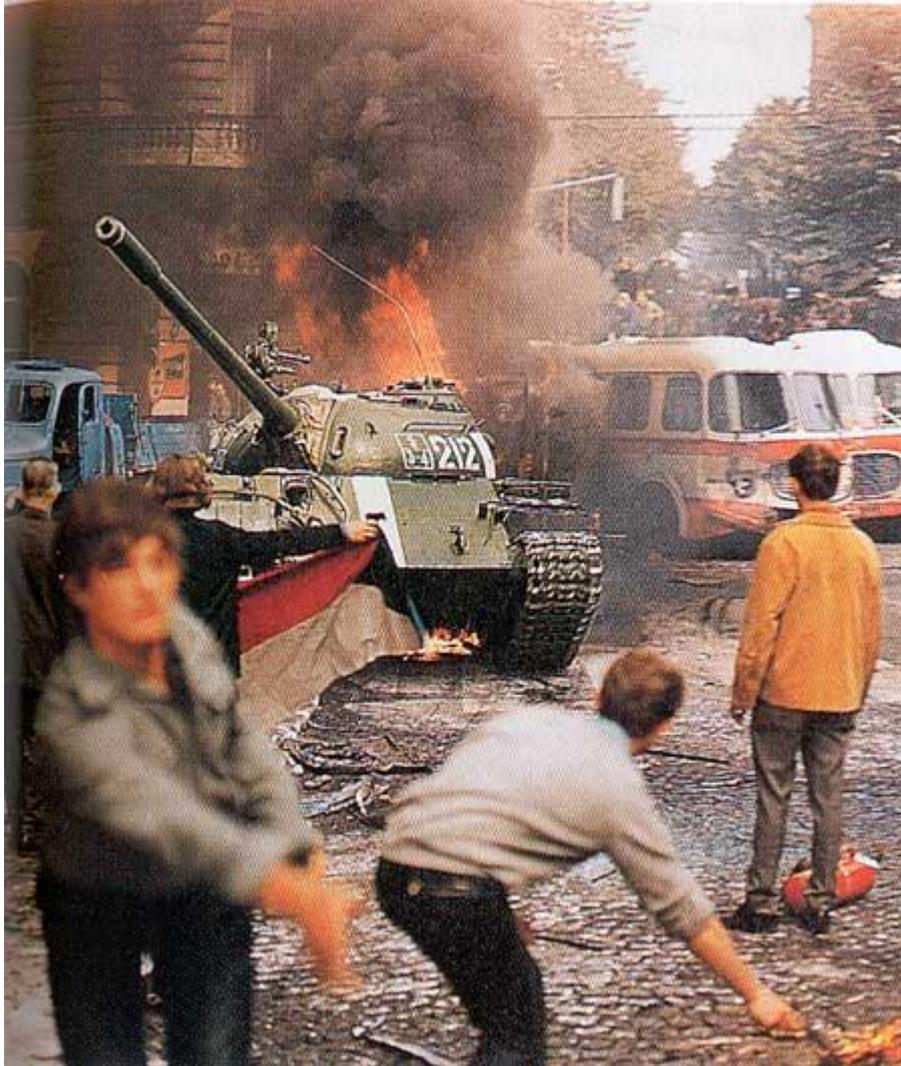


Reform and counterreform in the bureaucratic bloc: Czechoslovakia 1968



Article by the Situationist International about the Prague Spring, 1968.

It could almost be said that the history of the last twenty years has set itself the sole task of refuting Trotsky's analyses concerning the bureaucracy. Victim of a sort of "class subjectivism," Trotsky refused throughout his life to recognize in Stalinist practice anything but a temporary deviation of a usurping stratum, a "Thermidorian reaction." As an ideologue of the Bolshevik revolution, he was unable to become a theorist of proletarian revolution at the time of the Stalinist restoration. By refusing to recognize the bureaucracy in power for what it is, namely a new exploiting class, this Hegel of the revolution betrayed rendered himself incapable of making a genuine critique of it. The theoretical and practical impotence of Trotskyism (in all its variants) is largely attributable to this original sin of the master.

In *Enragés and Situationists in the Occupations Movement* (chapter 1) we said, a month before the Russian invasion: "The bureaucratic appropriation of society is inseparable from a totalitarian possession of the state and from the exclusive reign of its ideology. The present rights of free expression and association and the absence of censorship in Czechoslovakia will in the very near future lead to one of these two alternatives: either a repression, which

will reveal the sham character of these concessions; or a proletarian assault against the bureaucratic ownership of the state and the economy, which ownership will be unmasked as soon as the dominant ideology is deprived for any length of time of its omnipresent police. The outcome of such a conflict is of the greatest concern for the Russian bureaucracy, whose very survival would be threatened by a victory of the Czech workers." The first alternative was effected by the intervention of "Soviet" tanks. The basis of Moscow's total domination over the "socialist" countries was this golden rule proclaimed and practiced by the Russian bureaucracy: "Socialism must not go further than our army." Wherever that army has been the main force installing "Communist" parties in power, it has the last word each time its former protégés manifest any leanings toward independence that might endanger the totalitarian bureaucratic domination. The Russian socioeconomic system has been from the beginning the ideal type for the new bureaucratic regimes. But fidelity to this archetype has often conflicted with the specific requirements of the particular dominated societies; since the ruling-class interests of each satellite bureaucracy do not necessarily coincide with those of the Russian bureaucracy, interbureaucratic relations have always contained underlying conflicts. Caught between the hammer and the anvil, the satellite bureaucracies always end up clinging to the hammer as soon as proletarian forces demonstrate their desire for autonomy. In Poland or Hungary, as recently in Czechoslovakia, the national bureaucratic "revolt" never goes beyond replacing one bureaucrat with another.

As the first industrialized state conquered by Stalinism, Czechoslovakia has over the last twenty years occupied a "privileged" position in the international system of exploitation set up by the Russians after 1949, in the framework of the "socialist division of labor" directed by the Comecon. The naked totalitarianism of the Stalin era meant that upon their coming to power the Czech Stalinists could do nothing but servilely imitate the "universal socialist system." But in contrast to the other bureaucratic countries, where there was a real need for economic development and industrialization, the level of productive forces in Czechoslovakia was in complete contradiction with the objectives of the economic program of the new regime. After fifteen years of irrational bureaucratic management the Czech economy was on the brink of catastrophe, and its reform became a matter of life and death for the ruling class. This was the root of the "Prague Spring" and the adventurous liberalization attempted by the bureaucracy. But before going into the analysis of this "bureaucratic reform," let us orient ourselves by examining its origins in the purely Stalinist (or Novotnyist) period.

After the [1948] Prague coup, the integration of Czechoslovakia into the Eastern bloc's almost totally self-contained economic system made it the main victim of Russian domination. Since it was the most developed country it had to bear the costs of industrializing its neighbors, themselves yoked under a policy of superexploitation. After 1950 the totalitarian planning, with its emphasis on metallurgical and engineering industries, introduced a serious imbalance into the functioning of the economy which steadily grew worse. In 1966 investment in Czech heavy industry reached 47%, the highest rate in the world. This was because Czechoslovakia had to provide -- at ridiculously low prices that did not even cover the costs of production and the wear and tear of the machinery -- raw materials (in five years the USSR used up fifty years' worth of reserves from the Jachymov uranium deposits in Bohemia) and manufactured goods (machines, armaments, etc.) to the USSR and the other "socialist" countries, and later to the "Third World" countries coveted by the Russians. "Production for production's sake" was the ideology that accompanied this enterprise, the costs of which the workers were the first to bear. As early as 1953, in the wake of a monetary reform, the workers of Pilsen, seeing their wages decreasing and prices rising, revolted and were immediately violently repressed. The consequences of this economic policy were essentially: the Czech economy's increasing dependence on Soviet supplies of

raw materials and fuel; an orientation toward foreign interests; a sharp decline in the standard of living following a decline in real wages; and finally a decline in the national income after 1960 (its growth rate fell from an average of 8.5% from 1950-1960 to 0.7% in 1962). In 1963, for the first time in the history of a "socialist" country, the national income fell rather than rose. This was the alarm signal for the new reform. Ota Sik estimated that investment would have to be quadrupled in order to attain in 1968 the same national income growth as in 1958. From 1963 on it began to be officially admitted that "the national economy of Czechoslovakia is going through a period of serious structural imbalance, with limited inflationary tendencies appearing in all sectors of life and society, notably in foreign trade, the home market and investments" (Czechoslovakian Foreign Trade, October 1968).

Voices began to be heard insisting on the urgency of transforming the economy. Professor Ota Sik and his team began preparing their reform plan, which was to be more or less adopted after 1965 by the upper echelons of the state. The new Ota Sik plan made a rather daring critique of the functioning of the economy over the preceding years. It questioned the Russian tutelage and proposed that the economy be freed from rigid central planning and opened to the world market. To do this it was necessary to go beyond simple reproduction of capital, to put an end to the system of "production for production's sake" (denounced as an antisocialist crime after having been glorified as a fundamental principle of socialism), and to reduce the cost of production and raise the productivity index, which had gone from 7.7% in 1960 to 3.1% in 1962 and had fallen even further in the following years.

This plan, a model of technocratic reform, began to be implemented in 1965 and took full effect from 1967 on. It required a clean break with the administrative methods that had crushed all initiative: giving the producers an "interest" in the results of their work, granting autonomy to the different enterprises, rewarding successes, penalizing failures, encouraging through appropriate technical measures the development of profitable industries and enterprises, and putting the market back on its feet by bringing prices in line with the world market. Resisted by the hidebound administrative cadres, this program was applied only in small doses. The Novotnyist bureaucracy began to see the dangerous implications of such a venture. A temporary rise in prices that was not matched by a corresponding rise in wages enabled this conservative stratum to denounce the project in the eyes of the workers. Novotny himself presented himself as the defender of working-class interests and openly criticized the new measures at a workers meeting in 1967. But the "liberal" wing, aware of the real interests of the bureaucratic regime in Czechoslovakia and sure of the support of the population, joined battle. As a journalist of *Kulturni Tvorba* (5 January 1967) put it, "For the people, the new economic system has become synonymous with the need for change" -- total change. This was the first link in a chain of developments that would inevitably lead to far-reaching social and political changes. The conservative bureaucracy, having no real support to rely on, could only admit its failings and gradually bow out of the political scene: any resistance on its part would have rapidly led to an explosion analogous to that of Budapest in 1956. The June 1967 Fourth Congress of Writers (though writers along with filmmakers had already been allowed a certain margin of artistic freedom) turned into a veritable public indictment of the regime. With their last strength the "conservatives" reacted by excluding a certain number of radical intellectuals from the Party and by putting their journal under direct ministerial control.

But the winds of revolt were blowing harder and harder, and nothing could any longer stem the popular enthusiasm for transforming the prevailing conditions of Czech life. A student demonstration protesting against an electricity shutdown, after being strongly repressed, turned into a meeting leveling accusations against the regime. One of the first discoveries of this meeting, a discovery which was to become the watchword of the whole subsequent

oppositional movement, was the absolute insistence on telling the truth, in contrast to "the incredible contradictions between what is said and what is actually done." In a system based on the constant lies of ideology such a demand becomes quite simply revolutionary; and the intellectuals did not fail to develop its implications to the limit. In the bureaucratic systems, where nothing must escape the party-state totalitarianism, a protest against the slightest detail of life inevitably leads to calling in question the totality of existing conditions, to a human protest against the whole inhuman life that people are forced to lead. Even if it was limited to the Prague University campus, the student demonstration concerned all the alienated aspects of Czech life, which was denounced as unacceptable in the course of the meeting.

The neobureaucracy then took over the leadership of the movement and tried to contain it within the narrow framework of its reforms. In January 1968 an "Action Program" was adopted, marking the rise of the Dubcek team and the removal of Novotny. In addition to Ota Sik's economic plan, now definitively adopted and integrated into this new program, a certain number of political measures were proudly proclaimed by the new leadership. Almost all the formal "freedoms" of bourgeois regimes were guaranteed. This policy, totally unprecedented for a bureaucratic regime, shows how much was at stake and how serious the situation was. The radical elements, taking advantage of these bureaucratic concessions, were to reveal their real purpose as "objectively necessary" measures for safeguarding bureaucratic domination. Smrkovsky, the most liberal of the newly promoted members, naïvely expressed the truth of the bureaucratic liberalism: "Recognizing that even in a socialist society evolution takes place through constant conflicts of interest in the economic, social and political domains, we should seek a system of political guidance that permits the settling of all social conflicts and avoids the necessity for extraordinary administrative interventions." But the new bureaucracy did not realize that by renouncing those "extraordinary interventions," which in reality constitute its only normal manner of governing, it would be leaving its regime open to a merciless radical critique. The freedom of association and of cultural and political expression produced a veritable orgy of critical truth. The notion that the Party's "leading role" should be "naturally and spontaneously recognized, even at the rank-and-file level, based on the ability of its Communist functionaries to work and command" (Action Program) was demolished everywhere, and new demands for autonomous workers' organizations began to be raised. At the end of spring 1968 the Dubcek bureaucracy was giving the ridiculous impression of wanting to have its cake and eat it too. It reaffirmed its intention of maintaining its political monopoly: "If anticommunist elements attempt to attack this historic reality (i.e. the right of the Party to lead), the Party will mobilize all the forces of the people and of the socialist state in order to drive back and extinguish this adventurist attempt" (Resolution of the Central Committee, June 1968). But once the bureaucratic reform had opened participation in decisionmaking to the majority of the Party, how could the great majority outside the Party not also want to decide things for themselves? When those at the top of the state play the fiddle, how can they expect those at the bottom not to start dancing?

From this point on the revolutionary tendencies began to turn their critique toward denunciation of the liberal formalism and its ideology. Until then democracy had been, so to speak, "imposed on the masses" in the same way the dictatorship had been imposed on them, that is, by barring them from any real participation. Everyone knew that Novotny had come to power as a partisan of liberalization; and that a "Gomulka-type regression" constantly threatened the Dubcek movement. A society is not transformed by changing its political apparatus, but by overthrowing it from top to bottom. People thus came to the point of criticizing the Bolshevik conception of the party as leader of the working class, and to demanding an autonomous organization of the proletariat; which would spell a rapid death for the bureaucracy. This is because for the bureaucracy the proletariat must exist only as an

imaginary force; the bureaucracy reduces it -- or tries to reduce it -- to the point of being nothing but an appearance, but it wants this appearance to exist and to believe in its own existence. The bureaucracy bases its power on its formal ideology, but its formal goals become its actual content and it thus everywhere enters into conflict with real goals. Wherever it has seized the state and the economy, wherever the general interest of the state becomes an interest apart and consequently a real interest, the bureaucracy enters into conflict with the proletariat just as every consequence conflicts with the bureaucracy's own presuppositions.

But the oppositional movement following upon the bureaucratic reform only went half way. It did not have time to follow out all its practical implications. The relentless theoretical critique of "bureaucratic dictatorship" and Stalinist totalitarianism had scarcely begun to be taken up autonomously by the great majority of the population when the neobureaucracy reacted by brandishing the specter of the Russian threat, which had already been present from May on. It can be said that the great weakness of the Czechoslovakian movement was that the working class scarcely intervened as an autonomous and decisive force. The themes of "self-management" and "workers councils" included in Ota Sik's technocratic reform did not go beyond the bureaucratic perspective of a Yugoslavian-style "democratic management." This is true even of the alternative project, obviously drafted by unionists, presented on 29 June 1968 by the Wilhelm Pieck factory. The critique of Leninism, presented by "certain philosophers" as being "already a deformation of Marxism since it inherently contains the logic of Stalinism," was not, as the asinine editors of Rouge would have it, "an absurd notion because it ultimately amounts to denying the leading role of the proletariat" (!), but the highest point of theoretical critique attained in a bureaucratic country. Dutschke himself was ridiculed by the revolutionary Czech students, his "anarcho-Maoism" being scornfully rejected as "absurd, laughable and not even deserving the attention of a fifteen-year-old."(1)

All this criticism, which obviously could only lead to the practical calling into question of the class power of the bureaucracy, was tolerated and even sometimes encouraged by the Dubcek regime as long as the latter could coopt it as a legitimate denunciation of "Stalino-Novotnyist errors." The bureaucracy does indeed denounce its own crimes, but always as having been committed by others: it detaches a part of itself and elevates it into an autonomous entity that can be blamed for all the antiproletarian crimes (since the most ancient times, sacrifice has been bureaucracy's favored method for perpetuating its power). In Czechoslovakia, as in Poland and Hungary, nationalism has been the best argument for winning the population's support of the ruling class. The clearer the Russian threat became, the more Dubcek's bureaucratic power was reinforced; his fondest desire would have been for the Warsaw Pact forces to remain indefinitely at the borders. But sooner or later the Czech proletariat would have discovered through struggle that the point is not to know what any given bureaucrat, or even the bureaucracy as a whole, momentarily represents as its goal, but to know what the bureaucracy really is, what it, in conformity with its own nature, will be historically forced to do. And the proletariat would then have taken appropriate action.

It was the fear of such a discovery that haunted the Russian bureaucracy and its satellites. Picture a Russian (or East German) bureaucrat in the midst of this "ideological" panic, how his brain -- as sick as his power -- is tortured, confused, stunned by these cries of independence, workers councils, "bureaucratic dictatorship," and by the conspiracy of workers and intellectuals and their threat to defend their conquests arms in hand, and you will understand how in this clamorous confusion of truth and freedom, of plots and revolution, the Russian bureaucracy could cry out to its Czech counterpart: "Better a fearful end than a fear without end!"

If ever an event had cast its shadow ahead of itself long before it happened, it was, for those who know how to read modern history, the Russian intervention in Czechoslovakia. It was long contemplated and, despite all its international repercussions, virtually inevitable. By bringing into question the omnipotence of bureaucratic power, Dubcek's adventurous -- though necessary -- effort began to imperil this same power wherever it was to be found, and thus became intolerable. Six hundred thousand soldiers (almost as many as the Americans in Vietnam) were sent to put a brutal stop to it. Thus when the "antisocialist" and "counterrevolutionary" forces, continually conjured up and exorcised by all the bureaucrats, finally appeared, they appeared not under the portrait of Benes(2) or armed by "revanchist Germans," but in the uniform of the "Red" Army.

A remarkable popular resistance was carried on for seven days -- "the magnificent seven" -- mobilizing virtually the entire population against the invaders. Paradoxically, clearly revolutionary methods of struggle were taken up for the defense of a reformist bureaucracy. But what was not carried out in the course of the movement could certainly not be carried out under the occupation: the Russian troops, having enabled the Dubcekists to brake the revolutionary process as much as possible while they were at the borders, also enabled them to control the whole resistance movement after August 21. They played exactly the same role the American troops do in North Vietnam: the role of ensuring the masses' unanimous support for the bureaucracy that exploits them.

The first reflex of the people of Prague, however, was to defend not the Palace of the Republic, but the radio station, which was considered the symbol of their main conquest: truth of information against organized falsehood. And what had been the nightmare of all the Warsaw Pact bureaucracies -- the press and the radio -- was to continue to haunt them for another entire week. The Czechoslovakian experience has shown the extraordinary possibilities of struggle that a consistent and organized revolutionary movement will one day have at its disposal. Equipment provided by the Warsaw Pact (in anticipation of a possible imperialist invasion of Czechoslovakia!) was used by the Czech journalists to set up 35 clandestine broadcasting stations linked with 80 emergency backup stations. The Soviet propaganda -- so essential for an occupation army -- was thus totally undermined; and the population was able to keep abreast of just about everything that was happening in the country and to follow the directives of the liberal bureaucrats or of the radical elements that controlled certain stations. For example, in response to a radio appeal aimed at sabotaging the operations of the Russian police, Prague was transformed into a veritable "urban labyrinth" in which all street signs and house numbers were removed and the walls were covered with May 1968-style inscriptions. Defying all the police, Prague became a home of freedom and an example of the revolutionary *détournement* of repressive urbanism. Due to exceptional proletarian organization, all the newspapers were able to be freely printed and distributed under the nose of the Russians who asininely guarded the newspaper offices. Several factories were transformed into printing works turning out thousands of papers and leaflets -- including a counterfeit issue of Pravda in Russian. The 14th Party Congress was able to meet secretly for three days under the protection of the workers of "Auto-Praha." It was this conference that sabotaged "Operation Kadar"(3) and forced the Russians to negotiate with Dubcek. Nevertheless, by using both their troops and the internal contradictions of the Czechoslovakian bureaucracy, the Russians were eventually able to transform the liberal team into a sort of disguised Vichy-type government. Husak, who was thinking of his own future, was the principal agent responsible for canceling the 14th Congress (on the pretext of the absence of the Slovak delegates, who had in fact apparently stayed away on his recommendation). The day after the "Moscow Accords" he declared, "We can accept this

accord, which will enable sensible men (our emphasis) to lead the people out of the present impasse in such a way that they will have no call to feel ashamed in the future."

The Czech proletariat, as it becomes more revolutionary, will have nothing to be ashamed of except its mistake in having trusted Husak, Dubcek or Smrkovsky. It already knows that it can count only on its own forces; and that one after the other Dubcek and Smrkovsky will betray it just as the neobureaucracy collectively betrayed it by yielding to Moscow and falling in line with its totalitarian policy. The emotional attachment to one or another celebrity is a vestige of the miserable era of the proletariat, a vestige of the old world. The November strikes and the suicides somewhat slowed down the process of "normalization," which was not brought to completion until April 1969. By reestablishing itself in its true form, the bureaucratic power became more effectively opposed. The illusions all melted away one after the other and the Czechoslovakian masses' attachment to the reformist bureaucracy disappeared. By rehabilitating the "collaborators" the reformists lost their last chance for any future popular support. The workers' and students' revolutionary consciousness deepened as the repression became more severe. The return to the methods and "narrow, stupid mentality of the fifties" is already provoking violent reactions on the part of the workers and students, whose diverse forms of linking up constitute the main anxiety common to Dubcek, his successor and their joint masters. The workers are proclaiming their "inalienable right to respond to any extreme measures" with their "own extreme countermeasures" (motion by the workers of the CKD to the Minister of Defense, 22 April 1969). The restoration of Stalinism has shown once and for all the illusory character of any bureaucratic reformism and the bureaucracy's congenital inability to "liberalize" its management of society. Its pretense of a "socialism with a human face" is nothing but the introduction of a few "bourgeois" concessions into its totalitarian world; and even these concessions immediately threaten its existence. The only possible humanization of "bureaucratic socialism" is its suppression by the revolutionary proletariat, not by a mere "political revolution," but by the total subversion of existing conditions and the practical dissolution of the Bureaucratic International.

The riots of 21 August 1969 have revealed to what extent ordinary Stalinism has been reestablished in Czechoslovakia, and also to what extent it is threatened by the proletarian critique: ten deaths, 2000 arrests and the threats of expelling or prosecuting the puppet Dubcek have not stopped the national slowdown strike through which the Czech workers are threatening the survival of the economic system of their indigenous and Russian exploiters.

The Russian intervention succeeded in slowing down the objective process of change in Czechoslovakia, but only at a tremendous cost for international Stalinism. The bureaucratic regimes of Cuba and Hanoi, being directly dependent on the "Soviet" state, could only applaud their masters' intervention -- to the great embarrassment of their Trotskyist and surrealist admirers and the high-minded souls of the left. Castro, with a singular cynicism, justified the military intervention at great length as being necessitated by threats of a restoration of capitalism -- thereby unmasking the nature of his own "socialism." Hanoi and the bureaucratic Arab powers, themselves the victims of foreign occupation, push their absurd logic to the point of supporting an analogous aggression because in this case it is carried out by their self-styled protectors.

As for those members of the Bureaucratic International that shed tears over Czechoslovakia, they all did so for their own national reasons. The "Czechoslovakian affair," coming right after the heavy shock suffered by the French Communist Party in the May 1968 revolutionary crisis, dealt the latter another serious blow; now divided into old-fashioned-Stalinist, neo-Stalinist and orthodox-Stalinist fractions, it is torn between loyalty to Moscow and its own interest on the bourgeois political chessboard. If the Italian CP was bolder in its denunciation, the reason lay in the rising crisis in Italy, particularly the direct blow struck against its

"Togliattism." The nationalist bureaucracies of Yugoslavia and Rumania found in the intervention an opportunity to consolidate their class domination, regaining the support of populations rendered fearful of a Russian threat -- a threat that is in their cases more imaginary than real. Stalinism, which has already tolerated Titoism and Maoism as other images of itself, will always tolerate one or another sort of "Rumanian independence" as long as it does not directly threaten its "socialist model" faithfully reproduced everywhere. There is no point in going into the Sino-Albanian critique of "Russian imperialism": in the logic of their "anti-imperialist" delirium, the Chinese in turn reproach the Russians for not intervening in Czechoslovakia like they did in Hungary (see Peking News, 13 August 1968) and then denounce the "odious aggression" perpetrated by "the Brezhnev-Kosygin fascist clique."

"The international association of totalitarian bureaucracies has completely fallen apart," we wrote in *Internationale Situationniste* #11. The Czechoslovakian crisis has only confirmed the advanced decay of Stalinism. Stalinism would never have been able to play such a great role in the crushing of the workers movement everywhere if the Russian totalitarian bureaucratic model had not been closely related both to the bureaucratization of the old reformist movement (German Social Democracy and the Second International) and to the increasingly bureaucratic organization of modern capitalist production. But now, after more than forty years of counterrevolutionary history, the revolution is being reborn everywhere, striking terror into the hearts of the masters of the East as well as those of the West, attacking them both in their differences and in their deep affinity. The courageous isolated protests expressed in Moscow after August 21 herald the revolution that will not fail to break out soon in Russia itself. The revolutionary movement now knows its real enemies, and none of the alienations produced by the two forms of capitalism -- private-bourgeois or state-bureaucratic -- can any longer escape its critique. Facing the immense tasks that lie before it, the movement will no longer waste its time fighting phantoms or supporting illusions.

SITUATIONIST INTERNATIONAL (September 1969)

TRANSLATOR'S NOTES

1. Rudi Dutschke: leader of German SDS.
2. Eduard Benes: president of Czechoslovakia before the 1948 Communist takeover.
3. "Operation Kadar": i.e. an operation analogous to that carried out after the crushing of the 1956 Hungarian revolution, in which the Russians simply shot the Dubcek-type liberal bureaucrats and installed their puppet János Kádár.

Translated by Ken Knabb (slightly modified from the version in the *Situationist International Anthology*).