H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Miklos Kun. *Prague Spring–Prague Fall: Blank Spots of 1968.* Budapest: Akademiai Kiado, 1999. xii + 252 pp. $60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-963-05-7608-6.

Reviewed by Bradley Abrams (Department of History, Columbia University)

Published on HABSBURG (May, 2000)

Filling in the Blank Spots

Since the "Velvet Revolution" of 1989, historians have had unprecedented access to archival collections relating to the attempt to reform communism and create "socialism with a human face" in Czechoslovakia in 1968. The ways in which this attempt failed, and the reasons why it brought military intervention by the armed forces of the USSR, East Germany, Hungary, Bulgaria and Poland, have been the focal points of several recent studies and collections of documents.[1] With such intensive research already completed, it might seem that the major issues have been satisfactorily resolved. This is largely the case, with two important provisos. In the sphere of intervention, final judgment cannot be pronounced until the Russian government fully opens its archives on the events of 1968; in domestic affairs, a study of the development of Czechoslovak society beyond politicians and intellectuals is sorely needed. Until Moscow becomes more forthcoming, and some enterprising scholar takes on the broader social question, it appears that there is little to be added to our picture besides details.

It is these details that Miklos Kun, professor of Central and Eastern European History at Eotvos Lorand University in Budapest, attempts to provide in his *Prague Spring – Prague Fall.* Drawn to the topic from a personal interest in determining whether there was an alternative to intervention, Kun carried out interviews with leading figures from the times. Over the course of nearly a decade, he spoke with ten men of varying prominence: Stepan Chervonenko (the Soviet Ambassador in Prague), Vaclav Slavik (a member of the Presidium and Secretariat of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (CPCz)), Gennady Fominov (the Czechoslovak desk officer for the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU)), Vasil Bilak (the conservative CPCz Presidium and Secretariat member), Piotr (Petro) Shelest (the xenophobic and anti-Semitic First Secretary of the Ukrainian Communist Party and a member of the CPSU Central Committee and Presidium), Alexander Mayorov (the commander of the Soviet forces that invaded Czechoslovakia), Alexandr Yakovlev (the chief ideologist of perestroika and glasnost who served as the head of a special "agitprop" force sent to Czechoslovakia in the wake of the invasion), Bohumil Simon (a reform-minded economist who served on the CPCz Presidium), Venek Silhan (the man elected First Secretary of the CPCz

at the Extraordinary 14th Party Congress while Dubcek was in his Moscow Captivity), and Ludvik Vaculik (the writer and author of the famous "Two Thousand Words").

The result of these conversations is a careful comparison of these men's recollections with the archival evidence, and a considerable amount of new detail, but nothing that fundamentally alters our picture of the period. As we have long known, Polish leader Wladyslaw Gomulka and East German leader Walter Ulbricht urged intervention early and often, while the Hungarian leader, Janos Kadar, was more receptive to the Czechoslovak experiment. Similarly, our picture of Brezhnev's wavering through the early summer is not altered, but is reinforced by Chervonenko's testimony. Our understanding of the timing of the intervention, intended to pre-empt the Extraordinary 14th Party Congress of the CPCz at which conservatives were likely to be replaced by Dubcek-style reformers, is also unaffected.

So what is new here? Frist of all, there is consensus among Chervoneneko, Fominov and Bilak that Brezhnev did say "Eto vashe delo" (It is your affair), or words to that effect, to leading Czechoslovak communists during his visit to Prague in December of 1967 in reference to Novotny's possible ouster. Further, there is evidence that the Soviets became concerned about Dubcek already in January, as a result of his failure to pay an expected visit to Moscow. More seriously, Mayorov claims to have received a copy of a map bearing the legend "The advance of armed forces into the territory of the Socialist Republic of Czechoslovakia to halt, or, if necessary, to crush the counterrevolution in the country" already on 12 April 1968. This is an earlier date than many have proposed, although even earlier dates for initial Soviet invasion planning have also been tendered.[2]

Beyond these matters, Kun offers little new. What does come out is evidence of the personalities of the men concerned, and Kun does a commendable job of footnoting both the agreements and disagreements between the testimonies of his interlocutors and the agreements and disagreements of these testimonies with the archival record. This is especially evident in reading the comments of Shelest and Bilak, whose memories and (perhaps deliberate) mis-memories of certain key events come into serious conflict. One such flashpoint arises over Bilak's denial that he held a secret meeting with Shelest at Kadar's villa in Balatonliga prior to the Cierna nad Tisou meeting between Czechoslovak and Soviet leaders, in which he "poured out his heart" about the "open counterrevolution" in Prague, although apparently at that time refusing to offer a letter inviting Warsaw Pact military intervention.[3] Further divergence concerns Bilak's eventual handing of just such a letter to a KGB colonel in a public toilet during the early August Bratislava meeting.[4]

Perhaps the richest part of the book consists of Kun's own reflections on the course of the 1968 events in the epilogue. Here he contributes information hinting at the reasons for the opposition to Dubcek among Eastern European leaders. As we have long known, Gomulka was concerned about the effects the Czechoslovak experiment was having on Polish society, and Todor Zhivkov slavishly followed the line from Moscow, becoming harsher as the spring wore on. Kun contributes novel information gleaned from Hungarian archives on Ulbricht and Kadar, however.

His findings support the notion that the Czechoslovak attempt to open relations with the Federal Republic of Germany, related to the Hungarians by Lubomir Strougal, clearly influenced Ulbricht's outbursts against Dubcek. Kadar, long judged to have been sympathetic to the Czechoslovak reform, comes out tarnished. Kun shows that, before his many "spontaneous discussions" with Dubcek, the Hungarian leader "discussed the main issues with Brezhnev over the phone or through mediators, and gave a detailed report afterwards," even serving as a conduit for "things that would have been awkward for Brezhnev to say."(p. 220) What seems to have finally drawn Kadar into line with the others was the simultaneous publication of the "Two Thousand Words," which he saw as clearly "counterrevolutionary," and an article commending Imre Nagy, which he took "virtually as a slap on the face."(pp. 229-30)

In conclusion, Kun has provided us with an incremental advance in our knowledge of the Czechoslovak crisis, but little more. His effort is, ultimately, quite entertaining for those, like myself, who are historians of twentieth-century Eastern Europe. For those whose specialties lie further afield, however, the book will prove less enticing.

Notes

[1]. Among the most important recent publications in English are Jiri Valenta, *Soviet Intervention in Czechoslovakia, 1968: Anatomy of a Decision* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1991) and Kieran Williams' fine *The Prague Spring and its Aftermath* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Both rely heavily on archival materials made available after 1989. Many of these documents

have been published by the Institute for Contemporary History (Ustav pro soudobe dejiny) in Prague, in the series *Prameny k dejinam ceskoslovenske krize 1967-1970*. A selection from the three-volume set of documents relating to international aspects of the crisis, particularly the decision to invade, is available in English in Jaromir Navratil, chief editor. *The Prague Spring 1968: A National Security Archive Documents Reader* (Budapest: Central European University Press; distributed in the United States by Cornell University Press and elsewhere by Plymbridge Distributors, 1998). The present reviewer's assessment of this document collection can be found at `http://www.h-net.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=11490928517680`

[2]. The resolution of the debate will obviously require access to Russian archives. To my knowledge, the earliest dates have been suggested by Ivan Pataky, "Zatiahnutie Madarska a Madarskej ludovej armady do agresie proti Ceskoslovensku v roku 1968," *Historie a vojenstvi*- 42 (1993) 54-69 and Antonin Bencik, *Operace "Dunaj". Vojaci a Prazske jaro 1968* (Praha: Ustav pro soudobe dejiny AV CR, 1994.) Kun suggests, without citation, that the "Soviet general staff had been working on the draft plans for the invasion since the end of February 1968."

[3]. The meeting most assuredly took place on 20-21 July 1968. See pp. 71-3 for Kun's use of Hungarian archives to establish this.

[4]. Several letters of invitation are said to exist, signed by varying groups of Czech and Slovak opponents of reform. In a clear act of dissimulation, Bilak hints that the letter in question, which was given to Czechoslovak president Vaclav Havel by Russian President Boris Yeltsin in July 1992, is a forgery, asking "what kind of paper it was written on; is it Czechoslovak or Soviet made?" (p. 90) Shelest's recollections are largely excerpted from his diary, sections of which have already been made available in English. See Mark Kramer, ed., "Ukraine and the Soviet-Czechoslovak Crisis of 1968 (Part 1): New Evidence from the Diary of Petro Shelest," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 10 (1998) 234-47.

Citation: Bradley Abrams. Review of Kun, Miklos, *Prague Spring–Prague Fall: Blank Spots of 1968*. HABSBURG, H-Net Reviews. May, 2000.

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