

A Fait Accompli: The Prague Spring, Warsaw Pact Invasion, and the United States' Reaction, 1968

The Prague Spring and subsequent Warsaw Pact invasion was a major watershed moment of the Cold War. However, the entire ordeal is little more than a footnote in the historiography of American involvement in the Cold War. The reaction of the United States was negligible but to dismiss it outright ignores an important sequence of events. These events illustrate the complicated nature of Cold War diplomacy.

Imperative to this research project is the importance of the Prague Spring. The liberal reforms of Czechoslovak leader Alexander Dubcek and the crucial geographic position of Czechoslovakia made the Prague Spring a potentially lethal threat to Moscow and the Eastern Bloc. Negotiations between the Johnson administration and the Soviets concerning strategic arms limitations, the earliest stages of SALT talks, put the Johnson administration in a bind. The Johnson administration was distracted with SALT talks and missed, or disregarded, the signs that the Soviet led Eastern Bloc was preparing to invade Czechoslovakia. The Warsaw Pact invasion commenced on August 21, 1968, and armed forces from Poland, Hungary, East Germany, Bulgaria, and the Soviet Union quickly crushed the Prague Spring.

It is ironic that the crackdown on the Prague Spring caused the collapse of the talks—it was the Prague Spring that the Johnson administration had been ignoring in order to pursue an arms limitation treaty. Johnson himself admitted that the SALT treaty would have been his administration's greatest success. Those talks were cancelled in response to the Warsaw Pact invasion, which was the harshest condemnation the US could muster. The Prague Spring was sacrificed for détente, but the lack of further and more public condemnation of the invasion

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paved the way for SALT negotiations to resume under President Richard Nixon's administration in the following years.

At first glance, the response of the United States to the Warsaw Pact invasion is trifling. However, this research project has concluded that the Johnson administration could do little in its reaction to the invasion. It had been distracted with SALT negotiations and the possibility of an arms limitation treaty. Consequently the Johnson administration had to sacrifice both—a quiet but meaningful response to the Warsaw Pact invasion.

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