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X/15 RUSS - IS SUSLOV ON THE WARPATH?

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Munich, 7 May 1968 (Communist Area Analysis Department:  
USSR - r.r.g.)

To read the Western press on Czechoslovakia is better than watching a Durbidge or Hitchcock thriller. Every day brings a new leak from Prague or Moscow -- often even from Vienna -- followed two or three days later by official denials from both cities. Vienna is the only place not issuing denials; it simply corrects the original inaccurate sensation, and then looks for the next. In this way the reader is guaranteed a thrill a day, but he is not necessarily better informed than would have been the case if some of the wilder stories had never been circulated.

To select the five or six best "stories" on Czechoslovakia is more difficult than to take five or six hundred of them. In the top ten one would certainly place the innumerable stories last December to the effect that Brezhnev was insisting, during his flying visit to Prague, that Novotny should remain in office. David Binder (New York Times, 20 December 1967) was a leader in this field: he disclosed from an "authoritative source" that Novotny had achieved a stay from the Presidium, due to the personal intervention of Brezhnev, and would not be dismissed until late in 1968.

(Later it was learned that what Brezhnev had actually said was "this is not my affair, comrades. It is for you yourselves to decide")<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless by 22nd December the DPA office in Vienna had come to the conclusion that:

To all appearances Brezhnev has ensured that the dogmatists in Prague will stay at the helm and continue the hard Moscow line in the German question from the banks of the Vltava.

On the following day Michel Tatu of Le Monde gave a version which carries more credibility:

The General Secretary of the Soviet Party, who had come at Novotny's request ... contented himself, some people believe, with hearing both sides and expressing the wish that an eventual change of direction, if it

1) New York Times, 31/3/68.

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were to come about, should stir up as few "waves" as possible.

The truth seems likely to be that today Moscow cannot (and perhaps does not wish) to interfere in the internal affairs of other parties unless she is so requested. Brezhnev went to Prague to advise, not to dictate. And if his advice was in favor of discretion and moderation, as seems probable, he is likely to be fairly satisfied with the result. There is little evidence that a Dubcek regime would be anti-Soviet, as long as the Russians stay east of the border, and do not exert intolerable pressure on Prague. At present there is no sign of their doing so. Dubcek might easily prove to be the best communist leader available to Moscow in Prague at present.

#### The "David must stay" Campaign

In mid-March Mr. Anatole Shub (International Herald Tribune) Prague had heard "unconfirmed rumours that unnamed Soviet officials have urged that General Lomsky and Foreign Minister Vaclav David remain in office to ensure 'stability'." He added that East German criticism of recent events here has lent such rumours more credence than they might have obtained.

In view of Brezhnev's known attitude to the fate of Novotny, these "rumours" never carried much weight or conviction. Indeed David has already been replaced by Mr. Jiri Hajek, who is now in Moscow talking to Gromyko, presumably concerning matters arising out of the weekend summit meeting. Lomsky resigned on April 3rd.

#### The "Troops on the Border" Scare

The Spring manoeuvres of the Warsaw Pact countries in E. Germany, Czechoslovakia and in Hungary were the occasion for some of the juiciest rumours. At the end of March Henry Kamm (New York Times, 24/3/68) in Prague had picked up unconfirmed rumours that Moscow "had advised

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Prague that it was scheduling spring manoeuvres in Czechoslovakia," and that Soviet and East German troops would join Czechoslovak units in the exercises. However, he said, Prague had asked Moscow to move the exercises elsewhere, suggesting that now would not be the best time to send foreign troops into the country.

This carefully qualified report was picked up by several European newspapers, which omitted the second sentence of it, and drew an ominous picture of Soviet troops exercising on the E. German, Hungarian and Slovak borders of Czechoslovakia.

What happened in fact was that the Group of Soviet Forces Germany did carry out an exercise with the E. German army, but it was in the neighborhood of Magdeburg, about 200 kilometres north-west of the Czech-E. German frontier, and directly opposite the British Zone. The Hungarian Army carried out its own manoeuvres in Hungary, and there are no authentic reports of any Soviet formations being moved to either the Hungarian-Czech or the Slovak-Ukrainian borders.

The usually reliable Financial Times rounded off this episode on March 27th with a despatch from Prague:

No military pressure is being used against the new Czechoslovak regime of democratic communism and no military exercises on Czech territory are planned by the Warsaw Pact in the near future.

Planning is still in progress for the usual autumn manoeuvres, and it has already been announced that Czechoslovakia will take part in these, although they will be on a smaller scale than in the past.<sup>2</sup> They will therefore be an optical demonstration that while Prague still participates in the Warsaw Pact, she does so with visibly less enthusiasm than in the past.

#### The "Wheat Stoppage" Ploy

This particular red herring was unusual in that it dealt with a concrete issue in a non-secret area, and was supposed to have

2) Ceteka, 3/5/68.

originated from one named and responsible source. It was therefore nailed down in remarkably quick time, although the New York Times (its originator) is still making yardage out of it.

The New York Times of May 1st (David Binder) quoted Mr. Zdenek Mlynar, a C.C. Secretary, as saying that he did not know the details of the delivery problem, but that "this time we did not get the quarterly shipment. Certainly the Soviets are nervous, but no serious pressure has been exerted on us."

The New York Times added that according to Prague sources, the failure to ship wheat this quarter as contracted for was the result of a temporary Soviet shortage, and not a permanent measure.

That Mr. Mlynar did not know the details of the problem is clear enough. Ceteka replied that not only were grain supplies from the USSR ahead of schedule, but that the whole year's supply is likely to be delivered within the first six months. Radio Prague on April 30th noted that the Czech authorities had turned back one train-load because of quality deficiencies. It was replaced by the USSR.

David Binder then remarked that the USSR had resumed shipping wheat at a higher rate after a lapse in the first three months of the year. It seems likely that much the same lapse takes place every year. The shipment of bulk commodities from the USSR is frequently hampered by ice and snow in the January-March period, as is the delivery of oil to Munich at that time of year.

At all events Mlynar himself said on May 3rd that he had said that the USSR was not exerting any pressure on Czechoslovakia, neither economic nor political. But he had spoken to Mr. Binder through an interpreter, and it seems probable that the interpreter was the source of the confusion.

The Neue Zuercher Zeitung (5 May 1968) has produced the most plausible explanation of this incident so far:

The officially denied press story about a delay in the Soviet wheat deliveries seems lacking in credibility. In Moscow it is hard to believe that the present Soviet leadership would undertake such a crude attempt at

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blackmail which was bound to fail. It would be easier to imagine that a deliberate fabrication was planted on the press in Prague in order to compel the USSR publicly to assure the continuation of the deliveries....

Quite so.

The "Armed Intervention" Stories

The best of these comes from Le Monde, which had an unsigned, undated report on May 5th with the most ominous implications:

It is learned that during the C.C. Plenum on 23rd April in Moscow, Mr. Brezhnev was very pessimistic concerning the Czechoslovak situation. Without questioning the loyalty of Mr. Dubcek, to whom he paid tribute, the General Secretary of the CPSU is said to have described him as a prisoner of reactionary and anti-communist elements .... Mr. Brezhnev also said that the present events in Prague would endanger socialist "conquests" not only in Czechoslovakia but also in the other people's democracies.

Nevertheless the most serious threats are said to have been uttered by General Yepishev, head of the Main Political Administration of the Soviet Armed Forces. He is reported to have said that one cannot exclude the possibility that a group of "loyal communists" might address an appeal to the USSR and other socialist countries to help to save socialism in Czechoslovakia. "In this case," he is reported to have said, "The Soviet Army is ready to do its duty."

of the present Politburo who almost certainly supported the Soviet armed intervention in Hungary twelve years ago. Yet the fact remains that the deterioration from the Soviet point of view of the internal Czech scene is qualitatively different from what it was in 1956.

Then Nagy had left the Warsaw Pact and declared Hungarian neutrality the C.P. was in full retreat and unable to contain the popular pressure for drastic and immediate reform. This is not necessarily true of Prague today, and Suslov's judgement now is not necessarily the same as in November 1956. But even if one assumes that it is, that is still a far cry from having to assume that he could persuade a majority of the Politburo to accept his view.

Moreover Brezhnev is clearly making preparations, by promoting K. Katushev to a Secretariat post in the field of ruling-party relations, to relieve Suslov of a considerable part of his onerous duties. And it is noticeable in this connection that Katushev is a young technocrat (41 years old, an automobile engineer by profession), and not an ideologist of the Suslov stamp. It is therefore possible that Suslov's influence in E. European affairs is on the wane. What is certain is that if Suslov advocated military intervention last winter, he has not yet seen fit to resign nor has he yet been replaced, despite being overruled by Brezhnev's moderate majority for five long months on end.

While such negative evidence cannot possibly prove that Suslov is not, even now, hell-bent for intervention and the tanks, it deserves to be borne in mind when considering the possibility that Mr. Binder's unidentified source may conceivably be more anti-Soviet or anti-Suslov than fully knowledgeable about the Politburo's highly secret debates of last winter.

RF/1810/68