moroz, a former history teacher from Ivano-Frankiv'sk, advocated a renewal of the 'Leninist policy of Ukrainianisation' implied in the Czechoslovak case, which, he wrote, 'guaranteed the future and is in the interest of Ukrainian communists'. For the imprisoned Viacheslav Chornovil, historical experience showed that 'two paths have become discernible in socialism: that along which Yugoslavia, and now Czechoslovakia, are making their way, and that of Stalin and Mao Zedong. Centralism is a very shaky and uncertain position, which must inevitably lead towards one of these paths, throwing the masses off their bearings by undermining their faith in any ideals, except that of more or less secure and peaceful vegetation'.⁴²

One could not ignore the radicalising impact of the unfolding drama across the border on the thoughts and expectations of dissidents, their small numbers notwithstanding. That was certainly true for the cagey Soviet leadership. At this point Leonid Brezhnev addressed the Czechoslovak Party leadership on the issue of destabilising rhetoric: 'Comrades, you know about the CPSU's principled position based on full respect for the independence of all fraternal parties and countries. But not every question is a purely internal matter . . . After all, your newspapers are also read by Soviet citizens and your radio broadcasts attract listeners in our country as well, which means that all this propaganda affects us just as much as it does you'.⁴³ His warning went unheeded.

The removal of travel restrictions additionally complicated a volatile situation. In their summary report on tourism for 1967, Estonian authorities ordered that guides be trained to 'decisively unmask attempts to spread bourgeois and dissenting ideology'. Growing streams of tourists from neighbouring Finland bombarded Soviet guides with questions on the number of Russians in Estonia, their share in the government, their impact on life in the republic, the language of instruction in schools and the satisfaction of Estonians with Soviet power. They also pointed out the small number of shops, the long queues and the absence of freedom to travel out of the Soviet Union. Most troubling were questions about independent Estonia, and whether the Soviet Estonians wanted to restore the old order. One visitor attempted to 'comfort' a nervous guide, saying, 'We Finns are your brothers and have always worried about

41 See Grey Hodnett and Peter Potichnyj, *The Ukraine and the Czechoslovak Crisis*, Occasional Paper 6 (Canberra: Australian National University, Department of Political Science, 1970), 54, 59, 62, 72, 74.

42 Yaroslav Bihun, ed., *Boomerang: The Works of Valentyn Moroz* (Baltimore: Smoloskyp, 1974), 146–7; Viacheslav Chornovil, 'Letter from the Camp, 3 May 1968', in Michael Brown, ed., *Ferment in the Ukraine: Documents by V. Chornovil, I. Kandyba, L. Lukyanenko, V. Moroz and Others* (New York: Praeger, 1971), 171.

43 Mark Kramer, 'The Czechoslovak Crisis and the Brezhnev Doctrine', in Carole Fink et al., eds., *1968: The World Transformed* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 143.

the Estonians, especially when the Russians came in 1940... maybe the old order will be restored and you'll be free again'.⁴⁴

The Finns came in large numbers – 1,164 of them during the month of May alone – as things heated up in Czechoslovakia. But it was not only foreign tourists arriving with unsettling questions and observations that concerned Soviet Communists. Estonians visiting Finland were exposed even more directly to subversive views. Thus, on the night of 22 August 1968, a group of 380 Estonians on a boat trip were greeted at the Helsinki port by a crowd of fifty or sixty youngsters shouting 'Down with Soviet imperialism!' and 'Viva Dubček!'⁴⁵

In Western Ukraine, Yuri Il'nyts'kyi, the first secretary of the Transcarpathian regional party committee who was in constant contact with his east Slovakian counterparts across the border, repeatedly expressed uneasiness with the Ukrainian newspaper *Nove Zhyttia* that was published in Czechoslovak Presov and featured 'unacceptable' nationalist opinions.⁴⁶ On Shelest's instructions, on 12 May 1968 Il'nyts'kyi forwarded to the Central Committee in Moscow a report on Czechoslovak television broadcasts and the Czechoslovak press. With the recent end to the jamming of foreign radio broadcasts and the removal of genuine inspections at the border checkpoints, Czechoslovakia had willingly turned itself into a transmission point for 'spies, anti-socialist and anti-Soviet literature, and all kind of religious objects'. More than fifty thousand tourists from West Germany and Austria were entering Czechoslovakia every day: 'To cross the border, all a tourist has to do is to stick his head out of the bus's window and show a paper to the border guard, who then smiles happily at him and wishes him a good time in Prague... Other reports showed border guards removing barbed wire from the [obsolete] border installations', reported Il'nyts'kyi. Television broadcasts of May Day festivities featured demonstrators demanding an end to communist dictatorship as well as the formation of a new polity modelled on Western multi-party systems.

More troubling were reports pertaining to religious and socioeconomic affairs. The Czechoslovak media reported extensively on the revival of the Greek Catholic Church in Eastern Slovakia, a true red flag for the Soviets. The Church had been the spiritual core of the Ukrainian nationalist movement in Galicia and Transcarpathia, and was suppressed in postwar Czechoslovakia as well as the Soviet Ukraine. And in its treatise on Soviet–Czechoslovak relations, the printed media directly challenged the socialist socioeconomic order. A recent article in *Rudé Právo*, wrote Il'nyts'kyi, claimed that the years of the cult of personality (referring to the Novotný era) included the imposition of outdated and ill-suited Soviet experience, such as the 'egregiously unscientific Lysenko school'. This not-so-tacit reference to the collective farm system was explosive in western Ukraine, where it was seen to represent the ills of Soviet power. The article's celebration of the close ties forged between Czechoslovak and Soviet students 'who themselves today are seeking new paths to follow, do not like

44 ERAF 1/302/72/9, 20–2.

45 ERAF 1/302/71/142; 1/301/151/27.

46 TsDAHOU 1/25/27/23–24.

the phrases muttered by agitators, and are more critical than the previous generation was', could not but further unnerve the already agitated Soviet regime.⁴⁷ Thanks to the Czechoslovak media, western Ukrainians, the most rebellious of the Soviet nationalities, could now watch and read and draw their own conclusions on issues that were still strictly taboo in their country.

Alarmed by the 'unsavoury phenomena' of the continuous flow of negative information into his domain, Shelest ordered the KGB command in charge of the Western Border District in late May to submit a report on border controls, the transport of politically harmful literature, travel and tourism, and the inspection of freight trains. The agency admitted that the border was practically beyond control. Based on agreements with their Hungarian, Polish, Czechoslovak and Romanian counterparts, each border guard was expected to inspect only outgoing trains. The one-sided inspection resulted in the arrival of thousands of trains that were not inspected by Soviet border guards, barely touched by the short-handed Polish and Hungarian guards and untouched by the Czechoslovaks. There was not much hope with the Romanians given the recent political fallout between the two governments, lamented the KGB officials. The 45,403 'ideologically harmful' items seized in 1967 and the first quarter of 1968 were admittedly a drop in the ocean, given the sheer numbers of incoming foreigners that year – some 828,576 people, including 92,585 from capitalist countries. Shelest therefore requested Moscow to review current procedures as well as an additional 1,500 personnel to staff the checkpoints and two hundred KGB operational agents in five of the west Ukrainian regions.⁴⁸

Following a visit to the western regions, Shelest entered in his diary on 14 June that he informed Brezhnev of locals receiving information through direct contacts with inhabitants of regions along the border. Ten days later, Shelest recorded the sense of urgency felt by regional Party bosses, who demanded 'extremely urgent measures' to correct the poor situation with communication and media: 'In these regions the [official] radio and television practically don't work at all. At the same time, the residents are listening to Western radio stations and watching Western television'.⁴⁹

Frustrated by the continuous inflow of information, during a meeting at Čierna nad Tisou in late July Shelest accused the Czechoslovak leaders of approving the publication of counter-revolutionary tracts that were later sent to Ukraine 'through specific channels'. 'The alarming developments in Czechoslovakia are a matter of common concern to the Soviet Union', averred Shelest.

47 TsDAHOU 1/25/29/7–12.

48 Kramer, 'Ukraine and the Soviet–Czechoslovak Crisis of 1968 (Part 2)', 297–300. On 28 May, a week after Shelest's tirade, *Radians'ka Ukraïna* reported the apprehension of two Americans who allegedly tried to smuggle thousands of anti-Soviet and religious leaflets into Ukraine. Hodnett and Potichnyj, *The Ukraine and the Czechoslovak Crisis*, 143, n. 5.

49 Mark Kramer, 'Ukraine and the Soviet–Czechoslovak Crisis of 1968: New evidence from the Diary of Petro Shelest', *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, 10 (1998), 236; Shelest, 'Spravzhnii sud istorii shche poperedu', 271–2.

Soviet Ukraine is an integral and inseparable part of the USSR. We have a population of 46 million, including many nationalities, of whom nearly 2.5 million are Communists. We and you, our Czech friends, are direct neighbours, and, as is customary with neighbours, we know a lot about each other that is not known or even noticed by those further away . . . We see and hear your radio and television broadcasts, and read your newspapers. Hence, for us in Ukraine what is going on in Czechoslovakia, a state supposedly friendly to us, is all the more insulting.⁵⁰

Catapulted to the forefront of the national scene throughout the duration of the crisis, Yuri Il'nyts'kyi, a once-obscure secretary of the Transcarpathian regional party committee, offered lessons to fellow Soviets in his own region – but also indirectly to socialist neighbours across the border. After admitting the attractions of foreign radio and television broadcast for ethnic minorities, Il'nyts'kyi called for constant vigilance, especially at a time when 'Transcarpathia – once an isolated corner of Europe – has become a lively international crossroads and one of the main tourist highways in the country'. In his view, not all the tourists arrived with good intentions, as evidenced by confiscated anti-Soviet literature. Some were spies. In such trying times, concluded Il'nyts'kyi, the Party and the workers should sharpen their ability to distinguish between friend and foe.⁵¹

A bastion of hope?

As was to be expected, the docile and thoroughly sovietised western Belorussian Communists and non-party members featured as the most anti-Czechoslovak along the western frontier. True, the authorities recorded dissenting views, especially in the immediate aftermath of the invasion. Leaflets, such as 'Their Freedom Today is Our Freedom Tomorrow', and 'Lies – the Weapon of the Neo-Stalinists', were spotted in Minsk, along with individuals who condemned the invasion as a violation of the democracy and sovereignty of the Czechoslovak people. Food shortages in the sensitive western regions of Brest and Hrodna did not help either.⁵²

Overall, however, the republic's leadership was able to parade an impressive number of supporting voices that were notable for their militancy. The chairman of a collective farm in the Brest region, who declared in a meeting on 20 July that 'if necessary, I will step forward with arms in hands to defend the achievements of socialism', was cited as an example of clarity. With the invasion under way, military personnel weighed in with even more militant views. Interestingly, it was defiant Romania that inspired the aggressive mood. 'We must destroy the counter-revolution [in Czechoslovakia] . . . This will also be a great lesson for Romania', and 'We should have done it in Romania, too. Send in the army, impose order and get rid of Ceauşescu. How could he lead such a policy, if he were a real communist? I cannot refer to him as anything but a political prostitute', were two among many similar voices.⁵³

50 Kramer, 'Ukraine and the Soviet–Czechoslovak Crisis of 1968', 235.

51 Yuri Il'nyts'kyi, 'Nashe znamia – internatsionalizm', *Komunist Ukraïny* 1 (1969), 85–6, 93.

52 Natsyianał'ny arkhiu Respubliki Beloruss' (NARB) 4/62/709/142, 152.

53 NARB 4/62/709/89, 136, 139, 156.

Equally helpful for the regime was the unsettling, living memory of the bloody 1956 uprising in Hungary. Veterans of the intervention offered their services in Czechoslovakia, if needed, or recalled that a similar situation in Hungary was 'normalised' only when a more decisive and strong-willed leader took the reins and fought off the counter-revolution. Six months after the invasion, die-hards still advocated tough measures against the counter-revolutionary elements in Czechoslovakia.⁵⁴

And yet, despite such reassuring signs, the frenzied activities of the Belorussian Party betrayed unmistakable anxiety. Summer and autumn 1968 were filled with mass meetings that sought to convey to party and non-party members the official Soviet stand on the Czechoslovak crisis. By 10 September, when the Party concluded the propaganda campaign, some 355,566 members and candidates (91.2% of the total ranks) had attended meetings. While dissenting voices were rather few, certainly in comparison with other republics on the western frontier, the population's frustration with the lack of information in the Soviet media turned into a thorny issue. Communists repeatedly complained that they were being fed rumours and not given full information. The Belorussian authorities insisted that such questions as 'Why is the standard of living in Czechoslovakia higher than in the Soviet Union, although socialism has yet to be built there?' and 'Is it true that they teach scripture in Polish schools?' were not provocative. Nevertheless, they launched an intensive propaganda campaign, especially when the information gap was filled by Estonian tourists who told locals that 'Estonia is smaller than Czechoslovakia, but we too want to live independently', or by Party members who objected to the invasion on the grounds that it was the same as what had happened to Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia ('He who has the power rules').⁵⁵

Dangerous past, messy present

The unresolved issue of the rehabilitation of political convicts continued to blot the political landscape in the region. Rehabilitation committees operating under the auspices of the Supreme Soviet in each republic continued to plough through thousands of appeals, issuing amnesties but stopping short of the full rehabilitation of former nationalists or the restitution of their confiscated property, and often curtailing their right to return to their former place of residence.⁵⁶

Their task was not made easier by the public mass rehabilitation of political convicts, the restitution of property and the prosecution of individual perpetrators of crimes in the early days of communist rule, advocated and partially implemented by

54 NARB 4/62/709/3, 12; 4/157/172/108.

55 Further unsettling perspectives were added by visiting Czechoslovak officials who condemned the biased Soviet reports on their country and Soviet interference in Czechoslovak domestic affairs, and praised the author of the '2,000 Words' document, repeatedly noting the absence of democracy and freedom of speech in the Soviet Union. NARB 4/62/709/157, 142, 111–12. '2,000 Words', authored by Ludvik Maculik and signed by dozens of Czechoslovak dignitaries, called for peaceful, grass-root activities to advance the cause of reform and fight conservatives, and vowed to defend the reforms against foreign intervention by all means, including arms.

56 ERAF 17-2/1/306/42-5, 59.

the Czechoslovak Communist authorities and various political associations in spring 1968.⁵⁷ The first secretary of the East Slovakian regional committee told his stunned Transcarpathian counterpart in late March 1968, turning five decades of Soviet logic on its head,

Czechoslovak comrades believe that full democracy requires [among other things] the elimination of judicial proceedings and repression against citizens for their political views and statements, and the rehabilitation of all those who were repressed. . . . the State Security organs behaved improperly during the cult of personality [the reigns of Klement Gottwald and Antonín Novotný]. To ensure that there are no antagonistic classes in the country, the state security organs will be reduced to a minimum.⁵⁸

By 1968 popular retribution against perpetrators of the Stalinist purges seemed a far-fetched idea. With the notable exceptions of Beria and his close lieutenants who were tried and executed in camera as a part of the post-Stalin succession struggle, most of the perpetrators who survived the Stalin era appeared to endure de-Stalinisation cycles relatively peacefully and without visible displays of remorse. Still, Soviet Ukrainian state security officers could not remain indifferent when their Czechoslovak counterparts reported having to defend themselves against ‘slandorous and hooligan elements’ – without Party support – or reported agents under public attack for their activities in the 1950s threatening to commit suicide. Reporting on a meeting with their Czechoslovak peers, west Ukrainian police could count on a sympathetic ear in Moscow, especially from Yuri Andropov. It was probably no accident that the report of 13 May 1968 bluntly raised the issue of Czechoslovak expectations of Soviet military assistance ‘if a threat to socialism [in Czechoslovakia] were ever to arise’.⁵⁹

Ukrainian journalists who visited Czechoslovakia in May 1968 were struck by the popularity of the K-231 Club, an association named for the 1948 law for the defence of the republic that was used to convict people of political crimes. They allegedly sought to ‘restore the good name of those destroyed or repressed by the agents of Beria’, and a number of party officials committed suicide after being targeted as perpetrators, as an increasingly belligerent Shelest reported to Moscow.⁶⁰ A visiting Slovak Communist writer, Miloš Krno, told his Ukrainian hosts that the club, which started with the modest goal of assisting in rehabilitation of those wrongly convicted, soon swelled into a mass anti-Soviet organisation engaging in the persecution of innocent pro-Soviet citizens. The same thing, came the ringing reminder, ‘had

57 For a thorough portrayal of the rehabilitation question during the Prague Spring, see H. Gordon Skilling, *Czechoslovakia's Interrupted Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 373–411, and the report by the Third Secretary of the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry on his discussion with the Czechoslovak Consul-General in Kiev in late April 1968 in Kramer, ‘Ukraine and the Soviet–Czechoslovak Crisis of 1968 (Part 2)’, 279.

58 TsDAHOU 1/25/27/19. All archive translations are by the author.

59 Kramer, ‘Ukraine and the Soviet–Czechoslovak Crisis of 1968 (Part 2)’, 290–1.

60 TsDAHOU 1/25/28/129, 132. Indeed, several officials, such as the deputy chairman of the Supreme Court, the head of investigation in the Prague security service, and the chief doctor at the Ruzyně prison where prisoners were tortured, committed suicide. Skilling, *Czechoslovakia's Interrupted Revolution*, 232, 387.

happened in Hungary, where they began by focusing on Rákosi and then shifted their attacks to the entire Party and government apparatus'. Krno also related that members of another small club, named 'Clean Hands', demanded the arrest of all politicians involved in repression and had become fond of saying among themselves that 'democratisation will be completed when only two communists are left in Czechoslovakia and they end up killing each other'. Many judges had supposedly committed suicide after realising that they had sentenced innocent people to death and the relatives of the dead were demanding vengeance.⁶¹

The relatively free flow of information across the border guaranteed that ordinary Soviet citizens would soon join the debate. A teacher from Khust who returned from a visit to Czechoslovakia reportedly told his brother that he was struck to see 'that almost all the prisoners have been released from jails, and they are now publishing articles of a vehement anti-Soviet character in different newspapers and demanding friendship and co-operation with the Federal Republic of Germany. They write and tell their friends about the alleged torments, humiliations, and insults they had suffered'.⁶²

Compensation for confiscated property was an especially thorny issue in the Soviet western frontier region. Czechoslovak citizens informed visiting relatives from Transcarpathia that all political prisoners were being released and recovering their property, and that the Communists would be compelled to pay reparations.⁶³

If this were not enough, the Czechoslovak Communists appeared to violate a sacred Soviet taboo by publicly displaying paintings and photographs of politically disgraced figures. Ukrainian journalists who toured Czechoslovakia in May 1968 were allegedly dismayed to see in the Prague Museum of Lenin (*sic!*) 'many portraits, family and official photographs, documents and written material of Zinov'ev, Rykov, Trotsky, Radek, Stolypin, Guchkov, Rasputin, Tsar Nikolas II, Hitler, Mussolini and Mao Zedong', exclaimed an indignant Shelest.⁶⁴ And as always in this multi-ethnic region, the issue of rehabilitation was closely related to the threat of a nationalist revival.

The enemies within

In a speech in February 1968 Shelest lashed out at the treacherous counter-revolutionary elements of the Ukrainian diaspora who tried to administer the poison of nationalism to 'some of our own politically immature, ideologically wavering people'. Chattering about a decline of culture and language, exclaimed Shelest, 'is rotten bait that could be swallowed only by a political blind man, a limited or prejudiced person, or various demagogues and degenerates'.⁶⁵ On 28 March Shelest recorded in his diary a telephone call from the first secretary of the Ivano-Frankiv'sk regional party committee, who told him that 'in certain districts former members

61 Kramer, 'Ukraine and the Soviet-Czechoslovak Crisis of 1968 (Part 2)', 310-12.

62 TsDAHOU 1/25/28/157.

63 TsDAHOU 1/25/28/156-7.

64 TsDAHOU 1/25/28/131.

65 Hodnett and Potichnyj, *The Ukraine and the Czechoslovak Crisis*, 82.

of the Ukrainian nationalist underground had begun to turn up, amounting to over forty thousand in the region as a whole'.⁶⁶ In May, a teacher in a middle school in the Rakhiv district was quoted as saying that 'there's not much time left before we settle accounts with those who are in power', and villagers from Onokivtsi allegedly stated that 'soon will come the time when they'll hang the *moskali* [a derogatory term for Russians]'.⁶⁷

Similarly to 1956, the Czechoslovak crisis drove home the sense of isolation for Communists on the western frontier. Visits to Czechoslovakia brought party and non-party people face to face with downright contempt for their country, people and system. A Soviet delegation that toured Czechoslovakia on the occasion of the twenty-third anniversary of the liberation of the country from German occupation was fully aware that it was kept isolated by their hosts from any open interactions with ordinary citizens and even Communists. Candid discussions were held only during train or car rides, or when no one else was around. The behaviour of most of their hosts, especially the leaders of local party organisations, reflected alarm about their own fate, reported delegation head Volodymyr Shcherbyts'kyi.⁶⁸ Other Soviet tourists were exposed to dismissive comments on the uselessness of twenty years of contacts with the Soviet Union, and some who encountered blatant resentment concluded, 'More people hate us than we even imagine . . . the anticipated dispatch of the Soviet Army into Czechoslovakia [is] unfortunate. It would lead to no good, and after this even more people would hate us'. Quite probably such observations were compounded by encounters with local Soviet supporters of the Czechoslovak reforms who emphasised that 'Everywhere people hate the Russians. In Poland they threw thousands of the best people into prison because of their hatred for Russians. Romania is against the Russians. The Czechoslovaks have also changed the regime that subordinated them to the Russians. The Soviet regime in Czechoslovakia will be eliminated with the help of America'.⁶⁹

Jews in the region attracted the authorities' attention far more than they had in 1956. Although they did not pose a numerical or irredentist threat, Jews seemed to antagonise the party and the KGB, especially in western Ukraine. The visible role of several Jewish figures in the Prague Spring, such as Eduard Goldstücker, František Kriegel and Ota Šik, demands for the restoration of relations with Israel and condemnation of the current antisemitic campaign in Poland only fuelled the state anti-Jewish campaign already under way inside the Soviet Union. The condemnation by Czechoslovak writers of anti-Zionism as being thinly veiled antisemitism clearly violated a taboo in the domestic political arena, and strained relations with other countries in the socialist camp. KGB reports submitted to Shelest conveyed the

66 Shelest, 'Spravzhnii sud istorii shche poperedu', 254

67 TsDAHOU 1/25/28/105.

68 TsDAHOU 1/25/28/180-1.

69 TsDAHOU 1/25/28/157-8, 153, 154-5. Another local commended the Czechs who 'soon will move away from the *moskali* and rebuild their own country the way it was under Masaryk'. *Ibid.*, 156.

impression that other East European security services, notably the Polish, considered the events in Czechoslovakia to be a 'Jewish-led affair'.⁷⁰

Sustained by a steady diet of such reports as well as by his own biases, Shelest repeatedly lashed out at 'Zionist circles' stirring things up in Czechoslovakia and in his own backyard.⁷¹ His diary entry of 9 April identified Jews as being behind a domino effect that threatened the Soviet bloc. A destabilisation campaign was supposedly directed by a Zionist centre in Brussels, headed by a Jewish philosophy professor and the Israeli ambassador to Belgium and consisting of bankers, industrialists and scientists. Once the war in Vietnam ended or abated, the United States and Israel would direct their attention to Eastern Europe, observed Shelest. 'The theory of "bridge-building" was born: enemy propaganda alleges that the different "bridges" will lead to the "inevitable disintegration of the socialist camp"', wrote the Ukrainian leader.⁷²

Beyond the blunt antisemitism, the Soviet authorities had some concrete concerns regarding the Jews. It did not help that individuals allegedly expressed expectations that were similar to Shelest's anxieties. Jews who commented on the crisis often tied their observations to Soviet relations with Israel, a particularly thorny issue in the aftermath of 1967 war, the revival of Jewish cultural life and the growing international pressure on the Soviet Union to ease restrictions on emigration to Israel. 'Czechoslovakia will certainly break away from the Soviet Union, as Romania has already done. After that Poland and Hungary will go down the same path. This will weaken the socialist system, and capitalism will strengthen, all of which will benefit Israel. Having broken away from the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary will emulate Romania in establishing friendly relations with Israel', declared one Shulman from Khust, reflecting widely held views in the region.⁷³ A Jewish worker in L'viv had more realistic forecast: 'Trust my life experience – they'll finish with Czechoslovakia and start tightening the screws on us'.⁷⁴

Probably because of the peaceful course of events in Czechoslovakia prior to the invasion, the 1968 crisis revived memories of the 1939–40 annexations in the Baltic republics more than it did memories of 1956. Collective letters from workers in Czechoslovakia to their Estonian peers asked the latter to 'raise their heads' in protest against the occupation of Czechoslovakia by the uninvited Soviet forces. There were no public protests on the scale of those some twelve years earlier, but things were certainly not quiet. Letters by students drew the analogy with the Soviet occupation of Estonia in 1940 and others fanned rumours of numerous casualties suffered by

70 In his 9 May 1968 report to Shelest on the Czechoslovak media, Il'nyts'kyi paid special attention to Arnold Lustig, the Jewish writer who defended Israeli action in 1967 during a television broadcast. The head of the KGB Transcarpathian regional branch raised similar, and even more elaborate, charges on 14 May 1968. TsDAHOU 1/25/28/65–9, 85.

71 See reports of his speeches before All-Union and republic party gatherings and in meetings with Czechoslovak leaders during the crisis in TsDAHOU 1/25/97/34; Hodnett and Potichnyj, *The Ukraine and the Czechoslovak Crisis*, 83, 105.

72 Shelest, 'Spavzhnii sud istorii shche poperedu', 255.

73 TsDAHOU 1/25/28/106, 155–6.

74 TsDAHOU 1/25/39/26.

the invading Soviet Army.⁷⁵ The recipients of these letters may have been reluctant to embark on public or violent protests, but the allegations certainly touched a raw nerve. The writer Raimond Kaugver, who only two years earlier had caused an uproar with his book *Forty Candles*, in which his hero moved from the German and Finnish armies through the Gulag to a cosy job in the Soviet industrial sector, compared the invasion to the Hitlerite occupation of Estonia, and declared that he did not expect such an obtuse action. Graffiti and leaflets crying ‘Russians, Get Out of Czechoslovakia!’, ‘Moscow! Hands Off Czechoslovakia!’, and ‘Down with the Red Munich! Long Live Free Czechoslovakia!’ appeared in Pärnu, Kohtla and Tallinn in the days following the invasion. Some Party members, such as Anatolii Klachkov, were appalled by what they considered a resort to unnecessarily extreme measures that ‘ran counter to world public opinion, including Communist parties. The Communist movement around the world will pay dearly for this hasty action’.⁷⁶ Then there were those who shrugged off the Soviet claims as another charade, such as one former political convict from Tallinn, who wondered in what manner the Soviet intervention differed from the US intervention in Vietnam.⁷⁷ In Latvia there were fishermen who went to sea wearing black armbands on the day of the invasion.⁷⁸

The Orthodox Church stoked the above-mentioned anxieties in western Ukraine over the rehabilitation of the Greek Catholic Church. An Orthodox priest in Prague warned the secretary of the Mukacheve diocese in Transcarpathia that

In Eastern Slovakia the Uniates have risen again, which has inflamed passions, as manifested by egoism, crude invective, and hatred of everything that comes from the east, even things that are objectively good... If the government fully rescinds the 1950 decision to liquidate the Uniates in our country and does not restore the status quo that existed before 1 January 1968 as we propose, the Uniates will be fully re-established in all the parishes where they had operated earlier.⁷⁹

Other priests who visited Eastern Slovakia at the time confirmed his concerns.

The Greek Catholic Church may not have recovered from the blows it was dealt in the aftermath of the war, but its adherents did not have a change of heart. In the light of the history of the Church and of the fact that many of its priests were previously incarcerated for nationalist activity, it seems plausible to assert that its public revival was one of the most troubling issues for the Soviet authorities.⁸⁰ A former priest who had found work in a factory in Mukacheve was quoted as praising the new Czechoslovak course. Said one Andrii Bitsko,

75 ERAF 1/301/151/5,7.

76 ERAF 1/301/151/21, 24, 26, 29–30.

77 ERAF 1/301/151/29, 91.

78 Alexeyeva, *Soviet Dissent*, 98.

79 TsDAHOU 1/25/28/159.

80 For a thorough documentation of the impact of the Prague Spring on religious activities in Ukraine, and the struggle to legalise the Greek Catholic Church, see Volodymyr Dmytruk, *Ukraina ne movchala* (Kiev: Instytut Istorii Ukraïny NAN Ukraïny, 2004), 171–224, 230–3, 242–3, 250–61, 281–3, 285–8.

They aspire to a genuine democracy. Take any example you like. In the Soviet Union they banned the ringing of church bells because the noise would disturb the peace of the population and its leisure. Supersonic jets flying over the city make much more noise than the bells ever did, and the population has complained about it. But no one bans these flights . . . Political events in Czechoslovakia will develop in the same way they did under Khrushchev after Stalin died.⁸¹

A few months later Soviet anxieties grew exponentially. Reporting on 'sentiments among the clergy regarding the Czechoslovak events', the head of the Council on Religious Affairs of the Soviet Council of Ministers noted the sharp increase in the 'illegal nationalist activities of priests, monks and fanatical worshipers of the former Greek Catholic Church'. Under the impact of the events across the border in Czechoslovakia and foreign radio broadcasts, believers resumed propagating an independent Ukraine and resistance to Russification by the Russian Orthodox Church. According to one Soviet official, priests from the Transcarpathian region wrote to the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet that they would not cease their activities and would effect the restoration of their church.⁸² Rhetoric aside, he had a point. In the villages of Drohobych region Uniate priests launched a door-to-door revival campaign, urging believers to follow the Czechoslovak example and restore the church through their own efforts. In an alarming threat to the social order, Uniate clergy began preaching against their counterparts in the Orthodox Church who had taken their positions after the forced merger in 1946.⁸³

Interestingly enough, the abolition of collective farms was hardly an item on anyone's agenda during the Czechoslovak reforms. By 1968 both regime and peasants had found a *modus vivendi* following the gradual improvement in cultural and living standards throughout the 1960s. Polls conducted in the Slovak countryside in July 1968 showed dissatisfaction with living conditions in comparison with the city and demands for rehabilitation of peasants who were victimised during collectivisation, but the process and the system themselves were not challenged. Still, with the rumour mill spinning, even the moderate changes negotiated in Czechoslovakia were enough to ignite traditional antagonisms to the collective farm system in the western provinces. Reflecting the enduring sense of alienation after twenty-five years of Soviet rule, a villager in Mizhhir'ia in the Transcarpathian region noted, 'In Czechoslovakia they want to establish the same type of regime that exists in Yugoslavia, i.e., to distribute land to the peasants and disband the collective farms. In the Soviet Union, they are also liquidating collective farms. Why should things have to remain along the lines that Stalin set up?'⁸⁴

Evidently, the events across the border were reviving dormant resentments throughout the western frontier lands.

81 TsDAHOU 1/25/28/155.

82 RGANI 5/60/24/150-6. I thank Mark Kramer for forwarding me this document.

83 TsDAHOU 1/25/33/86-7.

84 TsDAHOU 1/25/28/105. On the politics of the Czechoslovak countryside in 1968, see Skilling, *Czechoslovakia's Interrupted Revolution*, 585-92.

Young rebels, aging revolution

In a revealing outburst at the conclusion of the communist bloc leaders' meeting in Warsaw on 14–15 July 1968, Brezhnev sounded particularly agitated in criticising Czechoslovak leaders' plans to admit 200,000 or 300,000 young people to the ranks of the Communist Party in order 'to give an aging party a healthy injection'. Not only did he find the comment insulting, but given the manifest attitudes of the Czechoslovak youth, such a move is intended to bury and not rejuvenate the party, said the Soviet leader.⁸⁵

Indeed, the Czechoslovak crisis brought Soviet leaders an unpleasant reality check. The geriatric would-be champions of youth and vigour were now reminded by the most receptive audience for liberalised socialism – students – just how passé their own revolutionary rhetoric had become, especially in the trouble spots of the western frontier and the Georgian republic. In sharp contrast to many of their counterparts in the Russian Federation who often opined that 'During the war we sacrificed 150,000 boys to save the Czechs from the Germans. And now they want to disown us?',⁸⁶ non-Russian students were visibly agitated by the course of events. This, as Mark Kramer pointedly notes, was especially disheartening for a regime that was preparing to celebrate fifty years of the Youth League (the Komsomol).⁸⁷ Along the entire stretch of the frontier, authorities were concerning themselves with restless students. In early April, for example, Shelest confided to his diary his worries about 'outsiders' agitating at the Taras Shevchenko State University in Kiev. A day after the invasion a student made an extraordinary telephone call in which he disavowed Soviet reports and pledged that Ukrainian youth would follow the Czechoslovak example. This was not an isolated reaction.⁸⁸

The party's rhetoric with regard to the impact of the Prague Spring on youth revealed a body overtly anxious about its own biological and ideological aging. Throughout 1968, and especially after the invasion, Komsomol leaders expressed concerns over the relentless campaign by the 'imperialists and their pitiful lackeys' to revive nationalism among Soviet Ukrainian youth, and more pointedly 'to shake the faith in the older generation'. Unwittingly, Party leaders confessed to the impotence of their indoctrination that, without living experience to back it up, appeared rather amorphous:

The boys and girls who have not been enriched with the experience of class struggle, who have not been armed with Marxist-Leninist theory, are easily wounded by the poisoned arrows of bourgeois propaganda. The events in Czechoslovakia have only confirmed this. Our task is not only to instil in youth immunity to the lies of Western radio, but also to turn them into active fighters against all

85 Navrátil, *The Prague Spring 1968*, 224–5.

86 Natan Sharansky, *Fear No Evil*, trans. Stefani Hoffman (New York: Random House, 1988), xiv. For the public protests against the invasion in the Russian Federation, see Alexeyeva, *Soviet Dissent*, 289–90.

87 Kramer, 'The Czechoslovak Crisis and the Brezhnev Doctrine', 143.

88 Shelest, '*Spravzhnii sud istorii shche poperedu*', 284–5; Kramer, 'Ukraine and the Soviet–Czechoslovak Crisis of 1968', 235–6.

sorts of displays of bourgeois ideology, patriots endlessly devoted to the Fatherland, internationalists fully committed to Lenin's goals.⁸⁹

The ensuing campaign to reclaim the youth of the republic bore all the traditional ingredients of Soviet crisis management, but with the addition of some intriguing new features. The Komsomol was purged down to the lower ranks and then given an enhanced role in educational institutions. The organisation celebrated as a model the rector of one of L'viv's higher education institutes who built bridges to the student body by engaging them in discussions on any topic, Ukrainian nationalism included, and integrated the students into the daily running of the institution.⁹⁰

As in 1956, Baltic universities stood out as the sites of the largest and best-organized anti-Soviet protests, albeit on a smaller scale. Students there successfully capitalised on an available organisational infrastructure, their relatively close contact with the outside world, their exposure to interwar political culture through the remaining older faculty, the relatively loose political control over academic and intellectual life in the republics, especially in Estonia and, equally important, the living memory of the mass protests in 1956. During a carnivalesque parade of the fourth Students' Day in Tartu on 19–20 October 1968, students displayed sarcastic banners: 'Long Live the Gentle Foreign Policy of the Soviet Union!', splattered with blood stains; 'Virus Valge, Yes! Moscow Special, No!' a not-so-tacit rebuke to things Russia which played on a popular vodka; 'Twins for Every Estonian Woman!' – a reference to concerns over the decline of Estonians' share in the republic's population; and, finally, 'Long live the Great Marxist Lentsmann!' combined with a banner that read 'Clean Up the Estonian language!' mocking both the veteran communist leader and local leadership's poor command of the indigenous language. Students of the Estonian Agricultural Academy waved a poster that read 'Yankees, Get Behind Peipsi!' (the lake forming the boundary between Estonia and the Russian Federation). Some Soviet banners and portraits of Lenin were defaced and 'hooligans' whistled when a Russian song was played during a concert in the Town Hall Square.⁹¹

The party's reaction was intriguing. Speakers at the university's party cell that met to discuss the incidents three weeks later were split in their assessment of the occurrences, which in itself constituted a distinct Estonian line. Some opted for a tough stand and advocated expulsion ('Let's not be under the illusion that the class struggle is entirely over... a university is not a place for the re-education of hooligans') and urged professors to identify the enemy in the course of academic work. Others sought a measured response, pointing to the generally satisfactory state of affairs on campus, but more intriguingly based their arguments on just how far the political landscape had migrated in the course of the preceding decade: 'The students are young, quick-witted, active in political life and possess useful enthusiasm for everything. After all, we cannot ban everything. We might risk overdoing it', opined one party member. 'There was a time', observed another,

89 Hodnett and Potichnyj, *The Ukraine and the Czechoslovak Crisis*, 109.

90 *Ibid.*, 110, 152, n.76.

91 ERAF 151/12/172/87–8, 90, 94.

‘when a combination of certain colours [blue, black, and white, the colours of the flag of the independent Estonian state] bothered certain people. But nowadays, fabrics and clothing are printed in these colours and no one pays attention. That time is probably behind us’. Nor did he see a compelling reason to condemn the banner ‘Long Live the Gentle Foreign Policy of the Soviet Union!’, since ‘we have yet to be offered complete information on how to interpret the events of August [the invasion of Czechoslovakia]. If we had received an official statement that it was an error, I would have condemned the slogan. But since we remained silent about the issue, we have no basis for saying that such a banner was inappropriate’. Indeed, the authorities appeared eager to let the involved students off the hook, accepting at face value expressions of bewilderment that such banners were perceived to be offensive, and content with the expulsion of only two students who had openly declared their opposition to the regime. And just as they had done in 1956 and their Ukrainian counterparts were doing at the same time, the Estonians were forced to address again the volatile issue of the *de facto* separation of Estonian and Russian students. The dean and the departments were urged to forge contacts between the two through sharing information and organising joint activities, such as lectures, field trips and vacation camps.⁹²

Still, the above initiatives could not conceal the visible strains between an aging revolution and a leadership fighting to preserve its life achievements at home and abroad, and a rather confused younger generation simultaneously proud of their fathers’ sacrifices and accomplishments, especially in the international arena, yet detached from the formative experiences of the founding fathers, and searching for a more inspirational existence than that offered by the regime, yet beset primarily by material concerns. And the regime responded in kind, offering commitment for material improvement in exchange for unchallenged political and ideological hegemony. This was certainly not the most exciting solution but, if the next two decades were any indication, a remarkably stable one. At least as long as the regime could deliver the goods.

Useful memories

Despite the consternation that engulfed the region, the western frontier did not erupt in the way in which it had some twelve years earlier. The reasons for the relative stability were anchored in the Soviet reaction to the events in Czechoslovakia and the changes in the region over the previous decade. For one thing, the military intervention was launched before events got out of control and evolved into a full-scale armed uprising. Second, this time around there was no young and violent constituency similar to the returning nationalist guerrillas and underground activists who tried to seize the moment in 1956.

Moreover, just as the living memory of the Second World War and brutal civil war that followed it were powerful enough for many to suppress the thirst for more

92 ERAF 151/12/172/89–91, 103–6; 151/12/191/2–3, 8, 10–11.

blood, so the memory of the violent crushing of the Hungarian uprising subdued for most the enthusiasm for a similarly risky adventure. Communist Czechoslovaks, including those apprehensive about the course of events, repeatedly went out of their way to assure anxious Soviet Ukrainian counterparts that current events were not a repetition of the events in Hungary 1956, which had allegedly been popular mass uprising against the party; now they were witnessing an inner-party backlash against conservatives.⁹³

Transcarpathians supportive of the Czechoslovak reforms were impressed by what they considered to be the skilful Czechoslovak avoidance of the Hungarian trap, at least for the time being. The Czechs were a cultured people who, in contrast to the Hungarians, would struggle for democracy through other means, noted a worker who returned from a family visit in Czechoslovakia. 'The friendship between the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia hindered the development of Czechoslovakia, as it did earlier with Hungary', observed a schoolteacher from Mukacheve. 'The only difference is that the Czechs are much wiser than the Hungarians were in 1956. The Czechs have taken power into their own hands without any bloodshed, and are acting very intelligently. They haven't done all that much for now, but they'll gradually be able to do more. Everything is being done to establish the same kind of regime that existed in Masaryk's time'.⁹⁴ Both were oblivious to the fact that it was not the means but the essence of Czechoslovak reforms that spelled their doom. But the appeal of a peaceful course was evident.

Regional leaders kept reminding their constituencies that despite changes in tactics 'imperialist forces' had the same 'unacceptable' goals in mind.⁹⁵ Well before the August invasion some locals had already concluded that military measures were preferable to revisiting 1956. 'Most important is that what happened in Hungary in 1956 does not take place in Czechoslovakia . . . The Soviet Union should not sit on sidelines of such events', observed an engineer from Transcarpathia.⁹⁶ '[Military intervention] will be a very timely measure', stated an academic in Uzhorod in May 1968. 'It will eliminate any possible repetition of the events that took place in Hungary in 1956. The presence of Soviet troops will sober up the frenzied representatives of anti-socialist circles who want to restore the old order to Czechoslovakia'.⁹⁷

Equally important, authorities drew on the role of the Second World War in the lives and memories of locals. It was a controversial event in regional memory. Though associated by most with the Soviet occupations of 1939 and 1944, it was also 'the Great Patriotic War' for growing numbers of newcomers. Whereas a hard core of nationalist activists had been driven out of the region and dispersed throughout the Union, Soviet veterans who were populating the region in increasing numbers were also at the helm of local power. It was within this cohesive, cross-national cohort

93 TsDAHOU 1/25/27/22.

94 TsDAHOU 1/25/28/155-6.

95 See Shelest's speech at the party meeting in Kiev on 25 Apr. 1968 in TsDAHOU 1/125/97/34-62, especially l.2, 20, 42-3.

96 TsDAHOU 1/25/28/103.

97 TsDAHOU 1/25/28/109.

that the authorities found a substantial source of support during the 1968 crisis. For these people, the war was a source of pride, the launching pad of civilian careers, or just a new start in a new region. In their world, the international status achieved by the Soviet Union in the wake of the war was indistinguishable from their personal standing in their respective communities. The territorial gains of the war were etched in personal memories and blood. Relinquishing them was unthinkable.

Moreover, the Czechoslovaks kept repeating the mantra of gratitude felt to the Soviet Union for liberating them from the Fascist yoke, as did a workers' delegation visiting Ukraine in May for the commemoration of the twenty-third anniversary of the liberation of Czechoslovakia.⁹⁸ But when a speaker at a party conference in Prague stated that the Czechoslovaks were grateful to the Soviet Army for liberating them in 1945, but would not want to see it on their territory now, the distinction did not register well with the Soviets.⁹⁹ 'If the Czechs have forgotten who liberated them in 1945, they must be reminded of this through the introduction of our troops onto their territory', 'What an outrage! The counter-revolutionary elements are shooting at soldiers whose fathers brought Czechoslovakia freedom and peace, and saved her from the brown plague of Fascism', were two of many similar views expressed in private conversations in L'viv during the mobilisation of reservists.¹⁰⁰

Belorussian veterans were equally adamant. Averred one in Hrodna, 'Our people are related by a centuries-old friendship. As a participant in the liberation of Czechoslovakia, I personally witnessed the respect and love soviet soldiers met in Czechoslovakia . . . The situation in brotherly Czechoslovakia worries us Communists and party activists. Therefore I propose the following motion: "Ask the Politburo of the Central Committee of the CPSU to take the most decisive measures for the normalisation of the situation in Czechoslovakia"'. 'I liberated Czechoslovakia in 1945, and if it is necessary, I will join the battle again, in order to prevent the restoration of capitalism in Czechoslovakia', declared another. Others fondly recalled the common struggle against the Nazis, especially of Slovak partisan units that operated in Beloruss, a valuable political asset in a place that embodied popular resistance to the Nazis.¹⁰¹

Estonian veterans echoed these sentiments. A school principal in Mustvee who had been in Prague on Victory Day and had recently returned there as a tourist recalled that on both occasions he was warmly welcomed by Czechs and Slovaks. So how come they now tolerate this wild anti-Soviet outburst and fail to restrain the enemies of socialism in their country, wondered Comrade Rusak. Others were angered by the ungrateful Czechoslovaks who forgot that the Soviet people shed blood for their freedom and assisted them daily in all spheres of life; they vowed

98 TsDAHOU 1/25/30/15.

99 TsDAHOU 1/25/30/208.

100 TsDAHOU 1/25/28/108; 1/25/39/25. See also 1/25/38/62. This rhetoric was not limited to veterans. Students in Uzhorod also pointed to those in Czechoslovakia who 'forgot about the year of 1939, Munich, and that without the help of the Soviet Army Czechoslovakia could not have become independent'. TsDAHOU 1/25/28/153.

101 NARB 4/62/708/314-15; 709/160.

to do all they could to defend the friendship sealed in blood in the fight against fascism. Russian veterans in Estonia bitterly blamed the Czechoslovak leadership for violating the eternal friendship between the two Slavic peoples.¹⁰² The rhetoric of the ‘Soviet man’s burden’ that began to emerge in the course of the 1956 events was now fully developed. The Soviet sacrifice for the defeat of the Nazi menace bought it permanent, uncontested rights over the territories and people they had acquired in the wake of this historical feat.

With still-fresh images of Soviet tanks rolling westward a year earlier, the first secretary of the Estonian Central Committee asked the commander of the Leningrad Military District on 4 August 1969 to donate a T-34 tank on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the liberation of the town of Pärnu from the Nazi occupation. The tank, wrote Käbin, would be used as a monument honouring the tank battalion that liberated the town on 23 September 1944.¹⁰³ For some, Soviet tanks rolling to the west were the face of occupation. For others they were the face of liberation. The latter, however, held the political reins.

Closure?

Much like the Hungarian crisis of 1956, the Czechoslovak crisis of 1968 both delayed and accelerated fundamental changes in the composition of the Soviet Union and its empire. The decade started with Vasili Aksenov’s celebration of Tallinn as Russia’s abroad. By the end of the decade, however, Aksenov’s band of intellectual and social drifters, increasingly embittered and disillusioned, operated in Russia proper. In between, they endured the brutal harassment by the Komsomol vigilante patrols, futile attempts to fit in ideologically, several ‘thaws’ and biting freezes. But they were finally burnt by 1968, as the title of Aksenov’s masterpiece alluded. The rape of Czechoslovakia that summer and the crackdown on dissent finally forced Aksenov and his protagonists to abandon their pervasive youthful optimism. For the scores of Russians in a bar, there was nothing exotic about the peoples of the western frontier; they were ‘Gypsy-like Moldavian and Latvian sons of bitches’. And the marginals, singing Okudzhava’s ‘Paper Soldiers’ in the streets of Moscow and still believing in their heart of hearts that they would prevail, were finally overwhelmed by the reactions to the invasion: ‘One day, during a night of falling stars, in the early hours of a morning the colour of dill pickles, with surly, dumb astonishment, Unanimous Approval occupied a fraternal socialist country to ensure that it was no longer fraternal but safely under its skin’. Some wanted to rush on to the streets in protest; others were shocked that the boys on the tanks were ‘our boys, who applauded us, who read our books’; there were also those who condemned Dubček for ‘adventurism’ and blamed Czechs without discrimination for their arrogance – ‘What did they expect? Did they really think they could have what we won’t have?’¹⁰⁴

102 ERAF 1/301/151/43, 51, 75.

103 ERAF 1/302/107/1.

104 Aksenov, *Ozhog*, 121, 364–5.

Fittingly, Aksenov's role as contemporary Russian chronicler of Tallinn was filled by the mercilessly sarcastic Sergei Dovlatov. The title of Dovlatov's autobiographical tales said it all: *The Compromise*. Gone was the pervasive optimism of the early 1960s. Cruel sarcasm replaced the passionate, good-natured portrayals of the Estonians and their guests. It was still a foreign place, whither one fled hoping to find 'quiet life without thinking', populated by straight-talking, businesslike, practical locals. But beyond that, life was a façade and was recognised as such by both the regime and a consciously compromising populace. It was a place where the four-hundred-thousandth inhabitant of Tallinn could be announced only when proper parents – Estonian and Russian – were finally found (the offspring of an Ethiopian student or of a Jewish court-poet would not do); where a celebrated model Communist woman worked on her marriage with the help of the 'Technology of Sex' manual, a hired lover, and tight schedule that did not interfere with her career plans; and where Leonid Brezhnev responded to a letter he had not received from a record-breaking milkmaid who had never written to him about the record that no one could verify or cared about – all concocted in the midst of drinking and sex binges by local party bosses and journalists. The compromises never ceased. And above all hovered a sense of resigned acceptance, because 'this is the only life there is'. When Dovlatov asked a Russian who had stayed in Estonia after wartime service whether he did not feel that 'all this was happening to someone else . . . that it's some kind of idiotic play and we're just the spectators', the latter responded: 'Don't think. Just don't think, and that's it. I haven't thought for about fifteen years . . . if only one could fall asleep and not wake up'.¹⁰⁵ One tried to muddle through, manipulate circumstances and float through one's existence as best one could, because one thing was beyond doubt: the numbing Soviet order was there to stay.

This state of affairs was accentuated by a series of self-immolations by young people: first a Ukrainian (November 1968), then a Latvian (April 1969), and finally the nineteen-year-old student worker Romas Kalanta, who ignited himself on 14 May 1972 in front of the theatre where Soviet power in Lithuania was proclaimed in 1940 and under the banner 'Freedom for Lithuania'. This suicide traumatised both authorities and population and triggered three more self-immolations as well as mass demonstrations by students and workers with anti-Soviet slogans, attacks on police personnel, extensive property damage and mass arrests. Not least, it forced the local authorities to address the issue in public, in itself a sign of the changing times.¹⁰⁶

The self-immolations only highlighted the sense of despair and hopelessness that engulfed the western frontier following the crushing of the Prague Spring. They were, in a sense, the swansong of the bygone era of violent resistance. By and large, political protest was already being channelled to the less dramatic, gradual and

105 Sergei Dovlatov, *The Compromise*, trans. Anne Frydman (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1983).

106 Thomas Remeikis, *Opposition to Soviet Rule in Lithuania, 1945–1980* (Chicago: The Institute of Lithuanian Studies Press, 1980), 118–19, 292–9; Alexeyeva, *Soviet Dissent*, 38.

legalistic dissident methods of mass petitions and *samizdat* publications that challenged the regime to live up to its formal constitutional obligations.¹⁰⁷

Foreign broadcasts, especially from Scandinavia, continued to haunt the authorities. By the mid-1970s, a powerful new station in Helsinki had already dominated the airwaves of northern districts of Estonia with news reports and films from the West. Reluctantly, the authorities admitted that a significant portion of the population were tuning in. The measures advocated to counter the impact of the Finnish broadcasts said it all: in addition to improving reception for central and Estonian television broadcasts, the Estonian officials advised the screening of Soviet and foreign films, enhancing the quality of colour broadcasts, intensifying propaganda on the Soviet way of life, and instructing the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to convey Soviet concerns to the Finns over unfriendly broadcasts.¹⁰⁸ Against the all too visible thirst for information, the poverty of Soviet broadcasts, and the changes the republic endured in the course of the last two decades, one could justifiably wonder whether the Estonian officials had a different place and era in mind. In the final analysis, however, they were not necessarily unrealistic. At this point, Soviet power in the western frontier regions had already come to rest on routine, consumerism and the tacit understanding by all interested parties that any meaningful change in the system would emanate from Moscow.

The brutal suppression of the Prague Spring led many in the western frontier regions to view the different conditions prevailing in the neighbouring socialist satellites as a problem and not necessarily as an inspiring model. When labour unrest swept Poland in late 1970, Belorussian informants concurred that the source of the problems lay in Poland's failure to collectivise. People who had lived in Poland and 'saw with their own eyes how the new kulak grows and prospers', wondered why Polish authorities did not take decisive measures to solve the agrarian problem, while others noted that the events in Poland were not solely internal affairs.¹⁰⁹ Apparently, the lessons of 1968 were thoroughly digested.

The invasion of Czechoslovakia practically sealed off irredentist rhetoric and policies in the borderlands. Despite the temporary radicalisation of anti-Soviet sentiments by tourists from neighbouring countries ('How can the Soviet Union consider itself the liberator of the peoples of Europe, when it grabbed foreign territories, rules foreign lands and Russifies the Moldavian population?'¹¹⁰), the invasion clearly cooled tempers. Even the hawkish Shelest admitted that the Romanians had changed their course. The Party organisations in the border regions informed their superiors that they had learned that Romanian officials advised their citizens prior to setting off to Soviet regions to avoid confrontations with Soviet people. Indeed, tourists began to conduct themselves more tactfully than in preceding

107 A case in point was the petition of some 17,000 signatures submitted to the United Nations and the Kremlin in protest at the trials of three priests who carried out religious teaching among young people. Remeikis, *Opposition*, 531–4; Misiunas and Taagepera, *The Baltic States*, 255.

108 ERAF 1/302/230/1–4.

109 NARB 4/157/173/194–6.

110 TsDAHOU 1/25/22/87.

years and avoided political conversations with their hosts. This went hand in hand with the resumption of instruction in the Russian language and distribution of Soviet journals in Romania.¹¹¹ The invasion had its impact.

True, Romanian irredentism continued to irritate the Soviets well into the 1970s. Pantelimon Halippa, the former leader of the Bessarabian government, was rehabilitated in Romania and was living on a generous pension in Bucharest, enjoying close relations with the current leadership and propagating Romanian rights to Bessarabia and other neighbouring territories, Shelest informed Moscow.¹¹² The visits of Romanian artistic groups to Soviet Moldavia provoked nationalist sentiments and attracted large crowds of youngsters chanting 'Brothers, Brothers'. In autumn that year public buildings in Chisinau were painted with slogans such as 'Russians Go Home', 'Moldavia for Moldavians', and 'We Want to be with Romania'.¹¹³ In June 1973 the Ivano-Frankivsk and Chernivtsi regional committees informed the Central Committee in Kiev about the chauvinistic bacchanalia that engulfed commemorations of the 125th anniversary of the 1848 revolution in the city of Iași. In comments that were omitted in the press, Ceaușescu referred to 'occupation by the *moskali*' and the 'threat from the east'. This speech, and inflammatory broadcasts like it, could easily be heard throughout the border districts of Ukraine, as Voldymyr Shcherbyts'kyi informed Moscow.¹¹⁴ Romanian historians continued to push the envelope by referring to the 1940 annexation as the amputation of national territory and a violent, illegal act imposed on a helpless, isolated state. Romanian tourists in Ukraine still chattered about Mao having promised Ceaușescu the help of two million soldiers in case of Soviet aggression, or that China would push a plebiscite on the return to Romania of Bessarabia and Bukovina through the United Nations. At the end of the day, however, it was the restrained Soviet reaction that stood out.¹¹⁵

With the ratification of the existing borders in Helsinki in 1975 and the realisation after the invasion of Czechoslovakia that irredentist claims were directed inward rather than towards the borderlands' diasporas, Soviet officials adopted a more measured approach to such proclamations. Pressure from Moscow, including the tacit incitement of Hungarian irredentist claims on Romania, persuaded Ceaușescu to deny any territorial claims on the Soviet Union and to drop the identification of Moldavians as Romanians. This dispute, acknowledged the Romanian leader, merely concerned matters of scientific accuracy and historical truth. Mutual visits by Ceaușescu and Bodiul to Chișinău and Bucharest, respectively, signalled a certain closure.¹¹⁶ The sense of resignation was apparent when Andrei Gromyko, the Soviet Foreign Minister, visited Bucharest in 1978 for another round of mutual accusations. 'You want Bessarabia. You have territorial demands regarding the Soviet Union,' fired Gromyko. 'Yes, Andrei Andreevich', replied Paul Niculescu-Mizil, the Head of

111 TsDAHOU 1/15/258/3,27.

112 TsDAHOU 1/24/6313/23.

113 Dima, *From Moldavia to Moldova*, 53.

114 TsDAHOU 1/25/868/1-4.

115 TsDAHOU 1/25/1281/181-90, 204-21.

116 Dima, *From Moldavia to Moldova*, 56-7.

the Propaganda Department at the Romanian Central Committee, 'We would like to have Bessarabia back. But do you think we can have it back?' 'No, this is impossible', said Gromyko. 'Then, you see, Andrei Andreevich', countered Niculescu-Mizil. 'Politics is not what we want, [but] what is possible. It is the art of possible. Do you think we are so stupid that we do not understand it is impossible? . . . We only ask you to stop saying that there are two peoples: the Romanians and the Moldavians. We ask you to stop saying that there are two languages – the Romanian and the Moldavian'. In private, however, he conceded that the controversy should be limited to the academic sphere. Raising the political aspect of the Bessarabian question would have led to tragic consequences, as indeed happened in 1989.¹¹⁷

By 1974, relations between Hungary and the Hungarian minority in the Transcarpathian region, which numbered over 150,000 and was so restless in 1956, were celebrated as a model of cross-border nationality policy in the socialist bloc. The Hungarian press and tourists were quoted as praising the freedom of the community to converse and study in Hungarian, and contrasting it, of course, with the forced Romanianisation of the Hungarian regions under Ceauşescu. The newly gained tranquillity was further exemplified by the presence of some 1,900 one-time members of Hungarian nationalist parties, fascist organisations and military officers, who had been quite active in 1956 but were now silent.¹¹⁸ With János Kádár at the helm and two invasions in the background, few, if any, in the region had a taste for irredentist illusions and experiments.

The 1956 crisis had concluded with the re-emergence of class as an operational sociopolitical category. The Czechoslovak crisis followed suit, this time with implications for the international arena as well. In his blistering attacks on Ukrainian nationalism during and after the Czechoslovak crisis, Shelest reminded his audiences inside and outside Ukraine of Lenin's creed that 'the conduct of nationality policy must be subordinated to the interests of the building of socialism and communism', and that no Communist could forget about the class nature of the communist movement and the socialist system, especially Ukrainian Communists who had always struggled to build bridges to other fraternal nationalities. The same applied to Czechoslovak circumstances where proletarian internationalism and mutual aid were sacrificed, albeit momentarily, for an illusory 'special path'.¹¹⁹ Herein lay the essence of the Brezhnev Doctrine that connected everyone by means of a socialist umbilical cord. National sovereignty continued to trouble the Soviet regime both at home and in its East European empire. And time and again, it was the 'principled class-based assessment of ongoing events' that allowed the Soviets to penetrate the ethno-national wall and remould the arena at their will. Class not only mattered; it was the primary ideological tool in the intricate Soviet political system.

117 Niculescu-Mizil, *O istorie trăită*, 54–5.

118 TsDAHOU 1/25/868/68–69; 660/4, 6–8.

119 See Shelest's speeches on 25 April 1968 in TsDAHOU 1/25/97/34–62 and on 23 November 1968 in TsDAHOU 1/1/2076/50–65.

The Soviet handling of the Czechoslovak crisis in 1968 was symptomatic of the entire Soviet experience. Soviet leaders had to reconcile the imprints of their formative experience of constant struggle against alleged external and internal enemies whose being was claimed to be an existential threat to the polity, with the acute awareness that they possessed the power and knowledge to handle the Czechoslovak and Romanian challenges. The Soviets exhibited both confidence and profound anxiety while walking the fine line between Brezhnev's acknowledgment that the impact of the Czechoslovak crisis was limited to specific segments of groups and regions, such as students in L'viv, Moscow and Leningrad, and the melodramatic warnings by Shelest that nothing less than the fate of the socialist camp was at stake. The result was a brutal crackdown on dissent inside and outside the Union and a partial rehabilitation of Stalin, advanced notably by Shelest, yet stopping short of a full revival of the 'February 1948' methods, namely the full-blown re-Stalinisation of the region.¹²⁰

The Soviet invasion and the Brezhnev Doctrine that tied all members of the Socialist bloc in a tighter ideological knot applied to the western frontier as well. Any change was bound to start and work through Moscow, as indeed happened some twenty years later when a new and clueless General Secretary of the Communist Party, who experienced first-hand the complete loss of Soviet legitimacy in the wake of the invasion, launched his own Moscow Spring, ignited the frontier, and brought down the Soviet house.¹²¹

120 Pikhov, *Sovetskii Soiuz*, 311, 342. When Brezhnev consulted with Shelest in late October 1969 whether Stalin's ninetieth birthday should be mentioned in the press, the latter retorted that keeping silence on such an important figure in Soviet history, in the labour of the people and in the victory over fascism would amount to falsification of history. In the Politburo meeting on 19 December, the overwhelming majority sided with Shelest, overruling only two objectors, Suslov and Ponomarev. Shelest, '*Spavzhnii sud istorii shche poperedu*', 316, 319.

121 On the impact of their November 1969 visit to Czechoslovakia on the young Mikhail Gorbachev and Egor Ligachev, the two rising Soviet leaders who would end up presiding over the disintegration of the empire and the union, see Stephen Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse, 1970–2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 38–9; Mikhail Gorbachev and Zdeněk Mlynář, *Conversations with Gorbachev: On perestroika, the Prague Spring, and the Crossroads of Socialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 6, 42–3.