

32. Telegram From the Embassy in Czechoslovakia to the
Department of State

Prague, November 18, 1989, 1418Z

Confidential

Prague 08082; Ni act Immediate

Subject: Brutal Suppression of Czech Students - Demonstration

1. Confidential - entire text.

2. This is an action message. See recommendation para 19.

3. Summary. An officially sanctioned student commemoration [on] the evening of November 17 developed into Czechoslovakia's largest anti-regime demonstration in 20 years. Several tens of thousands (possibly 50,000) students marched through central Prague calling for freedom, an end to Communist rule and the ouster of the present Communist leadership. The peaceful procession was halted by police before it reached its goal, Wenceslas Square. It was then brutally dispersed by truncheon-wielding riot police. Western journalists were particularly targeted by the police for rough treatment. One Chicago Tribune reporter required serious medical attention for head wounds. Numerous others were roughed up or had their cameras smashed. No official statistics have been released on the number of injured or detained, though we understand Prague Spring era leader Alexander Dubcek was among them and there is an unconfirmed report that at least one student died as a result of police beatings. The Embassy has already protested verbally to the MFA on the police treatment of American journalists and recommends in para 19 that Ambassador Housteky in Washington be called in to receive a protest and that the impending visit of CPCZ Presidium member Fojtik be cancelled as inappropriate at this time.

4. Scared and isolated, the Jakes leadership has decided to respond to this first major manifestation of student opposition with brute force. This bloody-mindedness may well produce the sort of divisions so far largely muted in the CPCZ leadership and will undercut what little popular legitimacy the regime has had as well as its longevity. New opportunities for popular protest will arise on December 8, "John Lennon Day" in Prague; December 10, International Human Rights Day, and January 16, the anniversary of Jan Palach's death. The example of Prague's students could encourage demonstrations of even greater scale on those dates. End summary.

The demonstration

5. A commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the death of a Czech, anti-fascist student leader (Jan Opletal) has sparked Czechoslovakia's largest antiregime demonstration in 20 years. A gathering of some 15-20,000 students met the afternoon of November 17 to hear speeches honoring the memory of this Czech martyr, as well as calls for academic freedom, a dialogue between Government and people and for students to become more politically active to change society. The spirit of the students and speakers was very much that of one of the large banners strung out over the assembly: "Who If Not Us, When If Not Now." Others read "Freedom," and "The Dinosaurs Out" (a reference to the CPCZ's aged Presidium).

6. After speeches, the students proceeded, as planned, on a solemn candle-light march to Vysehrad, the hill-top fortress and cemetery where many Czech national heroes are buried. The crowd became increasingly more political along the route. Shouts of "Long live Havel and the Charter" were interspersed with "Jakes out," "We want a new government" and "Free elections." At Vysehrad the gathering offered a moment of silence for Opletal and sang the national anthem. The crowd seemed uncertain as to how to proceed at this point, but shortly shouts rose up to march to Wenceslas Square, the traditional site of demonstrations in Prague's old center.

7. As students streamed down from Vysehrad into the city's streets they called, as demonstrators have in the past, for other Czechs to join them. This time they did. The crowd marched along the river embankment towards the city's center and its numbers swelled to several tens of thousands. (Western media estimates speak of 40-50,000, making it the largest independent demonstration here since 1969.) Student slogans became more forceful and nationalistic. In addition to calls for Jakes and the current Party leadership to resign, the crowd chanted "40 years of Communism is enough" and "Warsaw, Berlin and now Prague."

8. Up to this point the police had not seriously interfered with the demonstration, though they had halted its march at one point to prevent it from turning into side streets and to keep it along the river embankment. As the demonstrators reached Prague's broad National Avenue and turned toward Wenceslas Square, however, they were confronted by a barricade of riot police blocking their path. The demonstration had now been going on for some three and a half hours.

[9.] Between 19:30 and 20:30 the police and demonstrators were at a stand off. The police refused to permit the students to pass to the square, despite shouts that "after Wenceslas we will go home." While numbers of the demonstrators began to dwindle, a core of some 10,000 refused to budge or respond to police calls

to break up. The students responded by staging a sit-in on the street, singing the national anthem, chanting more anti-Communist, anti-leadership political slogans and shouting for someone in the leadership to come out and discuss their demands with them. Throughout, demonstrators were peaceful and restrained as police announcements became increasingly more threatening and riot police moved in to close the National Avenue from behind the crowd and cut off other points of egress.

Brutal police response

10. Shortly before 21:00, riot police, newly reinforced with special Red Beret Action Squads and fatigue-clad People's Militia, carried out a series of truncheon charges into the crowd. Numerous demonstrators, as well as foreign journalists, trapped within the street cordon were badly beaten. The police then began making arrests and using an armored personnel carrier with battering ram to force the people out into now open side streets. Within 30 minutes the street was clear. Busloads of those arrested as well as ambulances carrying injured were noted leaving the scene for several minutes afterwards.

11. According to reports, one student has died of injuries and at least 13 persons were seriously injured and required hospitalization. One of these was Chicago Tribune reporter Paula Butturini who suffered several head wounds requiring a total of 16 stitches. The number of injured was certainly much higher than the figure of 13. EmbOfs saw scores of young demonstrators bleeding or limping from the demonstration site. Many were not seeking immediate medical assistance for fear that their names would be taken by the authorities.

12. Western journalists were particularly targeted for brutal police handling. In addition to Ms. Butturini, a BBC journalist, Ed Lucas, was knocked unconscious. AP, LA Times, Boston Globe, and NBC reporters have all reported being beaten and roughed up. Many had cameras seized or damaged. EmbOfs witnessed a CNN reporter, Bruce Conover, being detained and his camera smashed. We understand that a British ITN reporter was also roughed up and held by the police.

13. There have been no reports on the total number of persons arrested or detained. We understand that former Prague Spring era leader Alexander Dubcek was among them. He was picked up when he was spotted by police during the earlier Vysehrad ceremony.

Comment

14. This is the first mass specifically student demonstration since 1969 and represents a watershed event for the Jakes regime. It changes our frame of reference on this regime's longevity. The brutal police treatment of youth will have broad

repercussions among the general population as it did last January at the much smaller-scale Palach demonstrations. It should remove what trace of legitimacy the regime retains as far as the general public is concerned. Jakes will not be able to pretend, as CPCZ ideology Secretary Fojtik tried to do after returning from talks in Moscow on Friday (just as the police were knocking heads), that Czechoslovakia is serious about speeding up the pace of political reform.

15. Importantly, the police action in its bloody-mindedness could produce divisions which have so far been muted in the Czechoslovak Communist Party leadership. But if this demonstration considerably undercuts the staying power of the Jakes regime, it also shows that the hardliners are not going to leave without a fight. Many of last night's demonstrators were calling on students to return to Wenceslas Square Saturday for a repeat demonstration. Even if this does not develop, there are several protest anniversary opportunities in the weeks ahead and around which demonstrations can coalesce.

16. Two in particular should be the focus of large-scale actions: International Human Rights Day on December 10 and the January 16 anniversary of Czech student Jan Palach's self-immolation in 1969. The December 8 local celebration of "John Lennon Day" has also typically drawn protest demonstrators.

17. How quickly the Jakes regime passes from the scene, however, may depend now on more than leadership divisions and popular pressure. An important factor, and one that could be decisive, is the Soviet reaction to local developments. Television coverage of CPCZ ideology chief Jan Fojtik's return from Moscow last evening showed him a physically shaken man. We have no doubt he heard some tough talk from his Soviet interlocutors and questions about exactly what Jakes and the regime are up to in their talk of reform.

18. There is a final bit of cruel irony to last night's events. Started officially to commemorate a heroic student act of protest against the brutality of Czechoslovakia's Nazi occupiers, they ended yesterday in brutality and apparently at least one student's death at the hands of the Czechoslovak authorities.

Recommendation

19. Embassy believes that strong and early protests are advisable to the GOC in view of the brutal treatment of its citizens and foreign, including U.S., journalists in such a blatant violation of its CSCE commitments. We further recommend that in view of these events, the impending visit of CPCZ Presidium member Fojtik be cancelled as a sign of our condemnation of the November

17 events. The Embassy has already verbally protested the police incidents involving journalists with the MFA. We are following up with a diplomatic note spelling these out in detail and demanding an explanation. The Ambassador plans, if the Department has no objection, to raise the contents of our note (see septel) 1 with GOC official in a nearly demarche. To reinforce our concerns, we commend that the Department take similar action by calling in Ambassador Houstecky at an early date. At that meeting we recommend that he be told that, in light of the November 17 events, the visit beginning November 24 by CPCZ Presidium member Fojtik, would not be appropriate.

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120. Telegram From the Embassy in Czechoslovakia to the Department of State

Prague, December 29, 1989, 1200Z

Confidential
Prague 09083

Subject: Havel's Election as President Concludes the First Phase of Czechoslovakia's Quiet Revolution

Ref: Prague 893143
1. (C - entire text.)

Summary

2. Vaclav Havel's election as President on December 29 caps the first phase of the Czechoslovak "quiet" revolution. His election was sealed by a Civic Forum-crafted political deal which gave his main competitor, Alexander Dubcek, the position of Federal Assembly Chairman as a consolation prize. Havel's election symbolically confirms in the minds of average Czechs and Slovaks that the democratic process here is irreversible and free elections guaranteed. The next phase of this revolution will be to institutionalize political reforms. An important issue in this process will be drafting a new electoral law, likely to be based on proportional representation. This is an electoral approach consistent with Czechoslovak political traditions and one likely to keep both the Communists, and the many new smaller parties now sprouting up, "in" the system. After elections in the summer or fall of 1990, the future of the Civic Forum and of Havel are unclear. While the Forum says it wants to "wither away" after these elections, it may have a part to play in

building future political coalitions. Havel has committed himself to step down from the presidency once free elections are held. From today's perspective, however, it seems probable that should he choose to ask the new Assembly for a full five-year presidential mandate, it would be hard to deny it to him. End summary.

3. Vaclav Havel, playwright, human rights activist and now politician, was elected President of Czechoslovakia on December 29 by a special session of the Federal Assembly held in Prague Castle. Havel's election had been a certainty for more than a week, but today's action, including a commemorative mass in St. Vitus Cathedral and a speech by the new President from the Castle balcony, will have an important psychological impact. It should confirm in the minds of average Czechoslovaks that the democratic process here is now irreversible.

4. Havel's election caps the first phase of Czechoslovakia's six-week-old "qui-et" revolution. In this phase the system has gradually been purged of its dis-credited, hardline Communist leadership. That house-cleaning has been going on at all levels of society. Last week, for example it reached the small Czech Jewish Community, where for the first time in decades, the Community freely elected its own leadership, making their respected former President, Desider Galsky, once again head of the Community.

5. Havel's victory has practical as well as symbolic significance. The post of President is not an honor if it is in position under the Czechoslovak system. The new President is Commander in Chief; he calls on the Federal Assembly to form a new Government; and he has extensive powers over appointments and amnesties. Havel as President is seen as a guarantee that democratic reforms will continue and that next year's elections will be free.

6. While some had criticized the presidential campaigning as a distraction of Civic Forum's energies from more basic reforms, it has proven a successful test of the Forum and Havel's skill in the political arena. The new President has made the shift from a purely moral figure to a politician without any apparent loss of popularity. The Civic Forum has shown that despite Communist delaying tactics, including a proposal to transform the Czechoslovak presidency into a directly elected office, it could bring public opinion around to its way of thinking. It crafted a compromise which met Slovak sensibilities by conceding to presidential candidate Alexander Dubcek the office of Chairman of the Federal Assembly (Dubcek was appointed on December 28) and swung other political forces behind Havel's campaign.

7. With Havel as President, the Civic Forum can now concentrate on the revolution's second stage: institutionalizing democracy. Essentially this involves putting a legal framework in place to protect human rights and permit free elections and later to draft a new constitution. As the Government's new program has outlined (reftel) these political reforms will be the priority over the next six months. The role of the Forum in this process will be to shape a popular consensus on the big political issues to be decided in this program, particularly the new election law.

8. The Government and the Civic Forum have taken a pragmatic, non-ideo-logical approach to this task. They have shown a readiness to compromise even when popular opinion might have supported a less conciliatory line. A good example is the recent decision to concede to the Communists two of the 24 seats left vacant when discredited deputies were expelled from the Assembly. Civic Forum representatives have told us that they want to keep the Communists "in the system". This consensus approach and the multiplication of new parties (at last count there were 14 and the number is rising) argues for retaining the Czechoslovak political tradition of proportional representation in the new election law.

9. A date for Federal Assembly elections has not yet been set. Early thinking had been to hold these in a mid-1990 (June/July) timeframe but Civic Forum representatives now tell us they are reconsidering. The Summer months, when most Czechoslovaks retreat to their country cottages, is not the best time to conduct an election campaign. The thought now is to delay the vote until the early Fall.

10. Most local observers are ready to discuss the post-electoral political landscape only in the broadest of terms. Too many factors are uncertain, including what the Civic Forum itself wants to become. Forum representatives now reject the idea of converting into a political party. Though the Forum has agreed to run a common slate of candidates or the 1990 elections, its official goal remains to "wither away" sometime after elections. Many fear the Forum could otherwise become a democratic counterpart to the past CPCZ, playing such a "leading role" in society that independent political initiatives are smothered.

11. Such a self-dismantling of the Forum presumes that the embryonic political parties now forming can fill the political void left behind. That seems unlikely to happen smoothly. Despite the protestations of its members, the Forum should survive the elections and could have an important role to play in coalition building among the many small parties forming to the left and right of the political center. The Forum has yet to come to terms with exactly what that should be.

12. Havel himself continues to dispute that his political role after his election today is anything but temporary. He has promised to resign after free elections are held. His eventual aim, he says, is to return to writing and the theater. But the smooth transition he has made to political life makes us suspect he may find the presidency appealing and hard to leave. From today's perspective it seems likely that if he asked to succeed himself after the elections with a full five-year mandate as President, it would be hard for the new Federal Assembly to deny it to him.

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