On many occasions, I have been told by people from other post-communist countries how much the events that unfolded in Czechoslovakia in 1968—the Prague Spring and the ensuing Soviet occupation—meant to them.

The first couple of times it happened, I was astonished. Surely, all countries in the former communist bloc had their own landmark years and dates that Czechs were often not even aware of. Why did people relate so much to Czechoslovakia and to the year 1968? Having heard several times from various former opponents of communist regimes in Romania, Poland, Georgia, and Ukraine, and even from those in faraway Soviet republics in Central Asia, that the Soviet tanks in Prague had crushed their last hope for a humane Soviet-type socialism, I began to understand. Czechs, however, have traveled down some strange and winding roads when reflecting on 1968 in the years of freedom after 1989.

Relaxation within the system

The grip on political and social life in Czechoslovakia started gradually loosening in the mid-1960s, which culminated in a “reform process” in the spring and summer of 1968. It happened for various reasons: subsiding international tension, significant changes in the membership of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, and appointments of pro-change people into positions of power and influence. Of course, most of these people wanted to keep the Communist Party in power and operated within the system. Still, the society at large responded enthusiastically to the relaxation of control.

Censorship was abolished, and a powerful torrent of hitherto suppressed information, criticism, and points of view gushed out through the media, even though the same people were in control of them. The Kremlin and its allies in other communist bloc countries first responded with warnings, then with threats, and ultimately with a large-scale, armed invasion.

Hopes crushed by tanks

It is now difficult to judge whether Czechoslovak communists would have eventually curbed the shifting popular mindset and calls
for more changes, adapted to it, or ended up using violence themselves to crush the desire of Czechs and Slovaks for freedom. But this is not relevant in this context. The important thing is that the atmosphere of freedom—or at least much greater freedom—raised great hopes that were then crushed by the invading tanks.

Czech society at large was powerfully galvanized in August 1968 and immediately thereafter. People felt the importance of being a community. Instead of viewing themselves as mere objects of history, they suddenly felt that they could make decisions and act freely, even if the impact of their actions was limited and the future held no promises that the situation would change.

**Caricatured memories of 1968**

We often hear that the Prague Spring was simply a battle of two communist cliques—the conservatives and those who called themselves progressives—and that it can be dismissed as an effort to make changes within the system. Many others, myself included, disagree, arguing that the opportunity to take a deep breath and experience a whiff of freedom, as well as the newspapers, magazines and books that were allowed to be published in 1968 and for a while thereafter, gave people back the self-confidence they had lost in the tough and cruel 1950s. It reminded them that all was not lost.

There is no denying that the two decades of “normalization” that followed the invasion ate away at and stifled that self-confidence, having suppressed pro-change elements and brought to power, for the most part, people of inferior intellect and integrity. Still, memories of 1968 persisted, though often merely as caricatures; people remembered Alexander Dubček and other Prague Spring
figures as their heroes. In the late 1980s—in fact, even in November 1989—you could still hear crowds cheer “Dubček!” at demonstrations, although Dubček had personally signed legislation in August 1969 authorizing the use of police, militias, and weapons to crack down on public resistance.

**Documents from 1968 guarded like a treasure**

We tend to judge the situation at that time by what we know today. It is difficult enough for those who lived through it to empathize with this history, let alone for the younger generation that cannot remember it. This kind of historical anachronism is very common. This said, we must not ignore that the fact that 1968 has boosted our social memory and given us new sources—old copies of newspapers and magazines that people guarded like treasure, books discarded from public and private libraries that passed from hand to hand, as well as samizdat literature and exile magazines; publishing companies, too, have worked tirelessly to fill in the gaps. Nor must we overlook the fact that the atmosphere of the Prague Spring made it possible to establish numerous contacts among like-minded people. Although the ensuing normalization broke off some of those contacts, it could not dissolve all of them.

In the intentionally atomized and corrupt society, however, there were groups that did not seek to make communism more human but to move beyond it toward democracy. The assumption that memories of 1968 must be linked to those who wanted to reform but not overthrow communism is false. In the week after the occupation of August 1968, people’s actions were conscious, organized, and courageous. The community showed itself at its best. Memories of that did not disappear either; they gave many people hope and energy when the next opportunity to resist presented itself at the end of the 1980s.

**Climate of free exchange of opinions**

Of course, twenty years later, it was politically and economically impossible to continue where we had left off in 1968; the times had changed, and so had the people. Surely you could find among those communists who lost power and influence after 1969 some that still dreamed of going back to building a socialism with a human face, but the fall of 1989 was not the spring of 1968. However, life is made up not only of economic, political and power arrangements, but also of the atmosphere in which people live and meet.
It is the atmosphere of freedom, trust, and exchange of views that defines the Prague Spring, despite its limitations, even decades later. After all, in the fall of 1989, you could literally feel the touch of historical memory and reminiscences of the months lived in greater freedom in 1968. Surely those who recall the warm welcome lavished on the iconic figures of 1968 in 1989, such as Karel Kryl or Marta Kubišová, even though they had been absent from the public eye for twenty years, will agree.

* The author writes from the present Czech Republic. The title of the contribution, however, reflects the political alignment of the country in 1968.

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