



Czech-Mate

An Olympic Victory Is Symbolic of One Nation's Role in Defeating Communism

By Fredo Arias-King

The drama that unfolded last Saturday night at the men's Olympic hockey final in Nagano, in which the Czech Republic beat Russia 1-0 in a hair-raising game, had symbolic meaning well beyond awarding the gold medal to the underdogs. It closely reflected the role the Czechs, armed only with their ideas, played in destroying the Soviet Union.

If the Soviet Union had not forced Czechoslovakia, which was the only democracy east of Switzerland before the Nazi invasion, into the Soviet orbit in 1948, the USSR would probably exist to this day. The Czechs, famous for their strong democratic traditions and cynical attitude towards authority, were the Trojan Horse of the Soviet empire.

While the Czechs never tried to put up a bare-fisted fight against the mighty Soviets (as the Hungarians did in 1956), their brief experiment to reform socialism under Alexander Dubcek in 1968, crushed that same year with Soviet tanks, was the virus which infected Soviet communism two decades later.

There are several causal links. The first is Alexander Yakovlev, known as the architect of glasnost and perestroika, and Gorbachev's chief adviser. He had been in charge of re-imposing the Stalinist ideology on the Czechs after the Soviet invasion, finding it in his words, "one of the most horrible things I've had to do." His own idea of communism changed then, as he could not argue against the far more timely ideas of Dubcek's people.

Another link was Zdenek Mlynar, who was one of the principal architects of the Prague Spring along with Dubcek. By one of history's most incredible coincidences, he had attended Moscow State University in the 1950s and shared a dorm room there with a young Russian named Mikhail S. Gorbachev. Apparently the

two kept in touch, and Gorbachev was intrigued with what his former roommate was doing to reform communism in Prague. Gorbachev later said that Dubcek's reforms served as the main ideological pillars for his perestroika. When Gorbachev's spokesman Gennady Gerasimov was asked at a press conference in 1989 what the difference between the Prague Spring and perestroika were, his reply was "20 years."

The third causal link came from the non-communist forces that gained ascendancy during the Soviet democratization period of 1988-89, who agreed with the reform communists in their admiration for the Prague Spring and its principles. The dissident Nobel Prize-winning physicist Andrei Sakharov was the leader of this democratic movement. He wrote in his memoirs that the crushing of the Prague Spring was one of the most tragic events of Russia's history, "but fire burned beneath the ashes," he concluded.

But the Soviets found to their chagrin that "reform communism" is an oxymoron, and since coercion and state terror were the only gluing mechanism of the USSR, any reform experiment meant to give their socialism a "human face" was bound to destroy the very pillars of that system. It was the Czechs' and Slovaks' attempts to make sense of an alien ideology during 1968, however, and its eventual crushing by Soviet hardware, that infected the Soviet Union's politics 20 years later, leading to the sensational death of a bloody tyranny.

After the Soviet Union died, the Czechs once again were relied upon by decent-minded Russians to make sure communism never returned. The victorious Russians, fresh from overthrowing their Soviet overlords in 1991, realized that the best way to make sure the communists never returned was to quickly privatize all government-owned businesses and housing. This way, common citizens would have private property

and an incentive to defend it. How do you privatize a Stalinist economy quickly? Well, the Czechs had been doing it for two years with the "voucher" system, devised by Jan Svejnar, a Czech-American economist. Now, Russia has a lower percentage of its GNP in government hands than does Italy.

The Russians copied from the Czechs all they could to free themselves of the worst tyranny ever known to man. When I asked Gorbachev's former top economic adviser, Stanislav Shatalin, why Russia did not just carbon-copy all the Czech commercial and tax codes, instead of endlessly debating how to reinvent the wheel, he replied, "Because the Czechs solve their differences in a bar over a beer, while we use knives!"

Now that all sorts of ex-communists and other imperial-minded demagogues, including foreign minister Primakov, have hijacked Russia's nascent democratization and begun to question democratic practice and even the wisdom of dissolving the Soviet Union and its beloved empire, the Russians would not have handled an Olympic victory well. Russia is its own worst enemy, and a Russian hockey victory would have given them a false sense of superiority towards a former colony. For their own good, Russia badly needed to lose this game to the underdog—the same underdog that showed them the way to their hated freedom.

The Czech hockey goal that humbled the Russians before the entire world in Nagano was a victory of ideas over simple raw power, much like the political relation of the two countries for the past 50 years. How sweet it is that the player who scored the winning goal was named Svoboda. His name, in both languages, means freedom.

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