The “Prague Spring” of Czechoslovakia, 1968, is still discussed ten years after it was quelled by direct Soviet military intervention. Voices are still raised in Prague, despite repression and “normalisation” — like those of Dubček, Kriegel, Kahout, Vaculík and other protagonists of 1968 who remain faithful to the ideals of the Prague Spring; the youth and political fringe; Christians; liberals and forbidden underground cultural movements which reject the hypocrisy of the occupation regime and demand respect for “human rights”. It is those disparate political and cultural elements which form the “Charter 77” movement.

The Prague Spring was essentially an attempt to “reform” the Soviet socialist model by moving towards a more democratic and pluralist socialism. Accordingly, democratic and socialist forces of East and West were made aware of a democratic, self-administering, pluralistic socialism — socialism with a “human face”.

The movement for “renewal of socialism” in Czechoslovakia in 1968 was not purely a national or “accidental” occurrence. It was the climax of a long crisis in socialism from which Stalinism had grown, and at the same time a tangible attempt to form a socialist alternative in a developed country. This was the real feeling of “The Spring” and the main reason for Soviet intervention.

That attempt at “socialist renewal” was certainly not the first by any Eastern bloc country. One recalls the Budapest revolt and the “Polish October” of 1956, the refusal of Tito and Mao Tse-tung to submit to the dictates of Moscow. But the uniqueness of Czechoslovakia was that of an economically developed country with traditions of parliamentary democracy, where the economic basis of socialism had been laid after World War II, in 1945, and where the imposition of the Soviet model, in 1948, had resulted in an economic, political and ideological crisis. It was important to see if socialism would give the Czechoslovakian people more liberty, democracy and participation in managing society in a developed country — as preconceived by Marx and Engels — than in countries which had no history of parliamentary democracy or had come directly from feudal regimes or dictatorships as in Russia, China, Cuba, Portugal and Vietnam, without denying the importance of respective changes.

This was why leading bureaucratic groups in Moscow, Berlin and Warsaw had to stifle the Prague Spring on August 20, 1968. They were frightened by the germ of a more “libertarian” socialism which could not only contaminate peoples of the Eastern countries, but also those of the West. The present leaders of the USSR have no interest in a “Western” socialism which is different from theirs and which may have repercussions for them in countries dominated by them. Hence the type of “Kadarisation” imposed after August 20, 1968 and why Czechoslovakia is still controlled by them 10 years later. It was to discourage others from following the same example.

August 20, 1968 was a shattering experience which deprived hundreds of thousands of citizens and 500,000 former communists of a political and cultural life; it has transformed Czechoslovakia into a “Biafra of the Spirit” (Louis Aragon), and ensured that the Prague Spring cannot be easily repeated.

However, traces of the former spirit still remain. It is in the development of a “Eurocommunism” which began with non-acceptance of Soviet intervention and has its roots in the Prague Spring. It is characterised by a more critical attitude to the Soviet model in the awareness that socialism cannot exist without democracy. This new approach appeals to many in the international left movement which has no
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clear ideology or central point of agreement, but represents the beginnings of a process which could overcome the divisions within workers’ movements. In fact, “the universal value of democracy” (E. Berlinguer) and political pluralism has largely healed the division between “reformists” and “revolutionaries”. The line of demarcation now exists between the partisans of the “Soviet model” and those of a “different socialism”. Resolving this will take a long time. The Prague Spring will be the point of reference, like the Paris Commune has been to marxist revolutionaries.

Some leftwing movements, certain Communist parties, different radical groups and trade unions in Paris, Rome, Berlin, etc. which were more attracted by the romantic visions of Che Guevara, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, by Cuba, Viet Nam, and later Portugal, are now discovering the virtues of the less spectacular revolution of Czechoslovakia, 1968, which the numerous debates and discussions in many countries of the world attest.

It could be that 1968 drew in China. Their disagreements with the USSR up to this time had been mainly ideological. The Soviet aggression against Czechoslovakia may have convinced them that they, too, may be faced with the menace of Soviet militarism. They mobilised their people and armed forces. They set defensive safeguards by approaches to the USA, to Western Europe and non-aligned countries (such as Australia) whom they previously denounced as “the united objectives of American imperialism”. One could say that the volte-face of Chinese politics which had its theoretical expression in the “theory of three worlds” (Mao Tse-tung) has its origins from conclusions made by the Chinese leaders from the aggression against Czechoslovakia, by the Soviet military.

It is paradoxical that the “West” has not understood the true implications of the change in Chinese politics. They consider it to be more “ideological” than it really is. The West mistakenly believes that the Chinese take the Czech lesson lightly, like “an accident along the way”, when the opposite is the case.

It is true that the phenomena of political and cultural dissidence in Eastern European countries existed well before the Prague Spring, but mainly as individual protest. In Czechoslovakia, the expulsion of 500,000 from the Communist Party created a huge base for opposition to the occupation. For the majority of its participants, opposition has to be in secret because of the presence of the Soviet Army and genuine fears of reprisals. The hopes engendered by the “Spring” for Eurocommunists and liberals of other Eastern European countries have aroused the fear of leading groups that the same phenomena occurring in their countries will lead to Soviet repression so that discrimination has taken place against real political opposition.

This atmosphere has produced “ghettos” of the discriminated composed of actual and potential dissidents, which provide new voices in the struggle. It is because of this that certain movements have come into being such as the “Charter 77” in Czechoslovakia; the “Committee for Self-Defence” in Poland; the “Watchdog Committees of Helsinki” in the USSR, etc. These movements have expelled communists, socialists, christians, liberals and nationalists — all sharing a common platform which includes: the defence of free speech and religion, the right to strike, freedom of access to information, respect for liberty and the participation of the people in control of state power, all guaranteed in the laws and constitutions of Eastern Europe, but to which their leaders pay only lip service.

Thus, one is witnessing the birth of a culture parallel to the official kind as one can see in the various editions of “Samizdat” in the USSR, “Edice Petlice” in Czechoslovakia, the literary reviews of Poland, Hungary, etc. None of that was possible before the Prague Spring which, even after its defeat, has shaken the myth and stability of the Soviet model in Eastern Europe.

The essential question now exists for Eastern Europe: what are the prospects for real change and will it be reform or revolution? Is an array of “gradual reform” definitely barred by the defeat of the Prague Spring, as the Polish philosopher Kolakorski insists? The answer is not easy. In the present situation, the chances of another
Spring appear minimal particularly in "normalised" Czechoslovakia. Consequently, one can see nothing different developing — no radical tendencies to left or right, no phenomena of anti-Soviet nationalism, not even anti-socialism. But there is pressure. Pressure on the "Estabishments" of Eastern Europe. Pressures especially for economic reform and the need to "open" to the West. There is ideological cynicism and pragmatism confronting the ideological rigidity of the party apparatus and its police, with their solid ties to Moscow.

The greatest fault in Dubcek's leadership was to believe that one country alone could go forward with a process of democratisation, provided it did not interfere with foreign policy and provoke Moscow.

This belief was fostered in the illusion that the USSR was still in the "after Khrushchev" mood and in line with the 20th Congress decisions on de-stalinisation. Dubcek was convinced that the Soviet leadership would understand the importance of this new type of socialism for all communist and socialist movements and as such would not contemplate the use of military force. Because of this, nothing practical was done to face that menace which may have discouraged the Soviets from what they did. Czechoslovakia should have warned the Soviets that while faithful to the Warsaw Pact, they would defend themselves in case of aggression. They should have accompanied this warning by mobilising the army and people's militia.

I think that this was the only way Soviet military intervention could have been avoided. This view has been confirmed by the examples of Tito, Mao Tse-tung and even Ceausescu who have not been afraid of risking conflict with Moscow in preserving their own road to socialism without becoming dependent on the West.

It is an important political lesson, not only for opposition in Eastern Europe, but for all who want to build an alternate socialist society in all developed countries. Each attempt, whether in Rome, Paris or Madrid, is going to meet the same hostile opposition from the Soviet leadership. When we talk of this to some western communist parties they reproach us for pushing them into a brutal rupture with Moscow. We do not ask this. We merely suggest that they be not taken by surprise as we were in 1968 by underestimating the aggressive stalinist nature of the present Soviet leadership, to understand that the socialist opposition in Eastern European countries is its natural ally in the struggle for a socialist alternative to capitalist society, while ruling bureaucratic regimes are merely brakes on the development of socialism throughout the world.

The progress to democracy can only be achieved if it happens simultaneously in two or three Eastern European countries like Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary. This would prevent Moscow from punishing one country by punitive intervention like August 20, 1968, or by making "concessions" by the "finlandisation" of Eastern Europe as the Polish dissident Jacek Kuron calls it. The possibilities of modification to socialism which conform with tradition and need, do run contrary to the essential interests of Soviet power in Eastern Europe.

It is for these reasons that the "Charter 77" movement, other protest movements and "contracts" between opposition groups are phenomena of greatest importance to the future of Eastern Europe — against the alliance of the bureaucrats is the new solidarity of the oppressed. Changes wrought in Eastern Europe could possibly provoke a political crisis in Moscow and as a result certain changes be effected — movements of national liberation often provoke political crises in corresponding metropolitan countries. This perspective is only possible though by international detente as an effort to overcome the division of the world into spheres of interest by the two super-powers.

The return to the Cold war, economic crises and terrorist phenomena will foster only authoritarian and totalitarian solutions of the right or left. To foster democracy in developed countries is to become allies in the fight for true socialism and against the status quo. That is why co-operation and solidarity between all socialist forces is a primordial condition for socialist transformations in the world. The defence and development of democracy coupled with the rights of all humankind is an essential condition for progress in Eastern, as well as, Western, countries of the world.