

“A Leap into the Unknown”

The Creation and International Reception of a Website on the History of the Prague Spring

Fabian Riesinger and Verena Hesse

M.A., East European Studies, Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich and University of Regensburg

Abstract

This article provides insights into the creation of a website analyzing the responses to the Prague Spring designed by the students of East European Studies at the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich and the University of Regensburg. This collaborative project, entitled [“Sprung ins Ungewisse: Der Prager Frühling im Spiegel der internationalen Presse”](#) (A Leap into the Unknown: The Prague Spring as Reflected in the International Press), emphasizes the innovative nature of the Prague Spring and sheds light on international responses to it. This article provides an overview of the project and focuses in particular on three case studies from the website: Hungary, Italy, and the Czech exile press in the United States. It also charts the background and evolution of the project, the challenges and discoveries encountered by the students, and its international reception.

Article

Introduction

The year 2018 was marked by several anniversaries, some of which were especially crucial for Eastern and East-Central Europe. In 1918, the First World War ended, allowing several states to gain or regain their independence. The First Czechoslovak Republic was founded on October 28, 1918, but this is not the only event in Czech history to be remembered in 2018. In 1968, another milestone had occurred, but in contrast to the Czechoslovak Republic’s foundation, this event offered little impetus for celebration.

In the early 1960s, a political thaw came to Czechoslovakia. Transforming the political climate there, this so-called Prague Spring turned into an elite-initiated campaign that aimed to introduce “socialism with a human face,” a project that inspired many Czechs and Slovaks and received increasing support throughout the entire society. The leading figure of this movement was Alexander Dubček who, although being a member of the Communist Party (KSČ), was in favor of both political and economic reforms. Having replaced the Communist hardliner Antonín Novotný as First Secretary of the KSČ on January 5, 1968, Dubček and others like him soon launched a reform process, which abolished censorship

and enabled a wide-scale liberalization.¹

Of course, these developments caught the interest of the international public sphere. Reporters and journalists from all over the world watched the special atmosphere of reforms and conveyed information about them to newspapers and television screens worldwide. The Soviet leadership, however, also observed the developing situation in Czechoslovakia. Yet, unlike the West, their reactions were ones of distrust and suspicion. After all, a reform of the current system could erode their power and the USSR could start losing its foothold in East-Central Europe. In August 1968 the Soviet Union decided to act. International negotiations at the end of July had come to an unsatisfying ending, and Alexander Dubček did not seem willing to yield to Soviet pressure. During the night of August 20 to 21, Soviet tanks rolled into Czechoslovakia. Supported by military forces from Hungary, Poland, and Bulgaria, the Warsaw Pact had put an end to the reform movement.

Was this a surprising act? Or had the military invasion been anticipated? And if so, by whom? Hoping that the answers to these questions could be found in the newspaper coverage of 1968, we—the students of the fourteenth annual East European Studies at the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich and the University of Regensburg—decided to analyze the responses to the Prague Spring. The results are published on a website of the Bavarian State’s Library under the title “Sprung ins Ungewisse: Der Prager Frühling im Spiegel der internationalen Presse” (A Leap into the Unknown: The Prague Spring as Reflected in the International Press). This collaborative project aims to stress the innovative nature of Prague Spring and shed light on international responses to it.² This article provides an overview of the project. It charts the motivations and evolution of the project and focuses in particular on three case studies from the website—Hungary, Italy, and the Czech exile press in the United States. We also reflect on the challenges and discoveries we encountered and its international reception.

The Beginning of Our Project

One aspect in particular distinguishes East European Studies at the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich and the University of Regensburg from other programs. Each new cohort of students starting to pursue a master’s degree in East European Studies is required to develop and manage a collective project. The unique nature of the course allows the students to take the lead, while professors take the positions of “external

¹ For a recent monograph on the Prague Spring, see Martin Schulze Wessel, *Der Prager Frühling: Aufbruch in eine neue Welt* (Ditzingen: Reclam, 2018). For a global perspective on the year 1968, see Norbert Frei, *1968: Jugendrevolte und globaler Protest* (München: dtv, 2017). Further readings on the Prague Spring include Martin Schulze Wessel, ed., *The Prague Spring as a Laboratory: Proceedings of the Annual Conference of Collegium Carolinum Bad Wiessee, 26-29 October 2017* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2019); Kieran Williams, *The Prague Spring and its Aftermath: Czechoslovak Politics 1968-1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Jan Pauer, *Prag 1968: Der Einmarsch des Warschauer Paktes: Hintergründe, Planung, Durchführung* (Bremen: Ed. Temmen, 1995); Harold Gordon Skilling, *Czechoslovakia’s Interrupted Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

² “Sprung ins Ungewisse: Der Prager Frühling im Spiegel der internationalen Presse,” Osmikon, accessed June 19, 2019, <https://www.osmikon.de/themen/prager-fruehling/>.

supervisors,” giving advice when needed but rarely interfering in decisions. Moreover, each class is challenged with a different thematic area and typically confronted with a different kind of media. While groups before our year designed exhibitions or edited a magazine, our group of thirteen master’s students was tasked with creating a website that was supposed to address the events of the Prague Spring.³ Having received no further instructions, where did we begin? After our project’s supervisors, Dr. Christiane Brenner and Prof. Dr. Martin Schulze Wessel, had given us a general introduction to the topic of Prague Spring, we soon started thinking about questions important for designing our project: What aspects of the Prague Spring have not yet been subjected to extensive research? What kinds of results are suited for an internet platform? And, most importantly, how can we, a group of thirteen students coming from different disciplines, including history, political science, ethnology, Slavic Studies, law and economics, combine our varied skills to reach the best possible outcome?

It did not take long for us to realize that one of our most important strengths were language skills. Each of us knows at least one Eastern European language as well as other languages from other parts of the world, including English. We asked, “How can this important knowledge be combined with the topic of Prague Spring?” The route from this realization to the idea of analyzing the international media coverage of Prague Spring was not far. This topic would assure an equal contribution from everybody, with those knowing Czech not having a seeming advantage. Furthermore, the accessibility of newspapers from several countries was possible thanks to the archives of several libraries and the newspapers themselves. We considered many aspects of the newspaper reports very interesting; newspapers as a form of mass media possess specific features that we deemed desirable for the topic. Indeed, just like other mass media, newspapers possess a certain sense of “urgency” or contemporaneity, commenting on the here and now almost immediately after the happening. Coming from a generation for which access to news is obvious and abundant, we expected to appreciate the meaning of press coverage at a time facing technical and political circumstances very different from today.

Moreover, the analysis of newspapers over a longer timespan would allow us to observe both consistencies and discontinuities in reporting. Generally one or two foreign correspondents for one newspaper covered the reports from Czechoslovakia, and we wondered if the different journalists reporting on the Prague Spring presented a consistent image of the country and its turbulent developments. Did they develop hopes for the future or, despite their obligation to present the news in an objective light, express opinions? In several cases, we learned that the press coverage of the Prague Spring conveyed more about the situation in the country of the newspaper’s origin rather than the situation in Czechoslovakia. All these aspects make newspaper coverage unique compared to television or radio broadcasting.

While undertaking our research, we also had to keep the technical aspects of our project in

³ To get an impression of projects developed by other years of East European Studies at the LMU, consult the Elitestudiengang Osteuropastudien homepage, accessed June 25, 2019, <https://www.osteuropastudien.uni-muenchen.de/index.html>.

mind. Although the technical implementation of the website was done by Arnošt Štanžel, our partner from the Bayrische Staatsbibliothek (Bavarian State Library), we still had to consider other aspects. These concerns included: How to advertise our project? What form should the public presentation take, and where should it take place? How should we coordinate the editing of our texts once the first versions were ready? At the end of January, the program organized a project-planning seminar that helped us to answer these questions. At this point in time, the final working groups had been formed. We each had to cover a textual and an organizational position. Again, we had the feeling of reaching yet another milestone on our way to the successful completion of our project. However, in reality, the true work was only about to begin. The first deadline came in April when we had to finish the initial draft of introductions for all countries whose press coverage would be analyzed. Students are not known for keeping deadlines, so we were all quite curious how disciplined everyone would end be, especially considering that we were responsible to one another rather than to the authority of a professor. The writing process had begun, and it turned out to be more than that. While becoming experts on the press coverage of a certain country, we also developed editing skills. Having agreed that the current versions of texts had to be handed in at certain points in time, we learned how to provide each other with helpful feedback. Only texts that were mutually proofread and revised were to be sent to our supervisors.

All of our texts were to have the same basic structure. We agreed to analyze the press coverage of four events in Czechoslovakia: first, the appointment of Alexander Dubček as First Secretary of the Communist Party on January 5; second, the abolition of press censorship in March; third, the international negotiations in Čierna nad Tisou at the end of July; and fourth, the military invasion on August 21. Of course, this meant particular challenges for every “textual team” or, as we termed them, “country groups” (this term is not to be taken literally as some of us decided to work on a country alone), so that we could cover as many corners of Europe as possible. Moreover, not every newspaper reported about every event, which required us sometimes to read between the lines. It was also necessary to have a solid background knowledge on the situation in the respective countries so as not to misjudge particular statements.

Fearing that going into detail about the writing process will bore readers of this text, we shall summarize the challenge of building our website by simply stating that we felt we would never make it at some points. Dr. Brenner and Professor Schulze Wessel gave us helpful advice, although sometimes this meant that the structure of a whole text had to be changed. We worked hard, confronting the challenges both as individuals and collectively. In the end, we recognized the benefits of an extensive collaborative student effort and we made it.

Countries Analyzed in “A Leap into the Unknown”

We covered newspaper responses to the Prague Spring from eleven countries. Judith Heckenthaler reviewed Austria and its position of neutrality. Lena Scheer examined the diverse French press. Roman Giesemann wrote two articles about the diverging views in the two German states of the time. The press of Great Britain was scrutinized by Ariane Dreisbach. Caroline Finkeldey undertook an analysis of Hungary’s state-controlled media.

The authors of this article, Verena Hesse and Fabian Riesinger, investigated two liberal Italian newspapers and the standpoint of the Italian Communist party. Dominika Halemba inspected the Polish media, contrasting the state press and a Catholic periodical. Melanie Hussinger and Felix Döhla analyzed the Communist press of the Soviet Union. The press in Francoist Spain, presented in the interesting article by Astrid Heindel, could be considered a voice from the periphery as Spain at the time was neither part of the West or the East and took a critical stance to both blocks. Finally, Zora Piskačová scrutinized two ideologically conflicting mouthpieces of the Czechoslovak exile community in the United States.⁴

To help readers appreciate the substance of “Leap into the Unknown,” we will here present in detail three of the eleven case studies that are explored on our website. They are Hungary, Italy, and the Czech exile press in the United States. When Soviet troops marched into Czechoslovakia on August 21, 1968, Hungary’s forces marched with them.⁵ As Caroline Finkeldey observes, the country was very much reminded of its own history and the events in 1956. Her article on Hungary serves as an example of the responses coming from the Eastern Bloc. In some Western countries there was a stark contrast between conservative and Communist views of developments in Czechoslovakia. Zora Piskačová’s article examines the Czech exile press in the United States. This “excursion” overseas is important and quite unique. Our case study on Italy reflects this ideological diversity. Nevertheless, as the analysis shows, the military suppression was a step too far even for the extreme left, which distanced itself from Moscow after August 1968—at least in Italy.⁶

Hungary: Three State-Controlled Newspapers

In her contribution, strikingly titled “The Bland Observer,” Caroline Finkeldey analyzes the Hungarian perspective on the reform process in Prague.⁷ While not unsympathetic towards the proceedings, the Hungarian socialist leadership and their press “played it safe” and only cautiously commented on what was happening in the neighboring country. The focus of her scrutiny is primarily the daily newspaper of the Socialist party *Népszabadság* (People’s Liberty), but she also analyzes content from the *Népszava* (People’s Voice) and *Magyar Nemzet* (Hungarian Nation), which were also controlled by the state.⁸ When Alexander Dubček replaced Antonín Novotný as the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, *Népszabadság* released a short announcement of the procedure on January 6 but avoided any commentary. A day later the newspaper published a report from the Hungarian News Agency (Magyar Távirati Iroda, MTI) detailing Dubček’s first session with

⁴ “Prager Frühling: Länder,” Osmikon, accessed June 19, 2019, <https://www.osmikon.de/themen/prager-fruehling/laender/>.

⁵ Csaba Békés, “Hungary and the Prague Spring,” in *The Prague Spring and the Warsaw Pact Invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968*, eds. Günter Bischof, Stefan Karner, and Peter Ruggenthaler (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 373.

⁶ Alessandro Brogi, “France, Italy, the Western Communists, and the Prague Spring,” in *The Prague Spring and the Warsaw Pact Invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968*, eds. Günter Bischof, Stefan Karner, and Peter Ruggenthaler (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 290-291.

⁷ Caroline Finkeldey, “Presseanalyse zu Ungarn: Der blasse Beobachter. Der Prager Frühling in der ungarischen Presse,” Osmikon, accessed June 20, 2019, <https://www.osmikon.de/themen/prager-fruehling/laender/ungarn/>.

⁸ Ibid.

the Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt, MSzMP). However, no information was given regarding the background of the change in the country's most important political position. Immediately following this article, the reader finds a short overview of Dubček's biography, which portrayed him as a loyal and eager Communist. As Finkeldey notes, the same resumé was published in all socialist newspapers in the Eastern Bloc.⁹ This already indicates a pervasive trend in Hungarian news reporting. Indeed, more often than not, the only information available on the developments in Prague were announcements from either the MTI news agency or its Soviet counterpart, the Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union (Telegrafnoe agentstvo Sovetskogo Sojuza, TASS).¹⁰

While press censorship in Czechoslovakia was officially lifted on March 4, the Hungarian newspapers did not report on it. It is fairly possible that this fact was known to the MSzMP leadership but purposefully not shared with the press. An indication of this discrepancy is a report written by *Népszabadság* editor-in-chief János Gosztonyi about his sojourn to Prague in later March. While he did not hesitate to express his fundamentally favorable opinion of the reform process, he also noted what concerned him: "This exaggeration, now being part of the Czechoslovakian press."¹¹ He used the term "exaggeration" to cautiously refer to the free expression of opinion now found in the newspapers of Czechoslovakia. While Gosztonyi did not name the newly renewed freedom of the press itself, he clearly cast doubt on it. Additionally, he criticized the proceedings in Czechoslovakia by referencing the events of 1956 in Hungary. He might have foreseen a violent suppression just like twelve years before.¹²

When the abolition of censorship was codified in Czechoslovak law in June, all of the Hungarian newspapers examined here were compelled to report on it. Still, they did so only briefly and without commentary. According to Finkeldey, this rhetoric mirrored official Hungarian politics. Reform developments that the Hungarian government supported were commented upon; those that were not were confronted with silence or offered to the readers without commentary. Indeed, while economic reform was viewed positively, any enablement of civic discourse was underreported or simply ignored.¹³

Similarly neglected in the Hungarian newspapers were the talks in Čierna nad Tisou at the end of July. While all three newspapers reported on them, none went further than commenting on the atmosphere that was supposed to be "comradely." At that point, the reader of the three Hungarian newspapers could not have known that an invasion of the

⁹ See for example the Polish party newspaper *Trybuna Ludu* (People's Tribune). Dominika Halemba, "Presseanalyse zu Polen: Land ohne Meinung," Osmikon, accessed June 20, 2019, <https://www.osmikon.de/themen/prager-fruehling/laender/polen/>.

¹⁰ Finkeldey, "Der blasse Beobachter."

¹¹ "Diese Übertreibung, die jetzt Teil der tschechoslowakischen Presse ist." Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

neighboring state was imminent. Indeed, no one could have guessed then that Hungary was to participate in such a venture.¹⁴

Three weeks later, when tanks finally rolled into Czechoslovakia on August 20-21, *Népszabadság*, *Népszava*, and *Magyar Nemzet* all responded to the event with hesitation. Because August 20 is a state holiday in Hungary, no paper was published on August 21. A day later, all three newspaper outlets printed the alleged invitation letter in which “Czechoslovak workers fearing imperialist scheming asked the Soviet Union to send military help.” Pictures of the tanks in Prague were not included. Rather, the letter was supplemented with a lengthy report about the proceedings of the national holiday.¹⁵

Finkeldey concludes that the Hungarian press might have had relative liberty to report on the reform process in Czechoslovakia, but it chose not to do so. They could have openly praised it, or if wanting to oppose it, they could have denounced Dubček. Instead, any opinions were suppressed in the Hungarian media. Invoking the memory of the bloody defeat of the 1956 reforms in their own country, Finkeldey argues that it was exactly this recent memory that served as the main reason for *Népszabadság* and its companion titles to “play it safe.” Following the Soviet path was—at least in the view of the Party—the safest game to play.¹⁶

Italy: Three Papers—Two Opposite Ideologies

While the Hungarian media barely discussed Alexander Dubček, the Italian newspapers were free to express mixed feelings about the new man in charge. Thus, the title of the second study presented here is a quote from the *Corriere della Sera* (Evening Courier). “Il flemmatico e irriducibile Dubček”—“The sluggish and imperturbable Dubček.”¹⁷ The article by Verena Hesse and Fabian Riesinger seeks to uncover whether all Italian outlets shared this view. Based on their ideological dispositions, this is very doubtful, as two of the analyzed dailies served an upper middle-class readership, while the other was the official “organ of the Italian Communist Party.”¹⁸

The *Corriere della Sera* is a conservative newspaper published in Milan. It is still circulated today. The same is true for the economically oriented *La Stampa* (The Press), which is published in Turin. Both were from the traditionally highly industrialized and comparatively rich northern part of Italy and shared a decidedly anti-Communist stance. The opposite was true for the third newspaper. *L'Unità* (The Unity) was the official newspaper of the Italian Communist Party (PCI). Published in Rome, it aimed at lower social strata, including workers. These ideological disparities informed many of the standpoints expressed by the different media outlets.¹⁹

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Verena Hesse and Fabian Riesinger, “Presseanalyse zu Italien: ‘Il flemmatico e irriducibile Dubček,’” Osmikon, accessed June 22, 2019, <https://www.osmikon.de/themen/prager-fruehling/laender/italien/>.

¹⁸ “Organo del partito comunista italiano.” Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

It is important to note that the Italian press of 1968, particularly *Corriere della Sera* and *La Stampa*, dedicated a significant amount of its media coverage to the events in Czechoslovakia. Both shared hope for reforms in Czechoslovakia particularly in terms of civil liberties and economic benefits. In January, both periodicals concentrated on the dichotomy between Dubček and Antonín Novotný, then First Party Secretary and Czechoslovak head of state. When the former had been replaced on January 6, *La Stampa* characterized him only a day later as the “penultimate Stalinist leader in Eastern Europe,” referring to Walter Ulbricht, head of state of the German Democratic Republic, as the last one. While both papers saw Novotný as a hardliner, they believed Dubček to be capable of initiating change.²⁰ *L’Unità*, on the other hand, reported the modification in Czechoslovak Party leadership without commenting on its possible implications. Nevertheless, we found a subtle distrust towards the newcomer, namely that while the paper did not hesitate to call Novotný “comrade” (*compagno*) on the front page, it omitted that title when mentioning Dubček.²¹ The focus on the apparent Stalinist versus non-Stalinist character of Czechoslovak leadership continued well into March. While neither of the conservative newspapers mentioned the abolition of press censorship in early March, both reported extensively on Novotný’s second resignation on March 22, this time from his position as head of state. Headlining again about the end of Stalinism, the *Corriere* and *La Stampa* nearly rejoiced about the newest change in the Party leadership.²² Yet the *Corriere* soon constructed a new antagonistic dichotomy. When the writer Ludvík Vaculík published *The Two Thousand Words*, a manifesto calling for a more radical continuation of the reform efforts, the paper used his example to criticize Dubček. Titling the article “The Conscience of Prague,” they declared Vaculík to be a more credible reformer than Dubček, especially considering that while he rigorously pursued the new political course, Dubček and the Party could always buckle under Soviet pressure.²³ In July, both the *Corriere della Sera* and *La Stampa* were reminded of the 1938 Munich Agreement. In late 1938, France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom had concluded a treaty allowing Hitler to occupy the German-settled regions of western and northern Czechoslovakia. The affected state itself was excluded from the proceedings.²⁴ While the *Corriere* compared the tense atmosphere in Czechoslovakia to the time after the Munich conference, *La Stampa* went even further, implying that this time the only measure that the great power involved—that is, the Soviet Union—had not yet taken was outright military action.²⁵

Even though the meeting in Čierna nad Tisou did not produce any considerable results, both papers started to report on the situation in Prague with daily frequency in early

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ “Dubček nuovo segretario del PC cecoslovacco” [Dubček new secretary of the Czechoslovak Communist Party], *L’Unità*, January 6, 1968, 1.

²² Hesse and Riesinger, “Dubček.”

²³ “Glossar: Manifest der 2000 Worte,” Osmikon, accessed June 22, 2019, <https://www.osmikon.de/themen/prager-fruehling/glossar/>. “La coscienza di Praga,” *Corriere della Sera*, July 20, 1968, 5. Ibid.

²⁴ “Glossar: Münchner Abkommen,” Osmikon, accessed June 29, 2019, <https://www.osmikon.de/themen/prager-fruehling/glossar/>.

²⁵ Hesse and Riesinger, “Dubček.”

August. An article of particular interest appeared on August 8 in the *Corriere della Sera*. Under the aforementioned headline, “The Sluggish and Imperturbable Dubček,” the newspaper delivered a character study of the Czechoslovak First Secretary.²⁶ It argued that Dubček rarely took outward measures for reform but preferred to remain in the background and pull the strings. It portrayed the politician as intelligent and calculating, but worried about a possible lack of determination. Overall, it was left open for discussion whether Dubček being “sluggish and imperturbable” could aid Czechoslovakia in achieving a slow but steady reform or whether it would prevent any radical measures.²⁷ When the reform process came to a quick halt due to the military invasion on August 21, all three newspapers reacted in shock. The conservative ones offered emotionally charged reporting on the Prague developments. Headlines like “How Liberty Dies” in the *Corriere* and “The Enemies of Freedom” in *La Stampa* were accompanied by photographs from Prague and first-hand accounts.²⁸

Meanwhile, the Communist press organ had its own battle to fight. *L’Unità* headlined in a self-referential manner: “Dramatic Hours in Prague—The Politburo of the PCI Expresses Its Grave Dissent.”²⁹ Although the Italian Communists tried not to alienate Moscow throughout the year, they had developed hopes and dreams in connection with the Prague Spring. As leftist writer Arrigo Bongiorno expressed, because of these fateful days in August, the Italian left was faced with “the burned-down utopia” (*L’utopia bruciata*).³⁰ Like Bongiorno, many on the left had hoped for Czechoslovakia to set an example of how to achieve a more humane and progressive socialism.

The conservative media outlets *Corriere della Sera* and *La Stampa* did not dream of a socialist future per se, but they still imbued the 1968 events happening in Prague with hope for transformation and, although they expressed a sense of uncertainty regarding Alexander Dubček, they supported the reform process as a whole. The Communist party newspaper *L’Unità* on the other hand underwent a much more a complex evolution. Nevertheless, while carefully navigating whom to support, it reached similar results. This agreement became clear in late August 1968 when the newspapers from both sides of the political spectrum decided that the Soviet Union had gone too far.

The Czech Exile Press in the U.S.: Two Newspapers and the Men Behind Them

While initially “Sprung ins Ungewisse” was planned to be limited to Europe, Zora Piskačová’s contribution supplemented the project with an excursion overseas. In her article titled “‘Dangerous Optimism!’: The Reflection of the Prague Spring in the Czechoslovak Exile Press in the USA” she analyzes two Czech-language weekly newspapers

²⁶ “Il flemmatico e irriducibile Dubček,” *Corriere della Sera*, August 8, 1968, 3.

²⁷ Hesse and Riesinger, “Dubček.”

²⁸ “Come muore la libertà,” *Corriere della Sera*, August 22, 1968, 3. “I nemici della libertà,” *La Stampa*, August 22, 1968, 2.

²⁹ “Ore drammatiche a Praga—L’Ufficio Politico del PCI esprime il suo grave dissenso,” *L’Unità*, August 22, 1968, 1.

³⁰ Arrigo Bongiorno, *L’utopia bruciata: Praga 1968* (Milano: Sugar, 1968), 7.

published in the United States.³¹ The phrase “dangerous optimism” in the title of her piece refers to a moment of self-reflection when the unforeseen—the Soviet invasion—had become reality. The Czechoslovak exiles in the United States constituted a scattered and politically diverse group. Nevertheless, the majority of the immigrants came to North America after the 1948 Communist takeover in Prague and thus—regardless of political diversity—the community possessed a decidedly anti-Communist stance. It was in this politically charged environment that the Czechoslovak exile press emerged and was cultivated.³²

The press organs Zora Piskačová analyzes were the well-known weekly *Americké Listy* (American Papers) published in New York and the much smaller monthly *Zpravodaj* (Reporter) circulated from its editorial office in Chicago. The two periodicals differed vastly in their political outlook, a fact that shaped their interpretation of the Prague Spring. Liberally oriented, *Americké Listy* was published between 1962 and 1989 by the exile Frank Švehla. Regular contributions were made by Ferdinand Peroutka, a public intellectual and an émigré who in the First Czechoslovak Republic belonged to the orbit of Tomáš G. Masaryk and headed the Czech department of Radio Free Europe in the 1950s.³³ *Zpravodaj*, on the other hand, was pronouncedly Christian-conservative in tone. The journal was also the main organ for the Association of Czechoslovak Exiles in Chicago, a Christian-conservative organization founded by Jaroslav Rabas.³⁴ *Zpravodaj* was published by Rabas between 1956 and 1974 with anti-Communist resistance fighter Radko Klein-Jánský as its most distinct contributor.³⁵

When Alexander Dubček was appointed First Secretary of the KSČ, both newspapers offered diverging reporting. The mistrust towards Dubček was nevertheless palpable in both. *Zpravodaj* perceived the new first man of the Czechoslovak Party as a willing henchman of Moscow installed to thwart any signs of liberalisation. *Americké Listy* was also critical, mostly because Dubček had spent long periods of his life in the USSR. Still, it quickly discovered his “human face” and praised his American style of politics.³⁶

When the Communist Party lifted press censorship in Czechoslovakia at the beginning of March, *Americké Listy* interpreted it as a clear step towards liberalization and reform. *Zpravodaj*, in contrast, took a radically different perspective. For them, abolishing censorship was understood as a cunning stroke to sway public opinion in favor of Dubček, whilst keeping his domestic enemies at bay.³⁷ Neither paper saw the Warsaw Pact invasion

³¹ Zora Piskačová, “Presseanalyse zur USA: ‘Gefährlicher Optimismus’! Die Darstellung des Prager Frühlings in der tschechoslowakischen Exilpresse in den USA,” Osmikon, accessed June 22, 2019, <https://www.osmikon.de/themen/prager-fruehling/laender/italien/>.

³² Piskačová, “Gefährlicher Optimismus.”

³³ “Glossar: Peroutka, Ferdinand,” Osmikon, accessed June 22, 2019, <https://www.osmikon.de/themen/prager-fruehling/glossar/>.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Piskačová, “Gefährlicher Optimismus.”

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

in August coming. While *Americké Listy* convinced itself that after the conference in Čierna nad Tisou some compromise could be reached, they chided themselves for their “dangerous optimism” once it was too late. Yet, the liberal exile milieu still did not abandon all hope, as Piskačová observes.³⁸ The conservatives from *Zpravodaj* had not expected an outright invasion either as they thought Dubček was operating on orders from Moscow. However, seeing the tanks rolling into Czechoslovakia impelled them to quickly change their stance. Indeed, in September *Zpravodaj* claimed that the intervention had been planned well in advance in order to catch any in-party traitors red-handed. It is important to note that this idea had never appeared in *Zpravodaj*’s previous reporting and was thus a last-minute justification that could make sense in the context of its previous line of argumentation.³⁹

Piskačová puts the coverage here in a broader context by analyzing the historical references employed by both newspapers. Overall, she shows that *Zpravodaj* depicts the events in Prague as an isolated case of a refined strategy to concentrate power in the hands of Moscow. While the conservatives viewed the 1956 uprising in Budapest as a “proper” attempt at revolution, what was happening in their country was interpreted as an inside job.⁴⁰ *Americké Listy*, on the other hand, did not shy away from contextualizing the Prague Spring in historical terms. They remembered other decisive years in Czechoslovak history. Drawing comparisons to 1848 and 1918, *Americké Listy* declared peaceful revolutions to be something typical for the Czechoslovak nation and argued that this tradition was making a comeback in 1968. Yet, there was also another decisive year that was not viewed at all positively: 1938 when the Munich Agreement took place.⁴¹ It is in this context that Piskačová brings in a quote from *Americké Listy* that reverberated throughout our entire project. Only shortly after the invasion, the newspaper published an article titled “The New Munich?” in which it presented the following statement: “Munich 1938, March 1939, Yalta, Teheran, Prague February 1948, Budapest 1956, and August 1968....In all of these cases, freedom was sold out. In all of these cases, small countries were strangled by larger ones under tacit approval of the free world.”⁴² Whatever hopes the Czechoslovak exiles and their press had for the reforms occurring in their home country, they were crushed by the invasion of August 21, 1968. Fortunately, this act of violence did not claim nearly as many lives as its Budapest predecessor in 1956. Still, as Piskačová notes, in the course of one year, about 80,000 Czechs and Slovaks left their country. And while it is true that the exile press in the United States had made valuable contributions to the discussion about the most recent events, most of the new Czechoslovak refugees decided to stay in western Europe.

The Project’s Launch Party in October 2018

The articles summarized here offer only brief insight into the scope of our research. We have all shared in the complex process of academic research with all of its challenges.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Translated from German by the authors of this article as per Piskačová, “Gefährlicher Optimismus.” Originally from “Nový Mnichov?” *Americké Listy*, August 30, 1968, 1.

While some newspapers were readily available, others were not, and students had to find creative ways to examine their chosen subject of research. Indeed, the projects about the Hungarian and Italian press and the Czechoslovak newspapers in exile were all part of a bigger picture. “Sprung ins Ungewisse” not only allows for the comparison of different responses to the Prague Spring but also sheds light on the internal divisions within countries such as in Italy or even within the exile communities as in the United States.

To present our research to the outside world, we held a public launch party in October 2018. At the art nouveau mansion, Seidlvilla, in Munich, we performed a dramatic rendering of our results.⁴³ Standing in a semicircle, we read original quotes from the papers we studied following the course of the year 1968. Using dramatic music specially composed for the occasion, we managed to transfix the audience. The hall brimmed with tension. Quotation after quotation, date after date, we created an illusion of urgency, rhetorically building up to a true moment of crisis. When Hungary and the Soviet Union moved forward to list names of Communist politicians in unison, the audience gasped in unanticipated surprise.⁴⁴ At the end, everyone stepped forward shouting frantically the alarming headlines of August 22. The audience was left only with the following—almost timid sounding—words: “It’s over. And probably for a long, long time, it’s over.”⁴⁵

The performance was well received, as was the panel discussion held afterwards. Journalist Michael Frank from Munich and literary scholar H el ene Leclerc from the University of Toulouse presented different takes on the media during the Prague Spring. While Leclerc concentrated on Czechoslovak periodicals produced for a Western audience, Frank, who was an aspiring journalist at the time of the events, related his personal encounters. Towards the end, he addressed us, the younger generation in the audience and on stage, making a case for the importance of free speech and our duty to protect it whenever threatened. Afterwards, we did indeed speak freely. Over wine and snacks we discussed with our guests the results of the project as well as our experience. We delighted in the great feedback we had received when the presentation of “Sprung ins Ungewisse” came to a close.

A Look Back

When registering for a master’s program, students tend to possess high expectations, hoping for academic excellence, an inspiring environment, or a knowledgeable and obliging mentor. When we registered for the Elite Graduate Program in East European Studies, we all likely shared these hopes. A project like “Sprung ins Ungewisse” is an integral part of the program. The idea sounded relatively simple: Write a text or two, put it on a website, present it to an audience. However, the overall experience was completely different.

⁴³ “Sprung ins Ungewisse,” Seidlvilla, accessed June 18, 2019, <http://www.seidlvilla.de/programm-detail/events/1404.html>.

⁴⁴ We indeed ended up occasionally referring to each other by the countries we had analyzed.

⁴⁵ Quoted after the unpublished script of the performance. German original: “Jetzt ist alles aus. Und f ur lange, lange Zeit wahrscheinlich aus.”

Firstly, the organization of a project of this scale was far from easy. Although we were guided and supported by Dr. Christiane Brenner and Prof. Dr. Martin Schulze Wessel, we soon spread our wings and took charge of the process. A mistake? Admittedly, the different teams were not always communicating well and more than once we had to pull the emergency break and start from scratch. Still, although it was an uphill battle, in the end we succeeded. To illustrate this experience, let us tell you about our experience as editors. If anyone had told us beforehand that *reading* the texts would not be the problem, we probably would have laughed. The real struggle however was *willing* the texts into being. To this day a fellow student delights in teasing Fabian with a voice message she saved, in which he pleaded with her to produce literally anything as the deadline had already passed by a considerable margin. In the end she did—and with good results.

Secondly, putting together a project like this can be incredibly rewarding. When we had finally received all the texts, the workload did not diminish, but suddenly our goal started to materialize on the horizon. While we edited, some planned the presentation, others advertised the website and the event. A graphic designer produced a visually appealing poster featuring an original photograph of Alexander Dubček in swimming trunks, complementing the idea of Czechoslovakia's "Leap into the Unknown." As the presentation in October drew nearer, everything fell into place. The location was easy to secure, the panelists were willing to come from near and far, and the website began to take its expected shape.

The project has assured us that any task can be both difficult and wonderful simultaneously. Indeed, we also learned that teamwork encompasses both controversy and compromise. We argued a lot but nevertheless always found a solution. But most of all, we learned that any project must be judged both by its results and by the complex process of development. Were we to judge the Prague Spring exclusively by its result, we would have to despair. However, by examining the liberalization process we were allowed to at least glimpse the astonishing human quest for a free and humane future.