SPRING

The Czechoslovak nation was founded in Prague in 1918; the Communists proclaimed their revolution there in 1948 until their grip was briefly but dramatically loosened in 1968.

1918-2018
A recent shot taken from Charles Bridge of Novotny footbridge, the former Old Town Mills

Photograph: Laif/Camera Press London

AWAKENING

This year is the anniversary of many of the most dramatic events in the Czech capital's turbulent history – Richard Askwith looks at its extraordinary past and promising future

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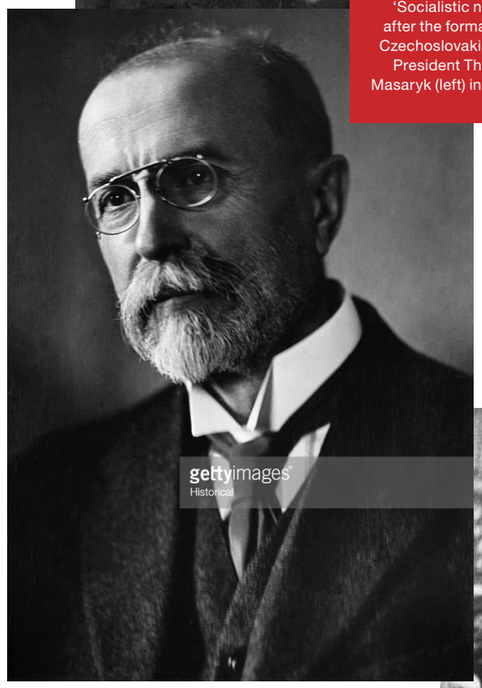
1918
Demonstrators in Bílá Hora demand a 'Socialistic nation' after the formation of Czechoslovakia under President Thomas Masaryk (left) in October



Photographs: Getty Images; Josef Koudelka/Magnum Photos

On a sunny afternoon half a century ago, a Prague night-shift worker was awakened by a policeman's knock on his door. Such visits usually meant trouble from the secret police, but this one had a stranger purpose. Some British pop stars were about to perform on the nearby Charles Bridge and needed a place to change.

It was 20 August 1968. For two decades, Czechoslovakia had been in the grip of one of the Soviet Bloc's dourest Communist tyrannies. Its cowed citizens were barely allowed to know about the depraved culture of the West, let alone taste it. So why were the security services now actively helping the Moody Blues?

But this was no ordinary year. A new first secretary of the Communist Party, 46-year-old Alexander Dubček, had been appointed in January. Ever since, hitherto unimaginable things had been happening. Censorship had been abolished, political offenders rehabilitated, travel restrictions lifted. Slavish submission to the Party was no longer compulsory. There was even talk of free elections. Dubček called it "socialism with a human face". The rest of the world called it the Prague Spring.

The atmosphere was intoxicating. Dubček had vowed "to remove everything that strangles artistic and scientific creativeness". Debate flourished. Political magazines sold in hundreds of thousands. As the playwright and future president Václav Havel later recalled, "After 20 years one was able to breathe freely." Everyone seemed to be excited, talkative, optimistic. "I thought we would succeed in creating a new kind of society," remembers the singer Marta Kubišová.

By summer, tourists were entering and leaving the country. Young people danced to hits such as *Walking Back to Happiness*. And the third Tuesday of August was earmarked, remarkably, for a concert of Western music. The Moody Blues were to headline. The Charles Bridge show was just a warm-up, but the band still had to prepare, so the night-shift worker was turfed out of his home. Soon afterwards, the yearning chords of *Nights in White Satin* swelled over the river Vltava: an improbable gift from the West's summer of love to the East's spring of hope.

Word spread quickly. One fan hoping to see the next night's show was 19-year-old Boris Gaydečka, who decades later founded Prague's famous Lávka nightclub. "We loved English music, but the Moody Blues were something else. It would have been an incredible event," he says.

But it was not to be. Shortly before midnight, a huge Soviet-led army drawn from five Warsaw Pact countries crossed the Czechoslovak border. After months of menacing noises, the Kremlin had decided that Dubček's experiment was "threatening the foundations of socialism". The Moody Blues were airlifted out, along with a plane-load of British Embassy staff. Their summer concert never happened.

Armed resistance was impossible – and Dubček, before being carted off to Moscow, urged his people not to provoke a "senseless bloodbath". But vast crowds were soon out on the streets, using non-violent resistance instead. Tanks had their paths blocked by human chains – and their periscopes blocked with paper; soldiers were demoralised by multilingual graffiti and one-on-one harangues. "It was terrifying, but also absurd," recalls former Olympic javelin champion Dana Zátopková, now 95. "Many soldiers didn't even know what country they were in." Her late husband, Olympic champion Emil Zátopek, was one of several street orators who rallied the crowds in Wenceslas Square, denouncing the Soviets as "the gangsters of the world" and urging defiance.

The exhortations worked. The Czechs and Slovaks ran rings round the Warsaw Pact forces for weeks. When the invaders took over the state radio, clandestine radio and TV broadcasts were improvised – and Kubišová, who had recently recorded a song celebrating the fall of a cruel tyranny, re-recorded it, so that *A Prayer for Marta* could be used as an anthem of resistance.

The tanks won in the end. By April 1969, after more than 100 civilian deaths, hardline Communism was re-established, the champions of freedom punished. (Kubišová suffered two decades of persecution – then sang *A Prayer for Marta* again during 1989's Velvet Revolution.) Yet, for all the bloodshed and heartbreak, many felt that it had been worth it. Novelist Milan Kundera described the first fierce days of solidarity following the invasion as "the most beautiful week that we have ever lived through".

This year, with pride and sorrow, Czechs and Slovaks will mark the Prague Spring's 50th anniversary. Yet this won't be the only national turning point under discussion in coming months. It's a quirk of Czech history that major events tend to take place in years ending in '8' (see below). And 2018's bumper crop of anniversaries includes the centenary of an even bigger landmark: the creation of an independent Czechoslovak nation.

As with the Prague Spring, the First Czechoslovak Republic was a noble but doomed attempt to create a better way of living. Tomáš Masaryk, its founding father, carved out the new liberal democracy from the ruins of the Austro-Hungarian Empire as WWI was ending. The victorious Allies backed him, and Czechoslovakia was born on 28 October 1918. After centuries of servitude, Czechs and Slovaks took control of their own destinies. For two decades, they made quite a good job of it.

Masaryk, their first and thrice re-elected president, was one of the 20th century's more attractive statesmen: a working-class philosopher whose motto was: "Don't be afraid and don't steal." His nation was far from perfect, but his decency suffused it. Radical land reform addressed some of the worst social inequalities. New opportunities opened up (for a while) for →

1968
An iconic image taken by Czech photographer Josef Koudelka during spontaneous street protests against the Soviet invasion

THE NEW FIRST SECRETARY CALLED IT "SOCIALISM WITH A HUMAN FACE". THE REST OF THE WORLD CALLED IT THE PRAGUE SPRING

1948
Wenceslas Square crowds hear Klement Gottwald announce the formation of a new government on 25 February, after the Communist coup

CZECH '8'

The Czech Republic has lots of anniversaries in 2018

| → | It's 25 years since the Czech Republic was founded, following the Velvet Divorce from Slovakia, on 1 January 1993.

| → | The Prague Spring began and ended 50 years ago this year.

| → | Next month it will be 70 years since 'Victorious February', when the Communists ushered in four decades of one-party rule.

| → | There's also the 400th anniversary of the Defenestration of Prague – a violent ejection of the Catholic emperor's officials through a window of Prague Castle, in May 1618, which led to the Thirty Years' War.

| → | It's 80 years since the Munich Agreement (29 September), in which Britain and France let Hitler annex the Sudetenland, paving the way for invasion and war. (Read Robert Harris's *Munich* for the inside story.)

| → | The one that matters most of all in 2018 is the creation, 100 years ago in October, of an independent Czechoslovak nation.

| → | The first stirrings of 1989's Velvet Revolution arguably began with a demonstration in Prague's Škroupovo Square on 10 December 1988, during a visit by French President François Mitterrand.

1918-2018
A statue of St Wenceslas overlooks Wenceslas Square. It was here that Alois Jirásek read the proclamation of the independence of Czechoslovakia

women and the working classes; technical and creative innovation were widespread; industry flourished. Later, the country's democratic institutions proved strong enough to survive the Great Depression. What they couldn't survive was being part of a peaceable nation in the heart of a troubled continent. In 1938, Czechoslovakia's Western allies allowed Hitler to annex German-speaking Sudetenland, crucial to the young nation's prosperity and defence. The First Republic became the enfeebled Second Republic, which was snuffed out the following year by the Nazi invasion.

That wasn't quite the end of the story. Democracy was restored briefly from 1945 to 1948, and again from 1990 to 1993. Then Czechoslovakia dissolved into its two component parts. But the Czech Republic, the most obvious successor to Masaryk's west-facing state, is this month celebrating 25 years of uninterrupted democracy – and over the next 12 months will also mark the full centenary of the formation of Czechoslovakia.

The 'Czech Republic 100' programme features more than 170 events within Czechoslovakia's old boundaries; nearly a third involve Slovakia. There will be celebrations abroad, too, including a week-long series of cultural happenings in London in October; while the BBC will help Czech Radio to celebrate its own vital role in the nation's history. It's all a reminder that the Czech Republic is one of Europe's most sophisticated and prosperous nations, with a growing economy, the EU's lowest unemployment rate, a budget surplus, low public debt and an industrial and scientific heritage as rich as its cultural one. "We want this to be about looking forward, not back," says Libor Sečka, the Czech Republic's ambassador to the UK, who is particularly proud of his country's thriving healthcare sector and of its world-leading nanotechnology industry.

But there is much to be said for looking back, too. The recent electoral triumph of populist billionaire Andrej Babiš (dubbed 'the Czech Trump') has raised the prospect of a retreat from democratic values and a resurgence of Russian influence. Anxiety about the future direction of the nation is widespread; even a 'Czech-out' from the EU is not inconceivable. "Sometimes," admits Kubišová, "when watching the news on TV, I am literally raging."

It seems a good time to remind ourselves of what ties the Czechs' national narrative to our own. Their capital, cherished by Mozart and Einstein, lies further west than Vienna. Czechs fought for the Allies (defying their Austro-Hungarian overlords) in WWI; Czechs died fighting in the Battle of Britain. The idealists who tried to build a gentler kind of socialism in 1968 were part of the same European narrative as ourselves.

For one Czech music impresario, it's a message still worth celebrating. His plans aren't yet set in stone, but if you're visiting Prague this summer, save these dates: 20-21 August. Fifty years after the Soviet-led invasion, David Gaydečka – the man behind the United Islands and Metronome festivals, and nephew of the disappointed Boris mentioned earlier – plans to "finish the concert that never happened". His ambition of luring back the entire Moody Blues may prove to be beyond him, but he has high hopes that Justin Hayward, as least, will be back on the river by Charles Bridge. "I can't promise it's going to happen," admits Gaydečka. "But we're working on it." ■

THIS YEAR SERVES AS A REMINDER THAT THE CZECH REPUBLIC IS ONE OF EUROPE'S MOST SOPHISTICATED AND PROSPEROUS NATIONS

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