

November 18, 1989

Cable from US Embassy in Prague on Czech Demonstrations

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Summary:

The US embassy in Prague reports on the brutal suppression of the Czech students' demonstration.

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BRUSSELS FOR USEC - AMBASSADOR NILES
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E.O. 12356: DECL: OADR
TAGS: PHUM, CSCE, PGOV, PREL, CZ
SUBJECT: BRUTAL SUPPRESSION OF CZECH STUDENTS'
DEMONSTRATION

1. CONFIDENTIAL - ENTIRE TEXT.
2. THIS IS AN ACTION MESSAGE. SEE RECOMMENDATION
PARA 19.
3. SUMMARY. AN OFFICIALLY SANCTIONED STUDENT
COMMEMORATION THE EVENING OF NOVEMBER 17 DEVELOPED
INTO CZECHOSLOVAKIA'S LARGEST ANTI-REGIME
DEMONSTRATION IN 20 YEARS. SEVERAL TENS OF
THOUSANDS (POSSIBLY 50,000) STUDENTS MARCHED
THROUGH CENTRAL PRAGUE CALLING FOR FREEDOM, AN
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END TO COMMUNIST RULE AND THE OUSTER OF THE PRESENT COMMUNIST LEADERSHIP. THE PEACEFUL PROCESSION WAS HALTED BY POLICE BEFORE IT REACHED ITS GOAL, WENCESLAS SQUARE. IT WAS THEN BRUTALLY DISPERSED BY TRUNCHEON-WIELDING RIOT POLICE. WESTERN JOURNALISTS WERE PARTICULARLY TARGETED BY THE POLICE FOR ROUGH TREATMENT. ONE CHICAGO TRIBUNE REPORTER REQUIRED SERIOUS MEDICAL ATTENTION FOR HEAD WOUNDS. NUMEROUS OTHERS WERE ROUGHED UP OR HAD THEIR CAMERAS SMASHED. NO OFFICIAL STATISTICS HAVE BEEN RELEASED ON THE NUMBER OF INJURED OR DETAINED, THOUGH WE UNDERSTAND PRAGUE SPRING ERA LEADER ALEXANDER DUBCEK WAS AMONG THEM AND THERE IS AN UNCONFIRMED REPORT THAT AT LEAST ONE STUDENT DIED AS A RESULT OF POLICE BEATINGS. THE EMBASSY HAS ALREADY PROTESTED VERBALLY TO THE MFA ON THE POLICE TREATMENT OF AMERICAN JOURNALISTS AND RECOMMENDS IN PARA 19 THAT AMBASSADOR HOUSTECKY IN WASHINGTON BE CALLED IN TO RECEIVE A PROTEST AND THAT THE IMPENDING VISIT OF CPCZ PRESIDUM MEMBER FOJTIK BE CANCELLED AS INAPPROPRIATE AT THIS TIME.

4. SCARED AND ISOLATED, THE JAKES LEADERSHIP HAS DECIDED TO RESPOND TO THIS FIRST MAJOR MANIFESTATION OF STUDENT OPPOSITION WITH BRUTE FORCE. THIS BLOODY-MINDEDNESS MAY WELL PRODUCE THE SORT OF DIVISIONS SO FAR LARGELY MUTED IN THE CPCZ LEADERSHIP AND WILL UNDERCUT WHAT LITTLE POPULAR LEGITIMACY THE REGIME HAS HAD AS WELL AS ITS LONGEVITY. NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR POPULAR PROTEST WILL ARISE ON DECEMBER 8, "JOHN LENNON"
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DAY IN PRAGUE; DECEMBER 10, INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS DAY; AND JANUARY 16, THE ANNIVERSARY OF JAN PALACH'S DEATH. THE EXAMPLE OF PRAGUE'S STUDENTS COULD ENCOURAGE DEMONSTRATIONS OF EVEN GREATER SCALE ON THOSE DATES. END SUMMARY.

THE DEMONSTRATION

5. A COMMEMORATION OF THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY

OF THE DEATH OF A CZECH, ANTI-FASCIST STUDENT LEADER (JAN OPLETAL) HAS SPARKED CZECHOSLVOAKIA'S LARGEST ANTI-REGIME DEMONSTRATION IN 20 YEARS. A GATHERING OF SOME 15-20,000 STUDENTS MET THE AFTERNOON OF NOVEMBER 17 TO HEAR SPEECHES HONORING THE MEMORY OF THIS CZECH MARTYR, AS WELL AS CALLS FOR ACADEMIC FREEDOM, A DIALOGUE BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AND PEOPLE AND FOR STUDENTS TO BECOME MORE POLITICALLY ACTIVE TO CHANGE SOCIETY. THE SPIRIT OF THE STUDENTS AND SPEAKERS WAS VERY MUCH THAT OF ONE OF THE LARGE BANNERS STRUNG OUT OVER THE ASSEMBLY: "WHO IF NOT US, WHEN IF NOT NOW." OTHERS READ "FREEDOM," AND "THE DINOSAURS OUT" (A REFERENCE TO THE CPCZ'S AGED PRESIDUM).

6. AFTER SPEECHES, THE STUDENTS PROCEEDED, AS PLANNED, ON A SOLEMN CANDLE-LIGHT MARCH TO VYSEHRAD, THE HILL-TOP FORTRESS AND CEMETERY WHERE MANY CZECH NATIONAL HEROES ARE BURIED. THE CROWD BECAME INCREASINGLY MORE POLITICAL ALONG THE ROUTE. SHOUTS OF "LONG LIVE HAVEL AND THE CHARTER" WERE INTERSPERSED WITH "JAKES

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OUT," "WE WANT A NEW GOVERNMENT" AND "FREE
ELECTIONS." AT VYSEHRAD THE GATHERING OFFERED
A MOMENT OF SILENCE FOR OPLETAL AND SANG THE
NATIONAL ANTHEM. THE CROWD SEEMED UNCERTAIN
AS TO HOW TO PROCEED AT THIS POINT, BUT SHORTLY
SHOUTS ROSE UP TO MARCH TO WENCESLAS SQUARE,
THE TRADITIONAL SITE OF DEMONSTRATIONS IN
PRAGUE'S OLD CENTER.

7. AS STUDENTS STREAMED DOWN FROM VYSEHRAD INTO
THE CITY'S STREETS THEY CALLED, AS DEMONSTRATORS
HAVE IN THE PAST, FOR OTHER CZECHS TO JOIN THEM.
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THIS TIME THEY DID. THE CROWD MARCHED ALONG
THE RIVER EMBANKMENT TOWARDS THE CITY'S CENTER
AND ITS NUMBERS SWELLED TO SEVERAL TENS OF
THOUSANDS. (WESTERN MEDIA ESTIMATES SPEAK OF
40-50,000, MAKING IT THE LARGEST INDEPENDENT
DEMONSTRATION HERE SINCE 1969.) STUDENT SLOGANS
BECAME MORE FORCEFUL AND NATIONALISTIC. IN
ADDITION TO CALLS FOR JAKES AND THE CURRENT
PARTY LEADERSHIP TO RESIGN, THE CROWD CHANTED
"40 YEARS OF COMMUNISM IS ENOUGH" AND "WARSAW,
BERLIN AND NOW PRAGUE."

8. UP TO THIS POINT THE POLICE HAD NOT SERIOUSLY
INTERFERED WITH THE DEMONSTRATION, THOUGH THEY
HAD HALTED ITS MARCH AT ONE POINT TO PREVENT
IT FROM TURNING INTO SIDE STREETS AND TO KEEP

IT ALONG THE RIVER EMBANKMENT. AS THE DEMONSTRATORS REACHED PRAGUE'S BROAD NATIONAL AVENUE AND TURNED TOWARD WENCESLAS SQUARE, HOWEVER, THEY WERE CONFRONTED BY A BARRICADE OF RIOT POLICE BLOCKING THEIR PATH. THE DEMONSTRATION HAD NOW BEEN GOING ON FOR SOME THREE AND A HALF HOURS.

BETWEEN 1930 AND 2030 THE POLICE AND DEMONSTRATORS WERE AT A STAND OFF. THE POLICE REFUSED TO PERMIT THE STUDENTS TO PASS TO THE SQUARE, DESPITE SHOUTS THAT "AFTER WENCESLAS WE WILL GO HOME." WHILE NUMBERS OF THE DEMONSTRATORS BEGAN TO DWINDLE, A CORE OF SOME 10,000 REFUSED TO BUDGE OR RESPOND TO POLICE CALLS TO BREAK UP. THE STUDENTS RESPONDED BY STAGING A SIT-IN ON THE STREET, SINGING THE CONFIDENTIAL

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NATIONAL ANTHEM, CHANTING MORE ANTI-COMMUNIST, ANTI-LEADERSHIP POLITICAL SLOGANS AND SHOUTING FOR SOMEONE IN THE LEADERSHIP TO COME OUT AND DISCUSS THEIR DEMANDS WITH THEM. THROUGHOUT, DEMONSTRATORS WERE PEACEFUL AND RESTRAINED AS POLICE ANNOUNCEMENTS BECAME INCREASINGLY MORE THREATENING AND RIOT POLICE MOVED IN TO CLOSE THE NATIONAL AVENUE FROM BEHIND THE CROWD AND CUT OFF OTHER POINTS OF EGRESS.

BRUTAL POLICE RESPONSE

10. SHORTLY BEFORE 2100, RIOT POLICE, NEWLY REINFORCED WITH SPECIAL RED BERET ACTION SQUADS AND FATIGUE-CLAD PEOPLE'S MILITIA, CARRIED OUT A SERIES OF TRUNCHEON CHARGES INTO THE CROWD. NUMEROUS DEMONSTRATORS, AS WELL AS FOREIGN JOURNALISTS, TRAPPED WITHIN THE STREET CORDON WERE BADLY BEATEN. THE POLICE THEN BEGAN MAKING ARRESTS AND USING AN ARMORED PERSONNEL CARRIER WITH BATTERING RAM TO FORCE THE PEOPLE OUT INTO NOW OPEN SIDE STREETS. WITHIN 30 MINUTES THE STREET WAS CLEAR. BUSLOADS OF THOSE ARRESTED AS WELL AS AMBULANCES CARRYING INJURED WERE NOTED LEAVING THE SCENE FOR SEVERAL MINUTES AFTERWARDS.

11. ACCORDING TO REPORTS, ONE STUDENT HAS
DIED OF INJURIES AND AT LEAST 13 PERSONS WERE
SERIOUSLY INJURED AND REQUIRED HOSPITALIZATION.
ONE OF THESE WAS CHICAGO TRIBUNE REPORTER PAULA
BUTTURINI WHO SUFFERED SEVERAL HEAD WOUNDS

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REQUIRING A TOTAL OF 16 STITCHES. THE NUMBER

OF INJURED WAS CERTAINLY MUCH HIGHER THAN THE FIGURE OF 13. EMBOFFS SAW SCORES OF YOUNG DEMONSTRATORS BLEEDING OR LIMPING FROM THE DEMONSTRATION SITE. MANY WERE NOT SEEKING IMMEDIATE MEDICAL ASSISTANCE FOR FEAR THAT THEIR NAMES WOULD BE TAKEN BY THE AUTHORITIES.

12. WESTERN JOURNALISTS WERE PARTICULARLY TARGETED FOR BRUTAL POLICE HANDLING. IN ADDITION TO MS. BUTTURINI, A BBC JOURNALIST, ED LUCAS, WAS KNOCKED UNCONSCIOUS. AP, LA TIMES, CONFIDENTIAL

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BOSTON GLOBE, AND NBC REPORTERS HAVE ALL REPORTED BEING BEATEN AND ROUGHED UP. MANY HAD CAMERAS SEIZED OR DAMAGED. EMBOFFS WITNESSED A CNN REPORTER, BRUCE CONOVER, BEING DETAINED AND HIS CAMERA SMASHED. WE UNDERSTAND THAT A BRITISH ITN REPORTER WAS ALSO ROUGHED UP AND HELD BY THE POLICE.

13. THERE HAVE BEEN NO REPORTS ON THE TOTAL NUMBER OF PERSONS ARRESTED OR DETAINED. WE UNDERSTAND THAT FORMER PRAGUE SPRING ERA LEADER ALEXANDER DUBCEK WAS AMONG THEM. HE WAS PICKED UP WHEN HE WAS SPOTTED BY POLICE DURING THE EARLIER VYSEHRAD CEREMONY.

COMMENT

14. THIS IS THE FIRST MASS SPECIFICALLY STUDENT DEMONSTRATION SINCE 1969 AND REPRESENTS A WATERSHED EVENT FOR THE JAKES REGIME. IT CHANGES OUR FRAME OF REFERENCE ON THIS REGIME'S LONGEVITY. THE BRUTAL POLICE TREATMENT OF YOUTH WILL HAVE BROAD REPERCUSSIONS AMONG THE GENERAL POPULATION AS IT DID LAST JANUARY AT THE MUCH SMALLER-SCALE PALACH DEMONSTRATIONS. IT SHOULD REMOVE WHAT TRACE OF LEGITIMACY THE REGIME RETAINS AS FAR AS THE GENERAL PUBLIC IS CONCERNED. JAKES WILL NOT BE ABLE TO PRETEND, AS CPCZ IDEOLOGY SECRETARY FOJTIK TRIED TO DO AFTER RETURNING FROM TALKS IN MOSCOW ON FRIDAY (JUST AS THE POLICE WERE KNOCKING HEADS), THAT CZECHOSLOVAKIA IS SERIOUS ABOUT SPEEDING UP THE PACE OF POLITICAL REFORM. CONFIDENTIAL

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15. IMPORTANTLY, THE POLICE ACTION IN ITS BLOODY-MINDEDNESS COULD PRODUCE DIVISIONS WHICH HAVE SO FAR BEEN MUTED IN THE CZECHOSLOVAK COMMUNIST PARTY LEADERSHIP. BUT IF THIS DEMONSTRATION CONSIDERABLY UNDERCUTS THE STAYING POWER OF THE JAKES REGIME, IT ALSO SHOWS THAT THE HARDLINERS ARE NOT GOING TO LEAVE WITHOUT A FIGHT. MANY OF LAST NIGHT'S DEMONSTRATORS WERE CALLING ON STUDENTS TO RETURN TO WENCESLAS SQUARE SATURDAY FOR A REPEAT DEMONSTRATION. EVEN IF THIS DOES NOT DEVELOP, THERE ARE SEVERAL PROTEST ANNIVERSARY OPPORTUNITIES IN THE WEEKS AHEAD AND AROUND WHICH DEMONSTRATIONS CAN COALESCE.

16. TWO IN PARTICULAR SHOULD BE THE FOCUS OF LARGE-SCALE ACTIONS: INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS DAY ON DECEMBER 10 AND THE JANUARY 16 ANNIVERSARY OF CZECH STUDENT JAN PALACH'S SELF-IMMOLATION IN 1969. THE DECEMBER 8 LOCAL CELEBRATION OF "JOHN LENNON DAY" HAS ALSO TYPICALLY DRAWN PROTEST DEMONSTRATORS.

17. HOW QUICKLY THE JAKES REGIME PASSES FROM THE SCENE, HOWEVER, MAY DEPEND NOW ON MORE THAN LEADERSHIP DIVISIONS AND POPULAR PRESSURE. AN IMPORTANT FACTOR, AND ONE THAT COULD BE DECISIVE, IS THE SOVIET REACTION TO LOCAL DEVELOPMENTS. TELEVISION COVERAGE OF CPCZ IDEOLOGY CHIEF JAN FOJTIK'S RETURN FROM MOSCOW LAST EVENING SHOWED HIM A PHYSICALLY SHAKEN MAN. WE HAVE NO DOUBT HE HEARD SOME TOUGH TALK FROM HIS

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SOVIET INTERLOCUTORS AND QUESTIONS ABOUT EXACTLY
WHAT JAKES AND THE REGIME ARE UP TO IN THEIR
TALK OF REFORM.

18. THERE IS A FINAL BIT OF CRUEL IRONY TO
LAST NIGHT'S EVENTS. STARTED OFFICIALLY TO
COMMEMORATE A HEROIC STUDENT ACT OF PROTEST
AGAINST THE BRUTALITY OF CZECHOSLOVAKIA'S
NAZI OCCUPIERS, THEY ENDED YESTERDAY IN BRUTALITY
AND APPARENTLY AT LEAST ONE STUDENT'S DEATH
AT THE HANDS OF THE CZECHOSLOVAK AUTHORITIES.

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RECOMMENDATION

19. EMBASSY BELIEVES THAT STRONG AND EARLY PROTESTS ARE ADVISABLE TO THE GOC IN VIEW OF THE BRUTAL TREATMENT OF ITS CITIZENS AND FOREIGN, INCLUDING U.S., JOURNALISTS IN SUCH A BLATANT VIOLATION OF ITS CSCE COMMITMENTS. WE FURTHER RECOMMEND THAT IN VIEW OF THESE EVENTS, THE IMPENDING VISIT OF CPCZ PRESIDUM MEMBER FOJTIK BE CANCELLED AS A SIGN OF OUR CONDEMNATION OF THE NOVEMBER 17 EVENTS. THE EMBASSY HAS ALREADY VERBALLY PROTESTED THE POLICE INCIDENTS INVOLVING JOURNALISTS WITH THE MFA. WE ARE FOLLOWING UP WITH A DIPLOMATIC NOTE SPELLING THESE OUT IN DETAIL AND DEMANDING AN EXPLANATION. THE AMBASSADOR PLANS, IF THE DEPARTMENT HAS NO OBJECTION, TO RAISE THE CONTENTS OF OUR NOTE (SEE SEPTEL) WITH GOC OFFICIALS IN AN EARLY DEMARCHE. TO REINFORCE OUR CONCERNS, WE RECOMMEND THAT THE DEPARTMENT TAKE SIMILAR ACTION BY CALLING IN AMBASSADOR HOUSTECKY AT AN EARLY DATE. AT THAT MEETING WE RECOMMEND THAT HE BE TOLD THAT, IN LIGHT OF THE NOVEMBER 17 EVENTS, THE VISIT BEGINNING NOVEMBER 24 BY CPCZ PRESIDUM MEMBER FOJTIK, WOULD NOT BE APPROPRIATE.

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