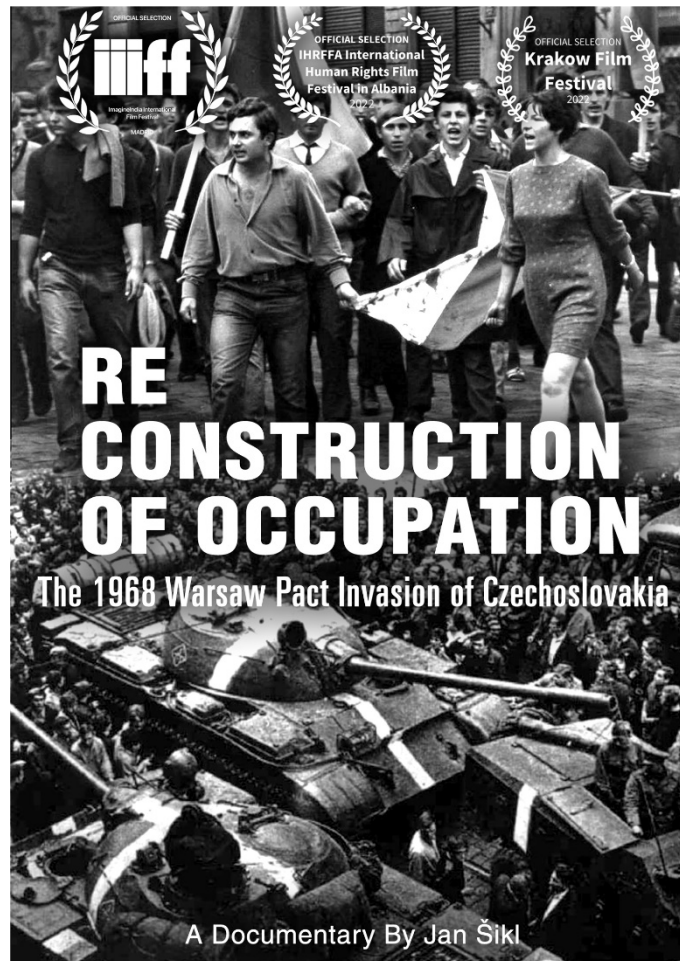




RECONSTRUCTION OF OCCUPATION



STUDY GUIDE

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Reconstruction of Occupation

For 30 years, director Jan Šikl has collected amateur films from families in his community. Then one day, he was brought archival materials—films shot by Czech military cameramen—which had remained hidden for over half a century. Jan accomplishes what seems impossible; he searches for the people immortalized in the footage—soldiers, students, and workers. Memories of specific events are vividly brought back to life, portraying history and its relevance to the present.

Czechoslovakia

Czechoslovakia was a country in central Europe that was created in 1918—after World War I—from parts of the Austria-Hungary empire. It was bordered by Austria, Hungary, Romania, Poland, Germany, and the Soviet Union. Czechoslovakia existed until 1993, when it split into two countries; Slovakia and the Czech Republic. Its capital city was Prague, which is currently the capital of the Czech Republic. At present, the Czech Republic has a population of more than 10 million people. The population of Czechoslovakia was larger than that.

Communism in Czechoslovakia

In 1948, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, with the support of the Soviet Union, took over Czechoslovakia's government. The government remained under communist control until 1989. Under communism in Czechoslovakia, the freedom of the population was restricted in many ways. For instance, the media was tightly controlled, farms and businesses were nationalized, and there were restrictions on travel and freedom of expression. People who spoke out against communism were often punished. The country's economy also suffered under the Communist Party. By the 1960s, many Czechoslovakians were unhappy with the state of their country.

Dubček and Attempted Reforms

In January 1968, the country's leader, Antonín Novotný was replaced by Alexander Dubček, who became the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. Dubček tried to liberalize Czechoslovakia's government and economy in what has been referred to as "socialism with a human face." This included loosening a number of restrictions on civil liberties and encouraging non-Communists to take part in the government. This period of time is also referred to as the Prague Spring. It was short-lived, ending in August 1968 when the country was invaded by Soviet forces.

Czechoslovakia was part of an alliance known as the Warsaw Pact, which was a defense treaty between a number of communist countries in Europe. The members of this pact were: Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union, Albania, Bulgaria, East Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Romania. When Czechoslovakia tried to institute reforms, the other members of the Pact worried that more countries would follow Czechoslovakia's example, which could lead to rebellion against communist rule. They decided to intervene and put a more conservative government in power that would follow pro-Soviet policies.

1968 Invasion

In August 1968, troops from the Soviet Union and other Warsaw Pact nations invaded Czechoslovakia. The invasion took place on the night of August 20, 1968. Troops from the Soviet Union, Poland, Hungary, East Germany, and Bulgaria entered Czechoslovakia. They took control of radio and television stations. Large numbers of Czechs protested in the streets—including in Wenceslas Square in Prague—and it is estimated that more than 100 were killed. The invasion was condemned by a number of other countries, but nothing was done. From then until the fall of communism in 1969, significant number of Czechs left their country.

As part of the invasion, Dubček and other leaders were sent to Moscow, where they were temporarily detained. Dubček was forced to resign in 1969 and was replaced by pro-Soviet leader Gustav Husak. Dubček's reforms were repealed and he was ultimately exiled from Czechoslovakia, first as an ambassador to Turkey and then as a forestry official in Slovakia. When the Communist Party gave up power in 1989, he returned to politics and was elected chairman of the Federal Assembly. He died in a car accident in 1992.

Jan Palach

Jan Palach was a 20-year-old Czechoslovakian university student. On January 16, 1969 he walked into Wenceslas Square in Prague, poured gasoline over his head, and set himself on fire. Bystanders quickly smothered the fire with their coats and Palach was taken to the hospital, but he died three days later. His action was intended as a protest against the invasion. In a letter that he left behind, he explained, "As our nation is living in a desperate situation, and its reconciliation with fate has reached its utmost stage, we have decided that in this way we will express our protest and shake the conscience of the nation."¹ Two other people committed suicide by setting themselves on fire soon after Palach. Jan Zajíc did so in February 1969, in the same location. In April, in the town of Jihlava, Evžen Plocek set himself on fire. There is a memorial to Palach in Wenceslas Square. A number of streets and places in the Czech Republic and in other countries, are named after him.

After the 1968 Invasion

Czechoslovakia remained under communist control until 1989, when there were widespread protests against communism in Europe and communist regimes started to crumble in multiple countries. In November 1989, shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall in Germany, students gathered in Prague to protest, and that event set off a country-wide revolution in Czechoslovakia which ended communist rule. This is often referred to as the Velvet Revolution. Husak resigned as president and was replaced by writer and political dissident Václav Havel. In 1993, the Czech and Slovak areas of Czechoslovakia separated peacefully into Slovakia and the Czech Republic. Havel became the first president of the Czech Republic.

¹ <https://praguemorning.cz/jan-palach-immolation/>

Study Questions

1. What kinds of things does the recovered film footage show about what life was like during the 1968 occupation of Czechoslovakia?
2. How did the Czechoslovakian people feel about the occupation, as shown in the footage?
3. Why do you think the filmmaker decided to show this footage to the public?
4. How do you think viewing and discussing this footage has been beneficial to the Czechoslovakian people?
5. Do you think that the discovery of this film has changed the way people see the occupation? Explain why or why not.

Additional Resources

Books

- Thomas K. Murphy, *Czechoslovakia Behind the Curtain: Life, Work and Culture in the Communist Era*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2018.
- Josef Pazderka, ed., *The Soviet Invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968: the Russian Perspective*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019.
- Kieran Williams, *The Prague Spring and Its Aftermath: Czechoslovak Politics, 1968-1970*. Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Online Resources

- Matthew Frost, "Czech Republic: A Chronology of Events Leading to The 1968 Invasion," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, August 9, 1998.
<https://www.rferl.org/a/1089303.html>
- Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State, "Soviet Invasion of Czechoslovakia, 1968,"
<https://history.state.gov/milestones/1961-1968/soviet-invasion-czechoslovakia>
- Prague Morning, "Jan Palach's Self-Immolation: 55 Years Ago," January 15, 2024.
<https://praguemorning.cz/jan-palach-immolation/>
- Radio Prague International, "'It Still Impacts Czech Opinion on Russia': The 1968 Invasion of Czechoslovakia," August 20, 2022.
<https://english.radio.cz/it-still-impacts-czech-opinion-russia-1968-invasion-czechoslovakia-8759138>
- Richard Severo, "Alexander Dubcek, 70, Dies in Prague," *New York Times*, November 9, 1992.
<https://www.nytimes.com/1992/11/09/obituaries/alexander-dubcek-70-dies-in-prague.html>
- Erin Schachtner, "Prague Spring," Czech Center Museum Houston, January 29, 2021.
<https://www.czechcenter.org/blog/prague-spring>

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