

DOCUMENT No. 72: The "Letter of Invitation" from the Anti-Reformist Faction of the CPCz Leadership, August 1968

Source: ÚSD, Sb. KV, Z/S 21.

This letter, drafted by a small group of pro-Moscow hard-liners in the CPCz, was given to Brezhnev at the Bratislava meeting on August 3. Written in Russian so as to be easy to read, the letter provided "an urgent request and plea for your intervention" to protect Czechoslovakia from the "imminent danger of counterrevolution." It was signed by Vasil Biľak and four of his colleagues: Drahomír Kolder, Alois Indra, Oldřich Švestka, and Antonín Kapek. Biľak quietly passed the letter to another member of the CPSU Politburo, Pyotr Shelest, in a meeting in the men's lavatory—the rendezvous was set up by the KGB station chief in Bratislava—during a break at the conference. Shelest went promptly to Brezhnev's suite and passed on the letter.

Brezhnev cited the "letter of invitation" when he met the leaders of East Germany, Poland, Hungary, and Bulgaria in Moscow on August 18 to inform them of the decision to invade. Brezhnev proposed to his East European colleagues that the letter be used as a formal justification for the impending military intervention. All the participants supported the idea, and the letter became a pretext for the invasion, though the "appeal" for "fraternal assistance" that was published in the Soviet press on August 22 was considerably longer and more detailed.

After the invasion, Soviet authorities stamped this key document top secret and locked it in the Kremlin archive with personal instructions from the head of the CPSU General Department, Konstantin Chernenko: "To be preserved in the Politburo Archive. Not to be opened without my express permission." For years, the letter, who signed it, and whether it even existed, remained a mystery. In July 1992, Russian President Boris Yeltsin provided the Czechoslovak government with a copy. Biľak, the only surviving signatory, was indicted by the Czechoslovak federal government in early 1992 on several counts, including charges of treason for trying to set up a "provisional revolutionary government of workers and peasants" after the invasion. Subsequently, those charges were broadened to include his part in the "letter of invitation." The breakup of the Czechoslovak federation at the end of 1992 prevented Biľak's trial.

Esteemed Leonid Il'ich,

We, conscious of the full responsibility for our decision, appeal to you with the following statement.

The basically correct post-January democratic process, the correction of mistakes and shortcomings of the past, as well as the overall political management of society, have gradually eluded the control of the party's Central Committee. The press, radio, and television, which are effectively in the hands of right-wing forces, have influenced popular opinion to such an extent that elements hostile to the party have begun to take part in the political life of our country, without any opposition from the public. These elements are fomenting a wave of nationalism and chauvinism, and are provoking an anti-communist and anti-Soviet psychosis.

Our collective—the party leadership—has made a number of mistakes. We have not properly defended or put into effect the Marxist-Leninist norms of party work and above all the principles of democratic centralism. The party leadership is no longer able to defend itself successfully against attacks on socialism, and it is unable to organize either ideological or political resistance against the right-wing forces. The very existence of socialism in our country is under threat.

At present, all political instruments and the instruments of state power are paralyzed to a considerable degree. The right-wing forces have created conditions suitable for a counterrevolutionary coup.

In such trying circumstances we are appealing to you, Soviet communists, the leading representatives of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, with a request for you to lend support and assistance with all the means at your disposal. Only with your assistance can the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic be extricated from the imminent danger of counterrevolution.

We realize that for both the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Soviet government, this ultimate step to preserve socialism in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic will not be easy. Therefore, we will struggle with all our power and all our means. But if our strength and capabilities are depleted or fail to bring positive results, then our statement should be regarded as an urgent request and plea for your intervention and all-round assistance.

In connection with the complex and dangerous course of the situation in our country, we request that you treat our statement with the utmost secrecy, and for that reason we are writing directly to you, personally, in Russian.

Alois Indra Drahomír Kolder Antonín Kapek Oldřich Švestka Vasil Bilak*

* Kapek had previously written a letter of his own to Brezhnev in late July in which he deplored the "anti-socialist and anti-Soviet" trends in Czechoslovakia and requested "fraternal assistance" from the Soviet Union. Unlike this letter, Kapek's apparently had little or no impact.