Czechoslovakia, 1968 - Prague Spring

Jan 1968 - Czech communists elect a new leader → Alexander Dubcek
Dubcek liberalized Czech communism
- freedom of speech
- criticism of political leaders allowed
- the role of the party was strictly limited in Dubcek's "Action Programme"
- gov't censorship abolished (June '68)
- still loyal to the "Socialist camp" and still remained in the Warsaw Pact
  → Soviets 'nervous' → army manoeuvres held just outside Czech borders.

Aug 20, 1968 → Soviet tanks roll into Czech.
  Poland, E. Germ, Hungary and Bulgaria also take part.
  Dubcek arrested and taken to Moscow in handcuffs.
  Czechs were outraged, but powerless to resist.

Leonid Brezhnev → Brezhnev Doctrine: "If hostile forces try to turn any member away from the "Socialist camp" in favour of capitalism it is the duty of the other members
the Soviet leadership had lost confidence in Dubcek’s ability to maintain the Communist Party’s power in Czechoslovakia. Ulbricht of East Germany and Gomulka of Poland had urged Brezhnev to use force.

Dubcek and several other Czech leaders were arrested and taken to Moscow. After agreeing to end political reform, Dubcek was allowed to return to Czechoslovakia where for the time being he remained in power. In April 1969 he was replaced by Gustav Husak, a less reform-minded politician. Dubcek was expelled from the Communist Party in 1970 amidst an extensive purge of the party membership. The USA and its Western allies publicly condemned the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia but, just as in 1956 when Hungary was invaded, took no action; the USA was bogged down in the Vietnam War and so could not contemplate confronting the USSR in Europe and the West accepted that the Eastern bloc was a Soviet sphere of influence.

The Brezhnev Doctrine

In November 1968, at a congress of the Polish Communist Party, Brezhnev issued a justification of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia which became known as the “Brezhnev Doctrine”. In his statement, Brezhnev argued that the USSR and other socialist states had the right and duty to intervene in a country where socialism was threatened; in other words, a threat to socialism in one country constituted a threat to socialism everywhere.

Détente

As explained earlier, after the East-West confrontations over Berlin and Cuba in the early 1960s, superpower relations improved considerably at the end of the 1960s. The state of superpower relations in the 1970s is usually described as one of détente: this means a relaxation of tension. During this period there were five face-to-face summit meetings by the leaders of the USA and the USSR and a number of important agreements designed to slow down the nuclear arms race. That does not mean that there were no confrontations between the superpowers during these years, nor that the two superpowers stopped trying to increase their global influence at each other’s expense. By the end of the 1970s relations deteriorated sharply and some historians talk of a “Second Cold War” in the 1980s until, from 1986, the Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev’s policy of glasnost substantially improved the international climate and brought a final end to the Cold War.

Why did the superpowers pursue détente in the late 1960s and the 1970s?

a) Soviet motives

1. The USSR was keen to prevent a further escalation of the arms race. The Soviet leadership was genuinely concerned about the danger of a nuclear war and was anxious to reduce the cost of its weapons programme. Prior to the 1970s, the USSR was not interested in a deal with the USA to freeze nuclear missile stocks because the USSR was well behind the USA in terms of missiles; a freeze under those circumstances would mean accepting a position of inferiority. By 1970 the USSR had closed the missile gap - the USSR had 1,300 ICBMs (Intercontinental ballistic missiles) to the USA’s 1,054.
2. The Soviet economy was stagnating. Leonid Brezhnev, the Soviet leader, saw in détente a way to make it possible to reduce defence spending in order to allow greater economic investment.

3. The Soviet leadership wanted to improve East-West relations in order to encourage East-West trade. By the end of the 1960s the USSR realised there was a need for greater emphasis on consumer good production and technical innovation; the USSR needed Western technology.

4. The USSR was worried by its deteriorating relations with China and by the improvement in Sino-American relations from 1971.

b) American motives

1. To reduce the risk of nuclear war.

2. President Nixon (1969-74) and Henry Kissinger (National Security Adviser, 1969-73 & Secretary of State, 1973-77) pursued a policy of "linkage" - that is they sought to deter the USSR from following an expansionist foreign policy by providing the USSR with incentives, such as economic aid, to maintain better relations with the USA.


4. Nixon was worried about the impact of the spiralling cost of the arms race and of the Vietnam War on the US economy. The US economy was in recession from 1973.

A prelude to détente: Willy Brandt's Ostpolitik, 1969-74

Before US-Soviet détente really got going in the early 1970s, the West German Chancellor, Willy Brandt, did much to improve East-West relations through his Ostpolitik (eastern policy). From 1969, he developed relations with the USSR, East Germany and the Eastern bloc generally:

August 1970. Soviet-West German Non-Aggression Pact which formally ended the war (WW2) between the USSR and Germany.

December 1970. West German-Polish Treaty. West Germany formally recognised Poland's western border (Poland had been given part of eastern Germany at the end of WW2 in order to compensate it for its failure to regain the part of eastern Poland taken by the USSR in 1939).

December 1972. East German-West German Basic Treaty - an agreement which stopped short of full diplomatic recognition but did much to regularise relations between the two states.
The Brezhnev Era (1964-1982)

- Took part in efforts to oust Khrushchev and became new leader.
- Khrushchev had tried to put the USSR on a new path of more political and economic liberalization but Brezhnev returned to a more conservative Stalinist regime.
- Initially his economic plans yielded results but by the late 1970s the economy was beginning its final downward spiral due largely to arms race and lack of productivity.
- Took an aggressive stance towards satellite nations.
- 1966-1968 the Czechs were developing a program that allowed for some economic liberalization and political discussion. Censorship rules were relaxed.
- Reforms reached a high point in 1968 under the leadership of Alexander Dubcek (Prague Spring).
- Brezhnev feared that the Czechs were moving too far to the right and the Communist Party would lose control like in 1956 Hungary.
- He gathered leaders from other satellite states and they agreed to use Warsaw Pact forces to invade Czechoslovakia and crush Dubcek.
- They succeed and arrest many Czech leaders – a pro-Moscow government under Gustav Husak takes over.
- The West criticizes this but not in a position to intervene and risk war – Americans were occupied with Vietnam.
- Brezhnev Doctrine – USSR and other countries had the right to intervene a country where socialism was threatened. A threat to socialism in one country constituted a threat to socialism everywhere.
- This was criticized by Chinese and Yugoslavians as “social imperialism”
- Soviets and Americans had some other areas of conflict in Africa and in the Middle East but Afghanistan was biggest issue.

Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan 1979

- Afghanistan had experienced a revolution in 1978 where a leftist government had been victorious (PDPA).
• PDPA developed a close relationship with the USSR, signing a cooperative friendship treaty in 1978.
• There was lots of division within the party and a growing opposition force made up of Islamic fundamentalists who resented Soviets on nationalist and religious grounds.
• Guerrilla fighters called the Mujahedeen created problems due to their knowledge of terrain and radicalism.
• Soviets sent 85,000 troops into Afghanistan – feared an Islamist revolution would encourage Muslims within USSR to rebel.
• This war can also be described as a result of the Brezhnev doctrine and Soviet confidence after American defeat in Vietnam.
• Americans supported Mujahedeen with financial aid and weapons. Americans boycotted Moscow Olympics and increased defence spending.

Results

• Soviets defeated – used similar tactics to USA in Vietnam and shared a similar fate
• Mujahedeen is victorious but leads to inner fighting between moderates and extremists like Taliban for control
• Ends a period of relative détente and launches the second phase of the Cold War characterized by aggressive policies of Reagan and Thatcher against the USSR.