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November 21, 1989

Cable from US Embassy in Prague on Czech Demonstrations

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Summary:

Cable from the US embassy in Prague reporting on the morning demonstration in Wenceslas Square and overheard conversations.

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Original Language:

English

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Original Scan

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IN/IPS/CR/IR AK Date: 12/23/97
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P 211901Z NOV 89
FM AMEMBASSY PRAGUE
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1808

FOIA Exemptions _____ TS authority to
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PRAGUE 08155

DEPT PASS ERIKA SCHLAGER CSCE COMMISSION

E.O. 12356: DECL: OADR
TAGS: PREL, PGOV, PHUM, CSCE, CZ
SUBJECT: NOVEMBER 21 MORNING DEMONSTRATION AT
- WENCESLAS SQUARE: OVERHEARD CONVERSATIONS

1. CONFIDENTIAL - ENTIRE TEXT.
2. SUMMARY. THE FOLLOWING RECORDS THE IMPRESSIONS AND A CONVERSATION OVERHEARD BY EMBASSY SPOUSE WHO VISITED WENCESLAS SQUARE AT ABOUT 10:30 ON THE MORNING OF NOVEMBER 21. THIS WAS EARLY ENOUGH SO THAT THE SQUARE WAS NOT CROWDED WITH DEMONSTRATORS. END SUMMARY.
3. AS EMBASSY SPOUSE STOPPED BY WENCESLAS SQUARE THIS MORNING AROUND 10:30, THERE WERE ABOUT 300 PEOPLE AROUND THE STATUE OF BOHEMIA'S PATRON SAINT, MOST OF WHOM WERE VERY YOUNG -- 15-20 YEARS OLD. THE SIX "LEADERS" STANDING ON THE STATUE STEPS LOOKED LIKE CHILDREN. (NOTE. MANY OF THESE ACCORDING TO LOCAL MEDIA ACCOUNTS HAD SPENT THE NIGHT AT THE

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FOOT OF THE STATUE.) ABOUT TWO BLOCKS DOWN THE SQUARE EMBASSY SPOUSE STOPPED TO LISTEN TO A KNOT OF PEOPLE WHO WERE STANDING IN THE CENTER OF THE SQUARE. THESE WERE OLDER PEOPLE, 40-80 YEARS OLD. THEY WERE DISCUSSING

THE EVENTS OF THE PAST FEW DAYS AND THE PAST 50 YEARS. MUCH OF WHAT THEY SAID SOUNDED LIKE WHAT CZECHS HAVE BEEN SAYING IN WHISPERS FOR A LONG TIME, BUT IT WAS CLEAR THESE PEOPLE WERE ENJOYING THE CHANCE TO SAY THE SAME THINGS OUT LOUD, PUBLICLY, AMONG STRANGERS.

4. HERE ARE SOME OF THE COMMENTS OVERHEARD:

-
-- "WE ALL HAVE TO GET OUT ON THE STREETS."

-
-- "YOUNG PEOPLE DON'T KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT HISTORY. THEY DON'T KNOW ANYTHING BUT COMMUNISM. THOSE KIDS WHO WERE OUT MARCHING IN JANUARY FOR PALACH -- MOST OF THEM DON'T KNOW WHO PALACH WAS."

-
-- "THEY DON'T KNOW WHO MASARYK WAS."

-
-- "THAT'S RIGHT. ASK A HIGH SCHOOL SOPHOMORE WHO WAS THE FIRST PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC, AND THEY WILL TELL YOU GOTTWALD."

-
-- "THEY KNOW MORE SOVIET HISTORY THAN CZECH."

-
-- "NO, THEY HEAR ABOUT THE FIRST REPUBLIC FROM THEIR FAMILIES."

-
-- "NO THEY DON'T. LOTS OF FAMILIES ARE AFRAID TO TALK ABOUT IT."
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-- "EVERYONE HAS TO PARTICIPATE IN THE GENERAL STRIKE NEXT WEEK. THAT WILL SHOW THEM."

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-- WOMAN: "I HEARD THAT ANYONE WHO PARTICIPATES WILL LOSE HIS JOB."
-- DEAD SILENCE.

-
-- "THEY CAN'T FIRE ALL OF US." "THAT'S RIGHT."

-
-- WOMAN: "THEY SAY ANYONE WHO PARTICIPATES WILL LOSE HIS JOB. NO JOB, NO MONEY, NO NOTHING, THE USUAL THING."

-
-- "I REMEMBER BENES, WHAT A MAN, WHAT A GENTLEMAN. YOU COULD RUN INTO HIM RIGHT HERE ON THE SQUARE,

IN FRONT OF BATA, AND SAY, GOOD DAY, MR. PRESIDENT,
AND HE WOULD SAY, WHY, GOOD DAY, HOW ARE YOU? BUYING
SHOES? I'D LIKE TO RUN INTO ONE OF THOSE GUYS
(GESTURING TOWARDS FEDERAL ASSEMBLY BUILDING) ON
THE STREET. THEY GO EVERYWHERE IN THEIR BIG CARS.
THEY HAVE MONEY, BIG PLACES, EVERYTHING."

-- WHEN (NAME FORGOTTEN) WENT INTO THE GOVERNMENT,
HE GOT 10,000 A YEAR. NOW THEY GET 2.5 MILLION. THEY
BUILD THEMSELVES PALACES. THEY HAVE ALL THE (WORD
NOT UNDERSTOOD, BUT IT GOT A BIG LAUGH) AND WE HAVE
NOTHING. MY PENSION IS 1000 PER MONTH. I'M SUPPOSED
TO LIVE ON THAT. WHY ISN'T JAKES ON PENSION?"

-- "THE MAIN THING IS, THERE HAS TO BE A GOOD TURNOUT
FOR THE STRIKE."

-- "YES, ESPECIALLY TRANSPORTATION WORKERS."

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1809

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 02 OF 02 PRAGUE 08155

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-
-- "RIGHT. 'THEY' ALWAYS USED THE STRIKE AS A WEAPON
BEFORE 1948. IF WE ALL STOP WORK, IF THE MINES STOP,
THEY HAVE TO LISTEN AND THE OLD MEN WILL HAVE TO GET
OUT."
-

-- "WHAT IF WE STRIKE AND NOTHING HAPPENS?"

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-- "WE STRIKE AGAIN. WE KEEP ON STRIKING AGAIN AND AGAIN."

-

-- "THEY ARE GOING TO TAKE PICTURES. THEY SAY THE STUDENTS WHO ARE MARCHING WILL BE IDENTIFIED."

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-- "IF THEY ARE WORRIED, LET THEM GO TO A DIFFERENT CITY AND MARCH THERE."

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5. SEVERAL PEOPLE SPOKE ABOUT INSTANCES WITH WHICH THEY WERE FAMILIAR OF GOOD PEOPLE LOCKED UP IN THE 50'S FOR, FOR EXAMPLE, BEING INVOLVED WITH SCOUTING. "THE PEOPLE WHO LOCKED THEM UP ARE THE ONES WHO HAVE BEEN LEADING THE YOUTH ALL THESE YEARS. WHAT DO YOU EXPECT? NO WONDER THE YOUNG PEOPLE DON'T KNOW ANYTHING." "BUT WE ARE HERE," REPLIED ONE YOUNG MAN.

6. A FINAL NOTE. ON THE METRO THIS MORNING THIS EMBASSY SPOUSE'S HOUSEKEEPER SAW A YOUNG STUDENT WEARING ONE OF OUR U.S.-CZECHOSLOVAK FLAG PINS. SOMEONE ON THE SUBWAY OFFERED HIM 500 KCS. FOR IT (USD 50). THE OFFER WAS REFUSED. END NOTE.
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