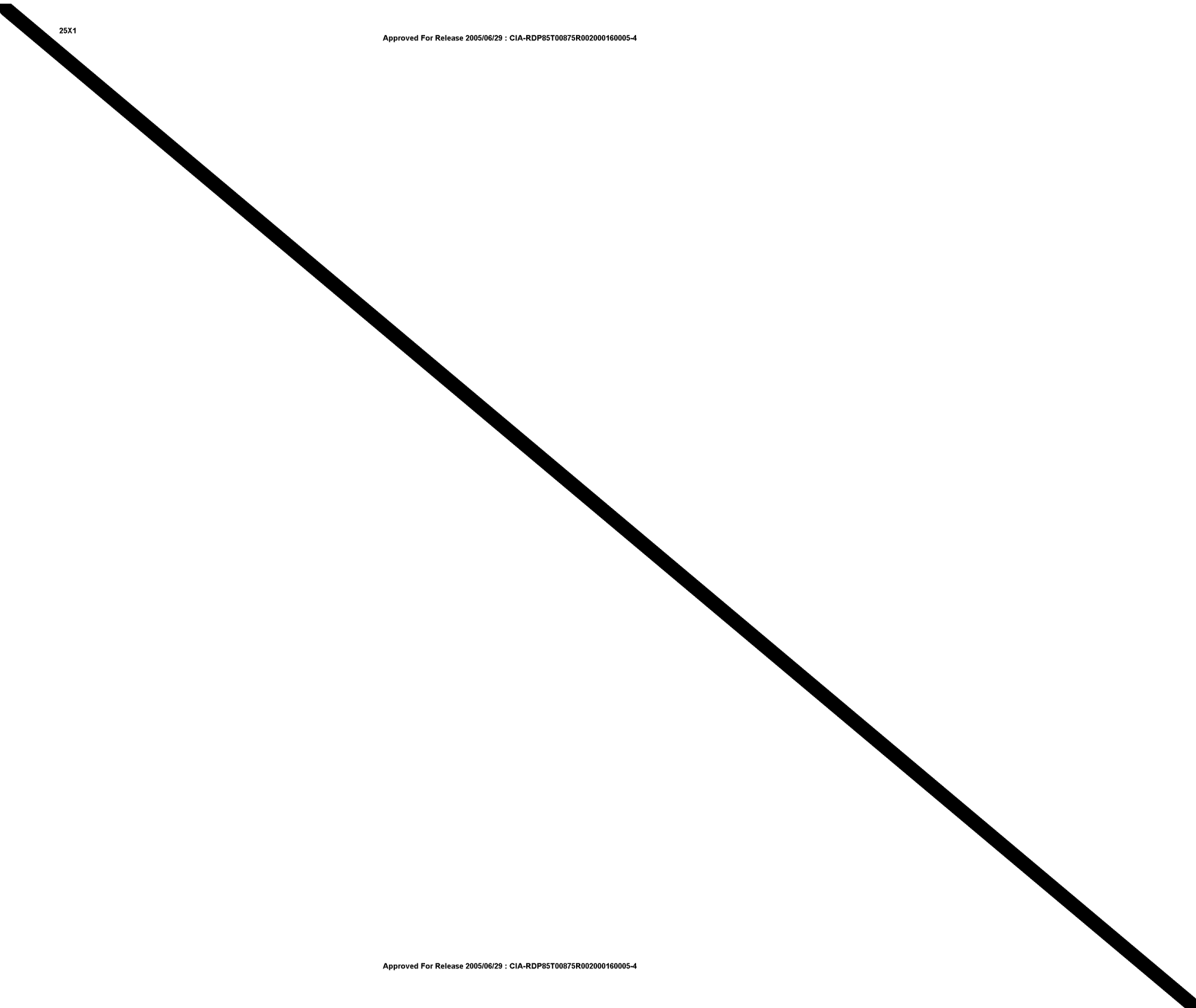

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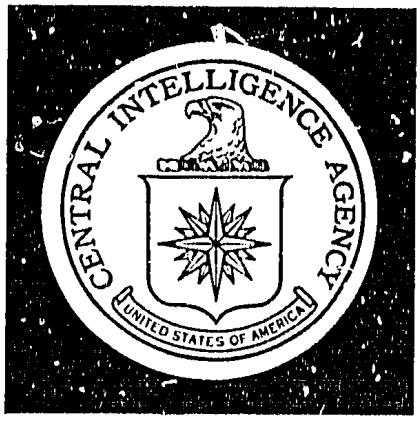

BOARD OF
NATIONAL ESTIMATES

SPECIAL MEMORANDUM

The USSR and Eastern Europe

Secret
21 March 1968
No. 6-68

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

21 March 1968

SPECIAL MEMORANDUM NO. 6-68

SUBJECT: The USSR and Eastern Europe*

SUMMARY

A. Eastern Europe is alive with political movement once again. Recent weeks have seen the overthrow of the established "conservative" order in Czechoslovakia, the outbreak of widespread student violence in Poland, and an open clash between Romania and the USSR at Budapest. While all these developments have had essentially anti-Soviet implications, the pattern of events in each of these three countries varies considerably. The newly dominant forces in the Czechoslovak party are committed to substantial internal reform and a more independent

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* This memorandum was produced solely by CIA. It was prepared by the Office of National Estimates and coordinated with the Office of Current Intelligence.

course in foreign policy. Party leaders in Warsaw, though otherwise divided into contesting factions, seem united in their determination to oppose popular demands for similar changes in Polish policies. And the regime in Romania, though also hostile to liberal reform, is largely free of any such domestic pressures and concentrates instead on its running battle for independence from the Soviet Union.

B. The odds are against any explosion in Eastern Europe comparable to that which occurred in 1956. Political circumstances and public moods have changed greatly in the intervening years. There is now a real prospect that Czechoslovakia will be able to set itself on a path denied to it in the past, toward a meaningful degree of liberty at home and sovereignty abroad and eventually a place of its own, somewhere between East and West.

C. It is true nonetheless that a restive nationalism, reminiscent of 1956, is an ingredient common to the most dramatic recent developments in Eastern Europe. It is true also that, as in Hungary in 1956, a popular uprising would almost certainly be a spontaneous event and thus would be essentially unpredictable. Some of the unusual political conditions which existed in Hungary before the revolution are visible today in Czechoslovakia, and the flash point could yet be reached.

D. Among the Soviet leaders, there is probably considerable apprehension about the trend of events in Eastern Europe and perhaps some disagreement as well. Beyond this, however, the Soviet attitude remains somewhat obscure. Moscow has lost its man in Prague (Novotny) but has not adopted a clear attitude toward his successor (Dubcek). The Soviets apparently were not displeased to see the Romanians walk out of the Budapest conference, which suggests that they may adopt a less conciliatory approach to the Romanian problem. They might resort to heavier political pressures, subversive efforts and economic blackmail in an attempt to curb Czech or Romanian excesses, but they probably have little confidence that such methods would prove very effective.

E. Should events get completely out of hand in Eastern Europe -- e.g., a complete collapse of Communist authority in Czechoslovakia -- the Soviets would, of course, once more face the hard choice of whether or not to intervene with troops. Though they would be even more reluctant to do so than they were in 1956, in the end they would probably decide that they could not tolerate such a setback and would intervene. They might think this feasible, however, only if their supporters in Prague first succeeded in provoking violence.

DISCUSSION

1. The great post-Hungarian settlement in Eastern Europe -- so painfully improvised and constructed in the wake of the events of 1956 -- is today on the verge of dissolution. Romania, long the Bloc maverick, has dramatized its denial of Soviet hegemony over its foreign policies by stalking out of the Communist conference in Budapest. Czechoslovakia, for years the docile ally, has successfully defied the USSR and is now embarking on a new and much more nationalist road. And Poland, under Gomulka the prime example of the proper Soviet ally, could be ignited by a shower of sparks from neighboring Czechoslovakia. To the leaders in Moscow, especially to men such as Brezhnev and Suslov, whose political fortunes at home will not remain untouched by the course of events in Eastern Europe, the picture must appear bleak indeed. By the same token, the temptation to intervene forcefully may become very strong.

Shades of '56

2. It is over eleven years since the revolution in Hungary and the political upheaval in Poland. Much has changed in Eastern Europe and in the world in that time, and the present situation

should not be seen as one likely to produce merely a repeat performance. The situation today is vastly more complex. In 1956, the countries of Eastern Europe, taking advantage of the throes of de-Stalinization in the USSR, reacted against Stalinism and the Stalinist bonds which held them in thrall to Moscow. Each state, of course, behaved in its own fashion, but everywhere the issues were essentially the same and, in Poland and Hungary, it seemed for a time to be a case of nationalist heroes vs. Moscovite villains.

3. In 1968, though the spirit of Stalin is in some instances still alive, and though the name of Stalin is still invoighed in partisan cause, the issues are more diffuse and the political situations in the various countries are more complicated. The heroes are less conspicuous -- Dubcek does not seem an entirely suitable replacement for Imre Nagy. The villians are also less obvious. The Rakosis -- the brutal and heavy-handed local Stalins -- are gone, and (Ulbricht aside) the Rokossovskys -- the visible Soviet agents at the highest levels -- are gone too. The national leaders, even the loyal Gomulkas and Kadars, are for the most part precisely that. The politicians now quarrel over the kind of support, if any, to give to the Soviet Union in its struggle with China, the treatment accorded the Hungarian minority

in Romania, and the most desirable timing for diplomatic recognition of the Federal Republic of Germany, all matters of substance quite inconceivable in Stalin's time. For their part, the people at large probably feel that they now have some stake in the preservation of public order and may in general be in a better frame of mind -- they now eat more and suffer less at the hands of the secret police.

4. Finally, Europe as a whole has changed greatly since 1956. West Germany has framed new and more flexible policies toward the East. And many of the East European states, moved by economic considerations and encouraged by the USSR's own policies of detente, see in improved relations with West Germany and Western Europe an opportunity to lessen their dependence on Moscow and ultimately a chance to participate as sovereign equals in a community of Europe. Thus there is now in view a plausible alternative to perpetual Soviet dominance in Eastern Europe, a prospect which was not at all visible in 1956.

5. In some ways, the differences between 1956 and today could work to keep matters from reaching the flash point. In Romania, the party is united, is firmly in control, and is not opposed by the people. In Poland, the party -- though otherwise divided --

appears at least to be united against the demands for liberal reform. In Czechoslovakia, the protesters are not simply beating their heads against Soviet and local Communist obduracy and stupidity; with Novotny removed, the dominant force within the party appears to be seriously intent on reform and thus enjoys meaningful public support. Moreover, among many patriots (perhaps especially in Czechoslovakia) there is now the feeling, based on the experiences of 1956 and what has happened since within the Communist movement, that their cause will surely win in the end if it is in the meantime pursued with persistence and patience but not with passion.

6. There are, however, some notable similarities between 1956 and 1968. In both years, the roots of discontent have flourished in nationalist soils enriched quite inadvertently by the Soviet Union. In both years much of the ferment was stirred up by intellectuals, in and out of the parties, and by students, intolerant of compromise. In both years, the way was shown, in spirit if not in letter, by countries which had already successfully defied the USSR, Yugoslavia in 1956 and Romania in 1968. And, finally, in both years, the USSR was ruled not by a single, purposeful leader but by a collective of concerned and uncertain men.

7. The situation today may thus be building toward a situation comparable to that of, say, the spring and summer of 1956. The arguments being joined today in Eastern Europe are potentially explosive; they are ultimately concerned not with the degree of Soviet control and the degree of popular freedom, as in 1956.* On the contrary, the purport of the Romanian experiment is the termination of Soviet control, and the issue in Czechoslovakia is democracy in the Czech tradition, not merely in some hybrid Marxist-Leninist form. Moreover, as demonstrated by student riots in Poland and the public outcry in Czechoslovakia, these societies are in a state of great agitation. As in 1956, emotions are running high and are spilling over into neighboring states.

8. Czechoslovakia. From the look of things at the moment, it is tempting to conclude that only the thin red line of Novotny and his cohorts now stands between Czechoslovakia and freedom. Even without the USSR looming massively in the background, it is not, of course, quite that simple. Novotny's resignation -- which now seems likely -- would represent another grave setback for

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* Except, of course, for those few hectic and heady days in Budapest when a free Hungary withdrew from the Warsaw Pact.

the forces of conservatism but it would not necessarily mark their final defeat. Some of the current exuberance in Prague should probably be discounted as only the natural outgrowth of a sudden (and perhaps temporary) removal of tight censorship; one is unhappily reminded of the out-pourings of conscience and the misguided enthusiasms of the "revisionists" in the first flush of the Gomulka triumph in Poland in 1956. The people have so far displayed good temper, but if their high hopes were suddenly dashed, the mood could become ugly, even violent. It is true nonetheless that the omens so far are that the Dubcek regime is seeking to effect reforms without unleashing uncontrollable popular demands. At present, there is reason to foresee significant changes in the quality of the regime at home and promising developments in its policies abroad. At a minimum, barring a rush toward anarchy and an unexpected return of the conservatives, Moscow's relations with Prague will probably never again rest on an easy assumption of ready Czechoslovak compliance.

9. Poland. There have long been wheels within wheels in the confused and tight little world of Polish politics. In some ways, this has perhaps made Gomulka's task all the easier; only he has been able to spin these wheels more or less in the same direction when national momentum seemed to require it. More and

more of late, however, he has found that the track he has chosen to follow -- straight down the Soviet line -- is of little liking to elements in the party. More important, perhaps, are the current signs that political strife is no longer confined to the party. Gomulka's policies have finally provoked the students and, at least for a time, the intellectuals to move with courage and determination. It may be that a long period of popular acquiescence and apathy is coming to an end.

10. For years, the Polish regime has been sustained by a general feeling that Gomulka, while a disappointment, was probably the best one could hope for under the circumstances. Now, apparently, two things are happening. First, Gomulka is severely compromising his own reputation as a patriot and some Poles -- though probably unclear as to what the alternatives might be -- are wondering if some other leader should not be tested. Second, and certainly related, the circumstances which seemed to require Gomulka's special abilities to handle the Soviets may in the public mind be changing; students and intellectuals, for example, may be coming to feel that, as Poles, they can hardly do less than the Czechs and the Romanians, and that the time is now ripe for a new try against the Russians.

11. Romania. The scene in Romania is, of course, quite different, comparable in some ways to that in Belgrade in the early 1950's: a domestic stability resting very largely on popular support of the regime's defiance of the Soviet Union. This is nationalism turned to Communist advantage, and it is no doubt a lesson widely observed elsewhere in Eastern Europe. In any case, mainly because of this nationalism, to ponder what next in Romania is often to consider the far-fetched. It often seems that the Romanians have gone about as far as they can go; just as often, of course, the observer may be surprised. It is now clear that -- beyond the requirements of a simple prudence -- the Romanians have never set any particular limits, on what they plan to do; it is the Soviets who must set the limits, or at least try. The Ceausescu regime, in fact, considers the USSR in many ways to be the chief obstacle to the achievement of Romania's national goals and behaves accordingly.

12. That is to say, there is more to Romanian ambitions than the straightforward achievement of national independence (which has for the most part already been accomplished in any case). Bucharest also acts at times in ways which undercut Soviet policies in areas only very indirectly related to the question of its sovereignty. (This seems to be the case, for example, in the

Middle East.) And in instances of some bearing on the question of independence, such as its policies in Eastern Europe, Bucharest's resolve is not simply to win its autonomy but to protect, advertise, and expand it. Bucharest refuses to join in the campaign against China, not because it likes the Chinese or sees other than madness in the cultural revolution, but because Mao -- mad or not -- is a useful counterweight to Brezhnev. Ceausescu and company would like other Eastern countries to follow the Romanian lead, and welcome signs of incipient Czechoslovak support, not out of any concern for the purity of doctrine and the future of the cause, but largely because this seems a good way to embarrass Moscow, complicate its policies, and forestall its plans, if any, to set things aright.

The Soviets

13. There is simply no sure way of knowing at this point just how alarmed the Soviets might be about the trends of events in Eastern Europe. For all their awareness of the dangers of nationalism and probable anxieties over current upsets, some of the Soviet leaders are probably still given to rationalization and some may still be half blinded by an ideology which discourages the perception of socialist serbacks. Nevertheless, as indicated earlier, the Soviets can scarcely derive any comfort from what is

now taking place. Soviet preferences in Czechoslovakia, for example, were quite clearly rebuffed and, according to some accounts, direct Soviet efforts in Prague to enforce those preferences were just as clearly defeated.

14. Perhaps athe best clue we now have as to current Soviet preferences was the USSR's behavior during the recent Communist conference in Budapest. The Soviets at Budapest were little inclined tc calm or negotiate with the Romanians; in some ways, in fact, it seemed that the Soviets egged the Romanians on and were not at all displeased with their departure. It may be too early to read in this attitude a firm declaration of Soviet policy, but years of compromise and of diffident attempts to pressure the Romanians into a more "constructive" course have brought the Soviets naught. It is beginning to look as if the Soviets feel that a smaller unified bloc of parties -- capable of issuing resounding communiques on a variety of subjects and susceptible to firm Soviet leadership -- is better than a larger body willing to deal only in irresolute generalities and in part hostile to Soviet dominance. Perhaps they have decided, in fact, that it is time to try somehow to isolate Romania, or at least to seek in some way to contain Romanian influence on the policies and desires of the other Eastern European states. If so, the

Soviets have cut for themselves a rather large order. The new Czech leaders, for example, have already strongly hinted of their sympathy for Bucharest's attitude and -- largely because they would see in it a threat to their own independence -- would not be likely to go along with any such Soviet campaign against Romania

15. The present position of the Soviets toward the Dubcek regime in Czechoslovakia is obscure. So far, Moscow has been silent and has remained very much in the background, unable or, burned once, unwilling to try again to intervene. In any case, and not surprisingly, the Soviets have chosen publicly to ignore much of what is now going on in Czech politics, presumably hoping that much of the hue and cry will soon die down. Certainly they have not seemed at all anxious to endanger their position in Prague (whatever that might be) and the party's position in Czechoslovakia (already in decline) by mounting an all-out campaign to bring Novotny back. They must be wondering, however, when Dubcek -- presumably a proper Communist -- is going to take charge and silence the extremists in the Czech press and sit on the radicals in the Czech party. At least some Soviet leaders must fear not only that Czechoslovakia could become another Romania, independent and difficult in its foreign affairs, but

also that the Czechoslovak party, lacking effective leadership, could disintegrate and leave the country in the hands of "dark reaction".

16. The events in Czechoslovakia and elsewhere have probably by now created some controversy and perhaps some heat within the Soviet leadership. Brezhnev, Podgorny, and Suslov have been especially close to developments in Eastern Europe and are probably vulnerable to charges of having mishandled their responsibilities. In any case, the options now available to the Soviets, especially in the event of an explosion in Eastern Europe, are of a character almost certain to breed disagreement at the top. [redacted] 25X1

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Some of the leaders may be advocating preemptive action -- say an ultimatum to Dubcek to arrest the dangerous drift in Czechoslovakia, through force if necessary, or face strong Soviet countermeasures. Others, however, may be less concerned with the USSR's ability to control the destinies of these states and be apprehensive that clumsy Soviet interference might only provoke resentment, threaten Soviet influence, and create problems for the USSR elsewhere, especially in Western Europe.

17. To be sure, the mood of the post-Khrushchev collective has been predominantly conservative. This has meant in Eastern Europe that Soviet policy has in most instances followed the familiar and careful path. Thus the Soviets gave their support to Novotny not only because he was their man but also because, good, bad, or indifferent, he was a known quantity. Similarly, concerning Romania, the Soviet leaders have at least until recently tried to play it safe, avoiding confrontations even when seemingly invited not to do so by Bucharest.

18. But Moscow's caution (or its conservatism) is not without its limits, as was suggested this month in Budapest when Moscow used hard-line spokesmen, such as Bakdash of the Syrian party and Honecker of the East German, to attack Romania and to extol Soviet-led (or Soviet-imposed) unity. As always, the Soviets are certain to use a variety of pressures and even inducements to try to influence the course of events in Eastern Europe. Should they become sufficiently alarmed or angered by developments in, say, Czechoslovakia, they would probably bring to bear very heavy pressures indeed: direct intervention in Czech political affairs, to the point perhaps of working for an internal party coup; interference with the normal flow of trade and economic negotiations, perhaps selective at first but increasingly disruptive

over time; and, eventually, hints and warnings of military intervention, perhaps with related troop movements designed to lend substance to the threats.

19. It is worth noting that the Soviets have, in fact, used all of these methods in the past against obstreperous allies and that -- with the possible exception of Poland in 1956 -- they have in each known instance failed of their purpose. The Soviets no longer seem to have the resources within individual parties to set policy or to determine the composition of the leadership, as recently demonstrated anew in Czechoslovakia. In most instances, the Eastern European Communist leader must count on domestic bases of support to preserve his position; reliance on Moscow is risky (because there can be no assurance that Soviet support will not evaporate or suddenly shift to someone else) and -- as again demonstrated in Czechoslovakia by Novotny -- is unlikely to save him in any case. Economic pressures do not appear to be any more promising -- perhaps less so. They failed dramatically when used against Yugoslavia, China, and Albania, all countries which, on rational economic grounds alone, should have succumbed. Threats of military intervention have, in the past, had questionable consequences; in any event, Moscow probably understands that, to be effective, they must appear genuine and, in the end, be carried out.

20. The Soviets were reluctant to use their armies against a defecting state (Hungary) in 1956. They would probably be even more so today, largely because it would at one stroke destroy their political investment in Western Europe, so much larger now than in 1956, and severely damage their prestige in the world at large, significantly improved over 1956. It is true nonetheless that -- no matter this generally enhanced reluctance to use military force -- the Soviets could someday find themselves faced once more with the question -- whether to intervene with troops or to allow one or another state and perhaps ultimately all of Eastern Europe to go its own way. Where then are the limits of Soviet tolerance and where would they likely be in the event of an explosion? How well, in fact, can we, or they, define them?

21. It has been felt, at least since 1956, that the USSR would not tolerate in any of the Bloc states either an internal collapse of Communist authority or a withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact. Up to those two points, Soviet reactions might be equivocal, but once they had been reached the Soviet response would be swift and sure, as in Hungary in 1956. This estimate, in effect made both in Washington and in Eastern Europe, was probably sound for many years. But, as indicated, it should today be subject to some further examination because its first proposition -- concerning

Communist authority -- may be put to serious test. And it is subject to some qualification because the second of its propositions -- concerning the Warsaw Pact -- has already been at least partly tested and found wanting.

22. There are in any given situation "special" circumstances which help to explain national behavior which departs from a posited norm. Thus there were special circumstances in the case of Albania's de facto withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact which helped to explain why the Soviets did virtually nothing about it, viz. Albania's size -- which meant that it was unimportant -- and Albania's remoteness from the Soviet Union -- which created major problems of movement and supply for the Soviet armed forces. It is true, however, that had Moscow been so pained by the principle of withdrawal from the Pact, it could have moved militarily to crush the offending regime (which would have, inter alia, saved the Soviet submarine bases on the Adriatic). This is important because Romania has been heading toward the Albanian position, i.e. toward a discontinuation of active participation in and cooperation with the Pact, and it too has gotten away with it. So far, presumably in part because they have been fairly careful to keep up some of the appearances of Pact membership -- which allows the Soviets to save face -- the Romanians have not been

confronted with the prospect of Soviet military intervention. All of which suggests that meaningful membership in the Warsaw Pact is no longer necessary for survival for some of the states of Eastern Europe (presumably at least the southern ones).

23. The question of the continuation of Communist rule -- rather than the perpetuation of the Warsaw Pact and what it symbolizes -- may thus be the key one in Moscow. Conceivably, the Soviet leaders could come to feel that the Bloc, qua Bloc, was not all that vital. As, in fact, they have learned to live with a truly independent socialist Yugoslavia, so too they could bring themselves to try to get along with an equally independent socialist Czechoslovakia. But the collapse of Communist control in any of the Bloc countries would damage the USSR's prestige, embarrass its ideology, and threaten its vital interests (including even the security of its frontiers). It could lead to chaos and counter-revolution, tempt similar developments in other Bloc states, (e.g. most ominously for the Soviets in East Germany), and even invite Western involvement. The stakes would thus seem extraordinarily high and the hazards of inaction extremely grave. Unless, as seems most unlikely, the Soviets concluded that their intervention would be actively and forcibly opposed by the West, they would

probably believe that the disadvantages of intervention -- by no means inconsiderable -- would simply have to be suffered. This certainly was their conclusion in 1956 and though they now have more to lose than they did then, its message seems apropos even today.

Whither

24. The Hungarian revolution, as such, was not predictable. The initial uprising was spontaneous, and the regime's immediate eagerness to compromise, and then its desperate haste to capitulate, came as a shock to practically everybody, on both sides. The revolution was preceded, however, by a number of developments which created a favorable climate for spontaneity and prepared the way for the collapse of the regime. These developments were visible (and observed) at the time. They were: (1) the gradual disappearance of effective restrictions on the expression of discontent and communications among the dissidents; (2) the subsequent discovery by the dissidents of their own determination and strength and the concomitant realization that change was not only desirable but also possible; (3) the uncertainty, ignorance, and callousness of the CPSU; (4) the related confusion of a Hungarian party torn between factions and without a coherent program; and (5) the disorganization and demoralization of the party as a whole which attended all of the above.

25. There is, as far as we know, no organized group in Eastern Europe which is now seriously contemplating a revolution. But again, if it is going to happen, it will be spontaneous and thus no more predictable than in 1956. Many of the circumstances listed above exist today in Czechoslovakia and others seem ready to make their appearance. This is not the case in Poland, but the potential for mindless violence in Warsaw is probably greater than in Prague. Hungary has remained calm, but a major increase in intellectual ferment there is probably inevitable, and this, in turn, could sorely tax the patience and the resources of the Kadar regime. Far to the south, Bulgaria too has been quiet; neither the party nor the army (which is politically potent) is completely immune to movements elsewhere, and the people are not above venting their displeasure with a repressive regime and a backward standard of life.

26. Finally, even the little world of Walter Ulbricht could be shaken by unsettling developments in Eastern Europe, especially in Poland and Czechoslovakia. There are already signs that Pankow is greatly disturbed by events in Czechoslovakia, largely perhaps because of what they may portend for Czech-West German relations but surely also because it is aware that they are of a contagious character. East Germany had its own share of "revisionists"

in 1956 (Schirdewan, etc.) and its own brand of trouble with the Soviets in 1953. And if, in East Germany, the Soviets have the wherewithal to contain or control events, they also occupy an especially conspicuous and sensitive position, there and in Berlin as well.

27. We can, and do, estimate, of course, that the odds are against explosions in Eastern Europe this year. People with guns are still stronger than people without. An explosion, furthermore, would probably have tragic consequences and few East Europeans are anxious to provoke the re-entry of Soviet forces. More likely than explosions, in, for example, Poland, are less dramatic internal difficulties: sporadic rioting, intellectual protest, intermittent repressions, some changes at the top, and a diminution (but not a breakdown) of party authority. More likely in Czechoslovakia is non-violent political turmoil attended by impressive progress toward limited goals of democratization.

28. Eventually, in the best of all plausible worlds, Eastern Europe will have avoided Soviet intervention and be well on the way to a new and more promising future. In fact, a country such as Czechoslovakia now has a chance, fully recognized in Prague, to set itself on a path denied to it in the past, toward a meaningful

degree of liberty at home and sovereignty abroad and eventually a place of its own in Europe, somewhere between East and West. The USSR will surely at times seek to curb and contain. It may resort to economic sanctions, bluster and threat, political interference. But the instruments of Soviet influence in Eastern Europe are not what they once were and are unlikely in the long term to be effective. Unless it is willing to use military force, the USSR, sooner or later, will probably have little choice but to accomodate itself to changes of great significance in Eastern Europe.

FOR THE BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES:

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Chairman