

Czechoslovakia

77. Memorandum From Helmut Sonnenfeldt of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger)¹

Washington, January 21, 1969.

SUBJECT

Czechoslovakia

1. The *situation* in the aftermath of Palach's self-immolation² is obviously *volatile*, made the more so now by a second burning, this time of a worker.³ The *student-worker alliance* in acts of protest and defiance is *potentially a most threatening* development for the Prague regime and the Soviets. If it gathers steam, the regime will be under *enormous pressure from the Soviets to crack down*.

2. At that point the regime will have to decide whether to attempt to master the situation by itself or to let the Soviets do it. It will probably prefer the former course to minimize brutality, even at the risk of thereby making itself a Soviet tool. In the end, there is, however, *a strong possibility that the Soviets will intervene* anyway, not only using their troops but establishing some form of military rule. An added factor militating for Soviet intervention—or at the very least heavy Soviet pressure on Prague to do so—is the *danger that acts of defiance will spread elsewhere in Eastern Europe*; witness the further burning in Budapest.⁴

3. I fear that *our own options* in this tragic situation are *extremely limited*. Almost anything we say as a government would be likely to encourage further acts of defiance or to stimulate a siege mentality in Moscow. I can think of nothing that we can say or do that could stay the Soviet hand if the Soviets see public order collapsing.

I nevertheless recommend the following:

1. That we privately, perhaps when Chip Bohlen sees the Soviet chargé at the latter's request today, indicate to the Soviets our deep

¹ Source: National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 672, Country Files—Europe, Czechoslovakia, Vol. I Jan 69–31 Jan 70. Secret.

² On January 16 student Jan Palach set himself on fire in the center of Prague to protest the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia.

³ J. Hlvatry, a brewery worker, on January 20.

⁴ On January 20 another protester set fire to himself in the Hungarian capital.

concern and a sense that a heavy new burden would be added to our relations if overt acts of repression should occur;

2. That the State-chaired Czechoslovak Task Force be promptly *and quietly* re-assembled to, inter alia,

(a) review contingency planning for the event of any spillover of disorders into the CSSR–FRG border region and across it;

(b) maintain utmost control over any public or other statements we may wish to make on the situation, including contingency guidance for the State Department spokesman should he receive questions. (Subject to review in the light of developments I recommend for the next 48 hours: “No comment; we are obviously watching the situation.”)

(c) prepare contingency statements for various kinds of overt repressive action or disorders;

(d) send guidance to our Ambassador at NATO where the subject undoubtedly commands high-priority attention; and seek to coordinate our public and diplomatic posture with major NATO allies.

Query: Do you want NSC participation in Task Forces of this kind? It has the advantage of keeping you currently informed; the disadvantage is that they are time-consuming.

Helmut Sonnenfeldt⁵

⁵ Printed from a copy that bears this typed signature.