

Where was the CIA? Planning another assassination?

The Limits of Intelligence: Why No One Knew

The invasion of Czechoslovakia caught the U.S. with its guard down. When Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin relayed the first details to President Johnson, key foreign-policy makers were scattered. Secretary of State Dean Rusk was preoccupied with a summation of Viet Nam policy for the Democratic Party Platform Committee. Under Secretary of State Nicholas Katzenbach was vacationing at Martha's Vineyard. U.S. Ambassador Llewellyn Thompson had left Moscow for a holiday in Venice that earlier tensions in Prague had delayed. European allies of the U.S. were no better prepared. NATO envoys meeting the next day in Brussels had little more than newspaper reports for guidance. Not a single advance word of warning had reached the West from its intricate web of intelligence agents and spies.

Another clanging defeat for Western intelligence? Not really. It was a failure not of intelligence but of evaluation and judgment. The failure, moreover, was shared by intelligence services, diplomats, journalists and assorted experts the world over.

In fact, it was on Aug. 2 that President Johnson had received pinpoint information on the massive Warsaw Pact forces poised at seven potential entry points. Two East German divisions, the Soviet Eighth and Twentieth Guards Armies, the First Soviet Guards Tank Army and the Twenty-Fourth Soviet Tactical Air Army were mustered in East Germany. Hard by Poland's frontier was a detachment of Polish Silesian infantry and more than 3,000 Soviet tanks and troop-carrying vehicles were less than 25 miles from the Czechoslovak rail center of Zilina. Part of the Soviet Third Army manned Russia's Carpathian border with Czechoslovakia, while to the south, a huge Soviet troop convoy waited inside Hungary. Token forces from Bulgaria, Poland, East Germany and Hungary had also been put on battle-ready status. Air bases in Poland and nearby Baltic states were crowded with Soviet warplanes. The missing, crucial fragment of information was whether the Kremlin had mustered these forces as a bluff or a preliminary for invasion.

Menacing War Games. Two days before tanks rolled, Western intelligence logged an unusual concentration of military flights across Poland. Could this be the prelude to an attack? It was Soviet Air Force Day. Perhaps the flights were part of the ceremonies?

The day before there had been a

steady stream of Soviet aircraft flying to East German landing strips near the Czechoslovak border. Scanning radar screens, NATO intelligence officers were worried. Were the planes participating in the menacing war games that Warsaw Pact armies had been playing for more than two months? When the

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planes took off, heading away from Czechoslovakia—for the time being—the watchers relaxed.

The maneuvers were tailored as a mask for aggression. Yet at no time did U.S. intelligence analysts from the CIA, Defense Intelligence Agency, National Security Agency or the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research advise the President that an invasion would definitely occur. They could not. The decision to strike lay locked inside the minds of a handful of Soviet leaders. As one State Department official observed: "They are a government that knows how to keep its mouth shut better than ours does." U.S. intelligence experts now believe that the Soviet leadership reached its irrevocable decision on Tuesday, just a few hours before the first Russian tanks rumbled



SOVIET'S YAKUBOVSKY

But the decision was locked inside.

into Czechoslovakia, commanded by Soviet General Ivan Yakubovskiy.

The swiftness and secrecy that spooked the spooks also jolted the Pentagon into the unhappy awareness that its defense plans for Western Europe were outmoded. For more than a decade, they have hinged on the premise that wary eyes focused on a cumbersome Soviet military machine would furnish at least two weeks' warning of any warlike thrust—time essential to activate the U.S. Army's Big Lift of troops to Europe and to mobilize NATO forces. Any westward-aimed Soviet buildup would certainly have produced a massive and almost simultaneous response. Nonetheless, top U.S. strategists could not conceal their respect for the shattering speed and efficiency of the Soviet takeover when it finally came about. "There should have been some little indication," lamented one senior Pentagon planner. One tip-off might have been a report that Soviet tanks were switching from blank shells used for maneuvers to live ammunition. "We got no word of it."