

**COMMUNIST  
CZECHOSLOVAKIA  
(1948-1989) - PRAGUE  
SPRING OF 1968**



# COMMUNIST CZECHOSLOVAKIA (1948- 1989) - PRAGUE SPRING OF 1968

## Description

Through an in-depth analysis of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the story behind the Prague Spring of 1968, what reforms Dubcek and his comrades tried to implement, how the people took to the new reforms, and ultimately how the Soviets and other Warsaw Pact countries responded to what was going on in Czechoslovakia.

## Subjects

European History  
World History

## Grade Level

11-12

## Duration

90 minutes

## Tour Links

- Museum of Communism, Prague
- National Museum, Prague

## Essential Questions

- What was the Prague Spring of 1968?
- Who was Alexander Dubcek? What reforms did he try to bring to Czechoslovakia in 1968?
- Who was Leonid Brezhnev? How did he respond to the Czech reforms?
- What was the Warsaw Pact? How did it respond to the Prague Spring?

# Academic Summary

## Primary Source

The story of Czechoslovakia in 1968 can be told from many perspectives ... This report concentrates on the loss and restoration of Soviet control. The Soviet Union's extensive political influence over neighbors with a common ideology cannot be ignored, but this report emphasizes political control in the specific and concrete sense, and the military and political prerequisites for it.

For almost 20 years, Czechoslovakia was a model satellite. However, increasingly dangerous anomalies had begun to weaken Soviet control ... When liberals and Slovaks combined to elect Dubcek party first secretary in January 1968 ... [h]e turned for support to the liberals who were then formulating and advocating popular reform programs. Finding support among the liberals and from the populace, he began to bypass mechanisms of Soviet control and instituted reforms which further threatened the prerequisites for Soviet control.

At the end of March 1968, apparently in response to East German and Polish alarm, the Soviet and Bloc leaders (minus Romania) met to caution the Czechoslovaks on their reforms. ... A final Soviet effort to coerce or split the Czechoslovak party and leadership and to recruit pro-Soviet leaders among them was made at Cierna at the end of July. ... The events of the first weeks of August [1968] proved that the Czechoslovak leaders would not or could not live up to the Soviet demands put on record at the Bratislava meeting of Bloc leaders (minus Romania) immediately after the Cierna meeting. On the night of 20-21 August 1968, the Warsaw Pact forces which had been building up on the borders for months swiftly and efficiently occupied the country.

*From "Understanding the Prague Spring" by the Central Intelligence Agency*

## Secondary Summary

On 20 Aug 1968, after months of buildup by Soviet and Warsaw Pact military forces on the Soviet / Czechoslovak border, the Red Army invaded Prague and quickly overtook the Czech capital. First Secretary of the Communist Party Alexander Dubcek and his supporters were taken into official custody. Their crime: the Prague Spring. Dubcek had been elected First Secretary earlier that year, in Jan 1968. A loyal member of the party since the dark days of the Second World War, Dubcek nonetheless believed that his new regime could create what he called "socialism with a human face" by bringing more liberal and modern policies, and soon after he was elected he called for "a free, modern and profoundly humane society." He tried to eliminate most of the repressive features of communism, allowing greater freedom of expression and allowing for the establishment of political and social organizations not under central control. By April, the party leaders were even calling for freedom of the press and multi-party elections. Cultural activities forbidden in previous years, such as music clubs, plays and even radical anti-government groups sprung up overnight. It appeared as though the revolution was on.

Theories and rhetoric aside, visions of a new liberal ideology for Czechoslovakia were troubling to many communist leaders, but when the Czech people took to the streets of

Prague on May Day (01 May) in support of their new leader, communist leaders all over the Soviet Iron Curtain trembled in fear. Leonid Brezhnev, Soviet Premier and the recognized master of Eastern Europe, wondered if liberalization in Czechoslovakia was simply a prelude to popular revolutions all over the Warsaw Pact. In many ways, Brezhnev was right. The Prague Spring of 1968 was a prelude to revolutions, but it was 20 years too early. It would be 1989 before the Soviet system fell apart. In the meantime, Brezhnev decided that the rebels in Prague needed to be taught a harsh lesson.

After an invasion that reminded many of Hitler's Blitzkrieg, Soviet troops quickly quelled the uprising. Dubcek and the other Czech leaders were arrested, flown to Moscow and forced to sign the "Moscow Protocol" a document approving the invasion and promising to return to harsh communist policies. Although he was eventually released and flown back to Prague in order to avoid an international public relations nightmare, Dubcek quickly lost his job and his authority. By 1970, he was forcibly expelled from the Communist Party. He lived the remainder of his life in relative obscurity and died in 1992 after a car crash.

Through an in-depth analysis of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the story behind the Prague Spring of 1968, what reforms Dubcek and his comrades tried to implement, how the people took to the new reforms, and ultimately how the Soviets and other Warsaw Pact countries responded to what was going on in Czechoslovakia.

## Objectives

1. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain the Prague Spring of 1968 in terms of its successes and its failures.
2. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain why Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev ordered Warsaw Pact forces to invade Czechoslovakia in Aug 1968 to put down the democratic uprising in Prague.

## Procedures

### I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: What did Churchill mean by the “Iron Curtain”? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of the primary sources and readings from the websites listed below. (5 min)

### II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – Brief Overview of the Prague Spring (20 min)
- Video – Prague Spring (10 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the primary sources and articles about the Prague Spring of 1968 and the Soviet Response in Aug 1968, taking notes as appropriate. (30 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of these articles for homework before class to prepare for class discussion.
- Suggestion: Assign different readings to different student groups.
- Group Activity – Discussion on the Prague Spring of 1968. (15 min)

### III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay / DBQ: Explain in detail the Prague Spring of 1968, what reforms Dubcek and his comrades tried to implement, how the people took to the new reforms, and ultimately how the Soviets and other Warsaw Pact countries responded to what was going on in Czechoslovakia.

## Extension

### On tour: National Museum in Prague - Memorial to Jan Palach and Jan Zajic

While on tour, students in Prague can visit the National Museum, where they can see for themselves bullet holes in the front façade of the building from the Soviet invasion of 1968. The museum itself is home to thousands of exhibits and is considered one of the most complete in the European sphere. Out front, they will find a memorial to Jan Palach and Jan Zajic, two young men who killed themselves by self-immolation (setting themselves on fire) in early 1969 in protest of the Soviet takeover of Czechoslovakia. The memorial consists of a bronze cross set into the bricks and concrete at the exact spot where Palach fell after setting himself on fire.

# Web Links

## Lesson Plan Websites

- [www.historylearningsite.co.uk/prague\\_spring\\_1968.htm](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/prague_spring_1968.htm)  
The Prague Spring of 1968 (website) – from the History Learning Site (UK)
- [history.state.gov/milestones/1961-1968/soviet-invasion-czechoslovakia](http://history.state.gov/milestones/1961-1968/soviet-invasion-czechoslovakia)  
Milestones: 1961-1968: The Soviet Invasion of Czechoslovakia (website) – from the Office of the Historian at the US Department of State – good essay that outlines the basic facts of the Prague Spring and the Soviet response.
- [teachwar.wordpress.com/resources/war-justifications-archive/invasion-of-czechoslovakia-1968/](http://teachwar.wordpress.com/resources/war-justifications-archive/invasion-of-czechoslovakia-1968/)  
Invasion of Czechoslovakia, 1968 (website) – from Teachwar, a blog devoted to sharing resources, strategies and tips for teaching about war and the military in college classrooms. Great primary sources on the Prague Spring and the Soviet Invasion of 1968. Highly recommended for students and teachers.
- <https://www.cia.gov/news-information/featured-story-archive/2008-featured-story-archive/a-look-back-the-prague-spring-the-soviet.html>  
A Look Back: The Prague Spring & the Soviet Invasion of Czechoslovakia (website) – from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Article outlines basic facts and the website has links to online primary source documents on the Prague Spring and the Soviet Invasion, including CIA memorandums to the White House.
- [www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1968brezhnev.asp](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1968brezhnev.asp)  
"The Brezhnev Doctrine" (primary source) – from a speech before Polish workers in Nov 1968. Justifies the Soviet invasion – from the Modern History Sourcebook at Fordham University.
- [www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nsa/publications/DOC\\_readers/psread/doc81.htm](http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nsa/publications/DOC_readers/psread/doc81.htm)  
Document #81: Transcript of Leonid Brezhnev's Telephone Conversation with Alexander Dubcek, August 13, 1968 (primary source) – posted online at The George Washington University in Washington DC.
- [www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/COLDprague.htm](http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/COLDprague.htm)  
Prague Spring (website)
- [www.janpalach.cz/en/default/index](http://www.janpalach.cz/en/default/index)  
Jan Palach – Charles University Multimedia Project. From Charles University in Prague, where Palach attended school before he committed suicide. Contains a great deal of primary and secondary sources, both on Palach and on the Prague Spring / Soviet Reaction. Highly recommended for teachers and students, but be aware this site covers a very graphic topic that may be too sensitive for younger students.
- [www.slideshare.net/rakochoy/prague-spring-6889252](http://www.slideshare.net/rakochoy/prague-spring-6889252)  
End of a Dream: The Soviet Invasion of Czechoslovakia – August 1968 (PowerPoint)
- [www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1](http://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1)  
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video) – great 2 minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvoor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA – highly recommended for teachers.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=SVIp5IUJhCs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SVIp5IUJhCs)  
Czechoslovakian Revolt 1968 (video) – 10 minute video that does a good job laying out the basic facts of the Prague Spring and its aftermath. Highly recommended for students and teachers.

## Background Information

- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prague\\_Spring](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prague_Spring)  
Prague Spring – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander\\_Dubcek](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_Dubcek)  
Alexander Dubcek – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Warsaw\\_Pact](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Warsaw_Pact)  
Warsaw Pact – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Warsaw\\_Pact\\_invasion\\_of\\_Czechoslovakia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Warsaw_Pact_invasion_of_Czechoslovakia)

## Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/russia/cold-war-iron-curtain](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/russia/cold-war-iron-curtain)  
Cold War – Russia’s Iron Curtain: An Analysis of the Soviet Sphere of Influence
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/russia/nato-vs-Warsaw-pact](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/russia/nato-vs-Warsaw-pact)  
Cold War – NATO vs. Warsaw Pact
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/russia/russian-involvement-in-ukraine-an-overview](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/russia/russian-involvement-in-ukraine-an-overview)  
Russian Involvement in Ukraine – An Overview
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/germany/cold-war-fall-of-the-berlin-wall-1989](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/germany/cold-war-fall-of-the-berlin-wall-1989)  
Cold War – Fall of the Berlin Wall 1989

## Key Terms

- Brezhnev
- Communist
- Czechoslovakia
- Dubcek
- Prague Spring
- Repression
- Single-Party rule
- Soviet Union

