INTRODUCTION

We are in fact idiots, but our idiocy resembles the ideology of reform communism. Thus Zdeněk Mlynář, the youngest and brightest member of the Czechoslovak Communist Party Secretariat, summed up his impressions about the treatment he and Dubček’s colleagues received from the Soviet comrades during the fateful negotiations in Moscow in the week following the military invasion of their country.\(^1\) Even after a break of ten years, in describing the surrealist scene in the Kremlin, Mlynář admits that he could see no other options save two alternatives with which the Soviet leadership under Brezhnev uncharitably presented them at the time: you are either with us ‘forever’, or against us.\(^2\) As he was listening to the arguments on the Soviet side, trying to imagine what the implications of the Moscow diktat would be for his country, Mlynář was suddenly struck by a revealing parallel: ‘he understood Emil Háchá’, another Czechoslovak President, who had signed in March 1939, also under tranquillising injections and brutal threats, showered upon him at the time by Hitler and his companions, a similar humiliating ‘protocol’ agreeing with the German military occupation of rump-Czechoslovakia.\(^3\)

In contrast to Dubček’s muddled and emotional speech, Mlynář admits that he was impressed by the brutal realism with which Brezhnev outlined the three most important reasons which led Moscow to intervene in Czechoslovakia:

1. Dubček wanted to carry out internal policy without Brezhnev’s prior agreement and approval.
2. Our soldiers, who sacrificed their lives also for your freedom, reached the river Elbe in the last war – and that is and will remain our Soviet border.
3. ‘Precisely because the territorial results of the last war are
untouchable to us’, Brezhnev went on, ‘we had to intervene in Czechoslovakia, even at the risk of a new European war’.

But this was not going to happen because even the US government had recognised this fact, first at Yalta and Potsdam in 1945, and as recently as on 18 August in a personal message from President Johnson. ‘So, what do you think will be done on your behalf?’, Brezhnev exclaimed, ‘Comrades Tito, Ceausescu, Berlinguer, will make speeches. Well, and what of it? You are counting on the Communist movement in Western Europe? But that has remained insignificant for the last 50 years’.

Today another ten years have passed since the publication of Mlynář’s revealing book, and the Soviet Union is ruled by a third successor of Brezhnev, a man of a younger generation, from a different mould, and without direct combat experience in Russia’s Greater Patriotic War. Would he also see today, like Brezhnev did, Czechoslovakia’s options as basically confined to the two extreme alternatives: either with us ‘forever’, or against us? What relevance today will Brezhnev’s fundamental assumptions for the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, which were based on direct political interference and geopolitical imperialism, have? A critical reappraisal of the unique Prague Spring of 1968 at its second decennial anniversary seems to me thus more interesting and stimulating for at least three additional reasons which had been absent a decade ago.

First, because of the fiasco of the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan, which a decade ago had been seen by many as the culmination of the ‘Brezhnev Doctrine’, originally formulated in 1968 to legitimise the invasion of Czechoslovakia. Perhaps even more important is the fact that in 1988 Moscow made an unusual step in reluctantly agreeing to begin with the withdrawal of its troops from Afghanistan, which demonstrated before the whole world — as the French and Americans had discovered for themselves earlier in Indo-China — that a so-called primitive people, but armed with indomitable resolution, can resist and eventually defeat a technologically vastly superior military adversary. This, of course, notwithstanding the specific circumstances surrounding the new political leadership in Moscow, could only happen at a considerable cost in human suffering, which not only the Czechs and Slovaks in 1968 (or in an analogical situation of 1938–9), but most westernised and consumer-oriented peoples for that matter, are unable to bear.

Secondly, because of the ‘Solidarity’ phenomenon in neighbouring