Fifty years since tanks crushed the Prague Spring

Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia the focus of important exhibition at Prague's Old Town Hall

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This Tuesday marks the 50th anniversary of the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia that crushed the period of liberalization known as the Prague Spring. Late August 20th and early August 21st, some 250,000 Soviet-led troops and 2,000 tanks entered the country.

Turbulent first hours and days of the invasion

The invading forces quickly secured key sites such as Ruzyně airport – where planes with additional troops began to land. The moment was a shock and pivotal in the future direction of the country and the lives of its citizens: the brief period of reforms that had begun with the political ascent of Alexander Dubček was over. The hours and days that followed were nothing less than dramatic as well as deadly: tens of thousands took to the streets to confront their occupiers, arguing and at times pleading with them to turn back – but to no avail. Confrontations were far from bloodless: at the Czechoslovak Radio building, tanks crushed hastily arranged barricades and the death toll began to mount. Seventeen people near the station lost their lives in the fighting. The nearby National Museum at the top of Wenceslas Square still bears the pockmarks from bullets from ’68. In all, more than 100 Czechs and Slovaks would die in the days and weeks following the invasion.

The very first Czechoslovak lives had been lost in the north Bohemian town of Liberec, where one photographer captured an infamous scene of a tank crashing into the arches of a local building, leading to falling debris that killed two people.

Scenes of mayhem

That and many other photographs capturing key moments during the invasion as well as its aftermath, are now on view now at an exhibition at Prague’s Old Town Hall entitled “Soviet Invasion – August 1968”. Czech photographer and the show’s curator Dana Kyndrová, who was 13 “when the Russians invaded”, told me more.

“This is a show featuring some of the country’s best photographers: whoever was in Prague or in Czechoslovakia in those days in August 1968 and afterwards was photographing what was going on, from Jan Reich to Vladimír Lammer who was an excellent picture editor at the magazine Květy. He took what is, I think, is the definitive image of the entire show: a man in a trench coat, holding a briefcase, who helplessly looks on as tanks come down Wenceslas Square.

“Many of the pictures around Czechoslovak Radio on Vinohradská Street, where makeshift barricades were set up and many people died, are very dramatic. But for me at least Lammer’s photo of this one man symbolizes the fate of our little country: in 1968, before that in 1938, where we can just stand and stare in shock at what is going on.”
The show captures many bitter and even devastating moments: a young group of Czechs carrying Czechoslovakia’s flag soaked in blood, crowds trying to engage Soviet soldiers in the shadow of the tanks.

**Not an ounce of meat for the occupiers!**

There are many moments of bleak humour – signs, cartoons, poems, and graffiti – urging the Soviet-led troops to “go home”. Signs spelling out that the invasion was a mistake.

Dana Kyndrová again:

“We have a certain black humour which is typical for us. It is a kind of defence mechanism in the face of misery. When no other option is left, humour is a last resort. People put up signs with slogans and poems and showed their opposition.

“One butcher’s put up a sign saying ‘Not one ounce of meat for the occupiers’. In front of the central bank, a sign read, we don’t need Soviet tanks to guard the [miserable little there is] inside.”

Not only the turbulent hours and days of the invasion itself are on view but also the brief period of reforms that preceded it and the aftermath that followed. Moments such as the death of the student Jan Palach, who set himself alight in January 1969 in an attempt to rouse his fellow citizens from apathy after the invasion, who would die three days later from his wounds.

**The halo around Alexander Dubček**

Another powerful image from the start of Prague Spring included in the show is a photograph of Alexander Dubček, the communist reformer upon whom many pinned their hopes (in socialism with a human face). Few, including Dubček himself, realised how quickly time was running out and how quickly his political zenith would peak. And crash.

Curator Dana Kyndrová:

“The image of Dubček in the show symbolizes the hope that many people felt [in 1968], that the experiment might be a success. There was kind of a ‘halo’ around him but I think historians were far more sceptical. In any case, he gave up when he was summoned to Moscow. He signed, whereas František Kriegel did not and the country learned that he had failed. Today it is difficult to evaluate all of the factors of course but in the end I think as a leader he was basically na?ve.”

Many Czechs and Slovaks of that generation never forgot Dubček’s speech after his return from Moscow: he was described as “defeated” and “a broken man”.

Other images in the exhibition until now remained largely unknown: two of these date back to 1969, months after the invasion, when morass had taken hold and Dubček and those loyal to the ideals of the Prague Spring had been sidelined. It was a new period: when a more compliant leadership approved by Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev had been installed.

“One of the pictures is an excellent photo by Jovan Dezort that was never before published and shows the newly installed Husák consulting with Brezhnev in Moscow. Another is a photograph from Milovice where Czechoslovak President Svoboda and First Secretary of the Communist Party Gustav Husák receive a picture of the ‘father of the Russian Revolution’ Lenin and ‘kowtow’ to the Russians.”

**Impressions of the invasion - 50 years on**

For many, including those who lived through the Prague Spring, exhibitions such as “Soviet Invasion” are an opportunity to revisit and re-examine the past.

“A lot of people coming to see the show are older and remember what happened. This is a show featuring excellent work: besides the historic value, these are excellent pictures. Many foreigners are also coming and comment afterwards.

“The subject matter has always been important for me because as a photographer myself I covered the departure of the last Soviet troops in 1990 and 1991. The scope is not just the invasion but also the prelude that was the Prague Spring, and the aftermath, the death of Jan Palach and so on.”

The images compel visitors to relive or to delve deeper into events that forever changed the direction of the country: it would be another 20 years before the totalitarian regime in Czechoslovakia collapsed and until 1990 and 1991 before the last occupying forces left.

As for prevailing impressions for some visitors? Here is what some took away:

**Young Czech student:** “I like the show but it makes very sad. My interest in history, especially Czech history, brought me here, but it makes me wonder how my mum and grandmother must have felt at that moment in time.”
Young Slovak visitor: “It isn’t anything I wasn’t familiar with. However, it makes me feel sorry when I look at the pictures. I can feel the rage growing in my eyes.”

Older American resident: “In 1968, we had rioting and the killing of Martin Luther King and of Robert Kennedy and this Czech history was lost on us because it wasn’t in the news. Now I have been living in the Czech Republic since April and what I have seen at this show just stops your heart. It makes me very sad to see this.”