

April 23, 1968

**Conversation with the Consul-General of the CSSR in
Kyiv, J. Gorak**

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Summary:

B. BAKLANOV, Third Secretary of the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry, relates a conversation initiated by J. Gorak, the Czechoslovak Consul-General.

Original Language:

Russian

Contents:

Translation - English

Top Secret No. 1382/23 CONVERSATION WITH THE CONSUL-GENERAL OF THE CSSR IN KYIV, J. GORAK 23 April 1968 At the invitation of Cde. Gorak, I met with him at the General Consulate building. From the outset J. Gorak emphasized that the discussion would be on an exceptionally "sober" basis, over a cup of coffee. During the conversation, he repeatedly alluded to his close ties with A. Dubcek, with whom he had spoken recently about the latest events in Czechoslovakia. In passing, he noted that he, Gorak, has been appointed to take over soon as head of the Soviet Department in the CSSR Foreign Ministry. 36 At the beginning of the conversation, the Consul-General said that he has sensed (and is set to inform Prague about this) an atmosphere of mistrust and suspicion around officials at the consulate in Kyiv: Relations with individuals and organizations used to be trusting and open, but they have now given way to perfunctory and purely formal relations. 37 Brushing aside my objections on this point, he noted that in his view such an atmosphere is attributable to the improper and incompetent reaction of the Soviet people and senior officials in the Soviet Union to the events mandated by the process of democratization under way in Czechoslovakia. He stated that it would be worth treating the Czechoslovak events with greater care, taking account in particular of the investigation into the reasons for and methods of the repressions in the CSSR and the effort to clarify the motives for the suicide of the CSSR deputy defense minister Janko and a number of political murders. 38 According to him, the KSC CC leadership has deep suspicions that the former president of the CSSR, A. Novotný, gave an oral command to Janko, via the head of the CC's 8th Department, that in view of the circumstances they should use the armed forces to attempt to restore him (Novotný) to power. 39 If the investigation confirms these suspicions, the results will be published along with the findings of the investigation into the abuses of earlier years that led to the conviction of roughly 40,000 people and that caused Czechoslovak workers to feel even greater antipathy toward the Soviet Union. 40 In this connection, Gorak stated that the KSC CC leadership is greatly upset about the frequent contacts between an employee of the Soviet embassy in Prague and the former president even after suspicions about Novotný were published in the press. Isn't it understandable, said Gorak, that these frequent private visits by embassy employees to Novotný remind Czechoslovak citizens of that earlier period of high activity by Soviet advisers, which has created a problem for us today of the rehabilitation of thousands of innocent people and the need to prosecute those who committed such actions? 41 Returning to problems of economic development, Gorak particularly emphasized that Czechoslovakia is seriously considering the possibility of a large loan from the Western powers. 42 In the hope of positively resolving this matter, as I understood from Gorak, the CSSR may reassess some of its foreign policy positions, especially in its relations with the FRG and USA. 43 In conclusion the Consul-General mentioned the upcoming conference of Communist and workers' parties. 44 Taking account of the current situation, the KSC will adopt the same position taken by the Italian and French Communist parties, since it is precisely these parties that have enormous experience regarding the socialist movement in the Western countries and are aware of the specific conditions of work in the industrially developed countries. It is also precisely these Communist parties that have displayed the most appropriate and favorable understanding of the essence of the Czechoslovak events and the aspirations of the CSSR to assume leadership in the Communist and workers' movement in the Central European countries, which are united by identical features of their development. The conversation took place in Russian, lasted two hours, and was of a confidential nature. The vice-consul, Cde. Doubrava, joined the conversation from time to time. During the conversation, the Consul-General harshly criticized the leaders of the GDR, especially W. Ulbricht, and also spoke negatively about the events in Poland and the leadership methods of W. Gomulka. Third Secretary of the Ukr Foreign Ministry BAKLANOV 25.IV.68 36 TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: The Department for the USSR was the first of ten regional departments in the Czechoslovak foreign ministry. Although the foreign ministry had less responsibility for Soviet-Czechoslovak relations than the KSC CC International Relations Department did, the impending transfer of Gorak to this post was viewed with concern in Moscow. 37 TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: For earlier evidence of Gorak's dissatisfaction with the work climate in Soviet Ukraine, see Document No. 1 above. 38 TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: In late February 1968, General Jan Šejna, the chief of the KSC's branch committee in the Czechoslovak ministry of national defense, defected to the United States shortly before he was to be arrested on charges of corruption. Rumors spread that Šejna and General Miroslav Mamula,

the head of the KSC CC's Eighth Department overseeing the armed forces and internal security apparatus, had been behind attempts by the Czechoslovak military in December 1967 and early January 1968 to keep Novotný in power, apparently at Novotný's request. Although details of the "Šejna affair" remained murky even after an official investigation was completed (for lengthy excerpts from the report, see "Proc útekl Jan Šejna: Výsledky setrení projednány vládou," published in *Rudé právo* on 12 June 1968, pp. 1-2), what came out was damaging enough that it inspired newspapers throughout Czechoslovakia to publish bitter criticism of Novotný and his supporters. Confronted by these revelations and attacks, hard-line KSC officials came under increasing pressure to resign. Among many officials who were forced to resign between 5 and 14 March 1968 were Jan Kudrna, the interior minister, and Jan Bartuška, the procurator general, who together had controlled the country's internal security apparatus in close liaison with the Soviet Committee on State Security (KGB).

A number of high-ranking Czechoslovak army officers, including Mamula, also were replaced. On 14 March, the same day that Kudrna and Bartuška were dismissed, an announcement was made of the suicide of a deputy defense minister, General Vladimír Janko, following reports of his collaboration with Šejna in December and January on behalf of Novotný. The outpouring of criticism that ensued in the Czechoslovak press led to further calls for Novotný's resignation, and the volume of those demands increased following disclosures that Novotný's son had been a friend of Šejna, and that Šejna's rapid advance in the armed forces had been attributable solely to Novotný's largesse rather than to any professional qualifications.³⁹

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: The fullest official investigation of the reasons for Janko's suicide was not declassified until 1994; see "Informace o samovrazde gen. VI. JANKA," 14 March 1968 (Top Secret), in *Vojenský Historický Archiv (VHA)*, F. Sekretariát Ministra národní obrany (MNO), Operacní správa Generálního Štábu (GS/OS), 154/277.

40 TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: By this point (23 April), a special commission had been set up under Jan Piller to accelerate and complete the rehabilitations that had begun very slowly in Novotný's final years. No law on rehabilitation had yet been enacted, but Dubcek and other senior KSC officials had pledged at the April plenum of the KSC Central Committee that a comprehensive law would soon be adopted.⁴¹

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: On the role of Soviet "advisers" in the violent repressions in Czechoslovakia in the 1950s, see Karel Kaplan, *Sovětské poradcí v Československu, 1949-1956* (Prague: Ústav pro soudobé dějiny, 1993), esp. pp. 17-58.⁴²

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: At around this time (i.e., in late April), Czechoslovak deputy prime minister Ota Šik indicated that Czechoslovakia urgently needed a loan of at least \$500 million to buy machinery and other badly-needed goods from the West. Šik left no doubt that although he would try to obtain the loan from the Soviet Union, he would turn to Western governments (particularly West Germany and the United States) if necessary. Informal overtures to the West German government about this matter had begun in early 1968, but Šik's public announcement provoked a barrage of criticism from East German leaders, and it also sparked deep misgivings in other Warsaw Pact capitals, including Moscow. The proposed loan was one of the topics that Soviet leaders raised when they summoned Czechoslovak officials to Moscow on 4 May. See "Zápis peregovorov s delegatsiei ChSSR, 4 maya 1968 goda," 4 May 1968 (Top Secret) in *APRF*, F. 3, Op. 91, D. 100, Ll. 14, 28-29, 47, 59, 103-104, and 111.⁴³

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: On 17-19 April, just a few days before this conversation with Gorak, a senior representative of the West German Social Democratic Party (SPD), Egon Bahr, paid a secret, unofficial visit to Prague. His arrival was not made public because Czechoslovakia's contacts with the FRG were still deemed highly sensitive. In April 1967, three months after Romania broke ranks with the Warsaw Pact countries and established full diplomatic relations with West Germany, the six other active members of the Pact met in Karlovy Vary and agreed that they would not pursue diplomatic ties or even significantly improve relations with the FRG unless the West German government formally recognized the permanent existence of two German states and accepted the inviolability of the Oder-Neisse line and the border between the two Germanies. These conditions, championed by the East German leader, Walter Ulbricht, formed what was supposed to be a binding "Ulbricht Doctrine." By the spring of 1968, however, as West German foreign minister Willy Brandt continued to promote Ostpolitik, there were increasing signs that one or two of the Warsaw Pact countries, especially Czechoslovakia and Hungary

and perhaps even the Soviet Union, might construe the Karlovy Vary commitments more flexibly than Ulbricht would have liked. The East German leader took a number of steps to try to forestall any deviation from the Karlovy Vary agreements, but he remained fearful that Czechoslovakia would press ahead independently in the same way that Romania had. Even under Novotný, the Czechoslovak government had agreed to the establishment of a West German trade mission in Prague, and economic ties between the two countries had increased briskly in the first few months of 1968. In March 1968 the Western press disclosed that Czechoslovakia had made overtures to the West German government about obtaining a loan, and those reports were soon publicly confirmed by CSSR deputy prime minister Ota Šik (see previous annotation). Moreover, the KSC Action Program, adopted in early April, had called for Czechoslovakia to “pursue a more active European policy” and to “promote mutually advantageous relations with all states.” These passages, combined with the gradual improvements in West German-Czechoslovak relations, could not help but antagonize Ulbricht. Thus, when Egon Bahr arrived in Prague on 17 April, Czechoslovak officials were aware of the need for discretion. At the same time, they wanted to explore opportunities that seemed potentially rewarding. Although the SPD was still only a partner in a coalition government, Brandt's party was expected to have a chance before long to form its own government (as indeed proved to be the case). It turned out that the talks with Bahr produced few results – see the declassified account, “Informace o rozhovorech mezinárodního oddelení ÚV KSC s představitelem SPD E. Bahrem,” 17-19 April, in Státní Ústřední Archiv (SÚA), Archiv Ústředního Výboru (ÚV) KSC, F. 02/1, Ll. 120-126 – but the very fact that the two parties had established direct contact was significant. When word of the meeting later leaked out, Ulbricht angrily accused the Czechoslovak authorities of having reneged on the Karlovy Vary commitments.⁴⁴ TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: The reference here is to a worldwide conference of Communist parties, which the Soviet Union was hoping to convene in Moscow in November 1968. Because of the Czechoslovak crisis, the conference was not held until June 1969, when seventy-five Communist parties officially gathered and another three took part unofficially. Fourteen parties, led by the Chinese and Albanian, declined to attend.