

The True Revolutionaries of 1968

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In my view, the true significance of 1968 lies not in the student radicalism usually associated with this year, but in the events of Prague, Warsaw, and Moscow where dissidence and political opposition within the Soviet communist empire was reborn.

By the time of the brutal suppression of the Prague Spring by the Warsaw Pact in August 1968, it had become clear to most everyone who risked opposing communist regimes that they could not be reformed from within but would have to be overthrown. Already in March of that year, students in Warsaw and other cities in Poland came together to demand university reforms as a metaphor for democracy – well before the Paris events. While their protests were met with arrests and imprisonment, that generation would become the heart of the Polish dissident movement and, together with their older mentors, keep alive the spirit of opposition during the harsh period of the 1970s. In 1976, the ‘1968 generation’ launched the Workers Defense Committee, which aided the movement for free trade unions among workers and thus realized a true coalition of workers and intellectuals. That coalition resulted in the birth of Solidarity. Which had more historical impact: Warsaw 1968 or Paris 1968?

1968 also forged a new generation of dissidents in the Soviet Union who committed themselves to non-violent opposition to the regime, despite its unlikely potential for success. On August 26, 1968, five days after the Warsaw Pact invaded Czechoslovakia, seven human rights campaigners went to Red Square facing the Kremlin with protest banners. Contrast two scenes. In May, in Paris, tens of thousands of students rioted and their actions were hailed in left-wing journals. Their actions were later hailed in left-wing journals. In Moscow, three months later, seven human rights activists, asserted their right to protest in a totalitarian regime, peacefully unveiled banners against the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia and were quickly arrested and sentenced to prison and Siberia. This act was generally ignored in the Western left journals (with some notable exceptions).

The Red Square protest symbolised the birth of a new dynamic human rights movement that had been gestating for several years and that later spread throughout

the Soviet Union. Its leaders and activists, most importantly Andrei Sakharov, would be at the heart of the 1991 Revolution and rebirth of nations. Which had more impact, Columbia University or Red Square?

1968 was a turning point because people embraced a new idea. Not the Marxist, Sartrean or Marcusean dialectics inspiring students in France, Britain, and America, but the moral imperative of human rights. People in the Soviet bloc protested in public for their dignity and rights and this was the most revolutionary thinking of 1968.

Forty years after 1968, we are still romancing about trivia. Forgotten are the authors and defenders of freedom of 1968, people like Sakharov, Bonner, Litvinov, Boguraz, Landsbergis, Kelem, Chornovil, Djemilev, Elchibey, Milosz, Modzelewski, Kuron, Karpinski, Kolakowski, Havel, Škvorecký, as well as the Western defenders of freedom like Berlin, Koestler, Meany, Orwell, Randolph, Rustin, and Hook. Perhaps, on its 50th anniversary, these true revolutionaries will define the meaning of '1968.'

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