

November 20, 1989

Cable from US Embassy in Prague on Czech Demonstrations

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Summary:

Cable from the US embassy in Prague reporting on contradictions in the Czechoslovak press coverage of the demonstrations' aftermath.

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DEPARTMENT PASS TO ERIKA SCHLAGER CSCE COMMISSION
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E.O. 12356: N/A

TAGS: PHUM, CSCE, PGOV, PREL, CZ

SUBJECT: CZECHOSLOVAK PRESS COVERAGE OF DEMONSTRATION
AFTERMATH SHOWS CONTRADICTION LINES

REF: PRAGUE 8082

1. SUMMARY. CZECHOSLOVAK COMMUNIST PARTY DAILY "RUDE
PRAVO" HAS TAKEN THE LINE THAT THE POLICE ACTED WITH
RESTRAINT TO PUT DOWN THE STUDENT DEMONSTRATIONS IN
PRAGUE NOVEMBER 17. THE PAPER PLACED BLAME FOR THE
DEMONSTRATIONS ON "SELF-APPOINTED" LEADERS SUBVERTING
THE PEACEFUL GOALS OF THE COMMEMORATION MARCH, ABETTED
BY THE FOREIGN PRESS WHICH UNCRITICALLY REPEATED
ALLEGEDLY FALSE REPORTS OF DEATHS AND INJURIES TO
SUBSTANTIATE THEIR PREDICTIONS OF BLOODSHED. (DESPITE
REGIME PROTESTATIONS, IT IS NOT YET CERTAIN THAT NO
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DEMONSTRATORS HAVE DIED.) THE SOCIALIST PARTY PAPER
"SVOBODNE SLOVO" AND THE YOUTH PAPER "MLADA FRONTA,"
HOWEVER, WERE STRONGLY CRITICAL OF SECURITY FORCES FOR

OVERREACTING AND IN GENERAL SUPPORTED STUDENT CALLS FOR MORE DIALOGUE AND DEMOCRACY. THOUGH A NUMBER OF REGIME LEADERS HAVE CRITICIZED THE REPORTS OF DEATHS, AS FAR AS WE ARE AWARE ALMOST NONE HAVE SO FAR EXPRESSED SUPPORT FOR SUPPRESSION OF THE DEMONSTRATION. PARA 7 INCLUDES THE OFFICIAL COUNT OF THOSE ARRESTED AND INJURED AT THE NOVEMBER 17 DEMONSTRATION. END SUMMARY.

2. THE NOVEMBER 20 EDITION OF "RUDE PRAVO" TOOK ADVANTAGE OF ALLEGEDLY INACCURATE REPORTS OF THE DEATHS OF ONE OR MORE STUDENTS IN THE NOVEMBER 17 DEMONSTRATION TO LAUNCH AN OFFENSIVE CHARGING THAT "SELF-APPOINTED LEADERS" HAD SUBVERTED THE LEGITIMATE ANNUAL COMMEMORATION FOR ANTI-NAZI FIGHTER OPLETAL. ACCORDING TO THE PAPER, POLICE FORCES HAD TAKEN NO ACTION AGAINST THE MARCHERS, EVEN WHEN THEY BEGAN SHOUTING ANTI-GOVERNMENT AND ANTI-PARTY SLOGANS, UNTIL THE CROWD TRIED TO MOVE TO UNAPPROVED ROUTES, WHERE THEY WOULD HAVE "ENDANGERED" THE PUBLIC.

3. IT WAS AT THAT POINT, ACCORDING TO THE PAPER, THAT THE LEADERS OF THE DEMONSTRATION DECIDED TO SPREAD A "FALSE" CLAIM THAT A STUDENT NAMED MARTIN SMID HAD BEEN KILLED, A CLAIM PICKED UP BY THE FOREIGN PRESS. (AFP, FOR ONE, REPORTED THAT THERE HAD BEEN FOUR DEATHS.) IGNORING DENIALS BY GOVERNMENT SPOKESMEN, SOME STUDENTS OVER THE WEEKEND SET UP SMALL MEMORIALS TO THE VARIOUS STUDENTS "KILLED" AT THE PLACES WHERE THEY "DIED." THE GOVERNMENT ON SUNDAY SHOT DOWN THE RUMOR ABOUT SMID BY PRODUCING HIM FOR A TELEVISION INTERVIEW. A STATEMENT BY THE INTERIOR MINISTRY DESCRIBED THE DEATH UNCLASSIFIED

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RUMORS AS A DELIBERATE MANIPULATION OF PEOPLE'S MINDS AND AN EFFORT TO AROUSE HOSTILE EMOTIONS. (THIS HAS NOT STOPPED SPECULATION THAT SOME DEMONSTRATOR(S) WAS KILLED.)

4. "RUDE PRAVO" STOPPED SLIGHTLY SHORT OF SAYING THAT THE FOREIGN PRESS HAD DELIBERATELY REPORTED WHAT THEY KNEW AS A FALSE STORY, BUT DID ACCUSE THEM OF AT LEAST POOR JOURNALISM BY REPORTING A STORY WITHOUT ADEQUATE EFFORTS TO CONFIRM IT. IT ASCRIBED THIS FAILURE TO THE WESTERN MEDIA'S DESIRE TO SUBSTANTIATE PREDICTIONS OF VIOLENCE AND BLOODSHED. IT LEFT LITTLE DOUBT THAT IT BELIEVED THAT SOME OF THE FOREIGN PRESS (PARTICULARLY RFE) HAD ABETTED OPPOSITION ELEMENTS IN PRAGUE IN THEIR EFFORTS TO "SUBVERT" THE COMMEMORATION AND TO "PROVOKE"

A CONFRONTATION WITH AUTHORITIES.

5. IN CONTRAST TO "RUDE PRAVO'S" LINE, THE CZECHOSLOVAK SOCIALIST PARTY PAPER "SVOBODNE SLOVO" PRINTED A STATEMENT BY THE PARTY PRESIDUM VERY CRITICAL OF SECURITY FORCES. NOTING ITS PAST CALLS FOR AN INCREASED DIALOGUE, THE PRESIDUM EXPRESSED ITS "FUNDAMENTAL DISAPPROVAL" OF POLICE ACTIONS AGAINST "DEFENSELESS DEMONSTRATORS" WHICH COULD ONLY "EXACERBATE TENSIONS IN SOCIETY" AND AROUSE NATURAL RESISTANCE. IT DEMANDED THAT SUCH EVENTS NEVER BE RESOLVED IN THIS MANNER AGAIN.

6. THE YOUTH PAPER "MLADA FRONTA", ALSO TAKING A CRITICAL VIEW, QUOTED A STATEMENT BY TWO STUDENT GROUPS ATTACKING THE "INADEQUATE AND POLITICALLY ILL-ADVISED" ACTIONS BY SECURITY FORCES. THE GROUPS WERE

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"CONCERNED AND OUTRAGED" AT THE INFORMATION ABOUT
INJURED PARTICIPANTS IN THE DEMONSTRATION. AS "SVOBODNE
SLOVO," "MLADA FRONTA" DID NOT MENTION THE DEATH
REPORTS AND CALLED FOR INVESTIGATIONS OF THE ACTIONS
OF THE SECURITY FORCES.

7. FINALLY, THE MINISTRY OF INTERIOR HAS RELEASED AN
OFFICIAL COUNT ON THE DEMONSTRATIONS: 24 INJURED
(17 DEMONSTRATORS, 7 POLICE); 143 PEOPLE DETAINED,
NINE ON POSSIBLE CRIMINAL CHARGES. OF THE OTHER
DETAINEES, 21 WERE FINED AND RELEASED, 70 WERE RELEASED
AFTER AN ID CHECK. THE REMAINING 43 WERE NOT ACCOUNTED
FOR IN THE MINISTRY STATEMENT, BUT MAY HAVE BEEN
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