

1968: A Global Perspective

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Prague 1968: Spatiality and the Tactics of Resistance

This paper focuses on the photographic documentation of the Warsaw Pact supported, Soviet invasion of communist Czechoslovakia on August 20, 1968. The invasion marked the end of a short-lived period of political and social reforms spearheaded by Alexander Dubcek, and the subsequent occupation ushered in a more stringent form of Soviet control referred to as normalization. From the inception of communism, the Soviet Union and its leaders intimately understood that control must be exerted across many institutional fields, especially those that constitute public spaces of discourse. Despite occasional and sporadic spells when censorship was eased during the 1960s, the Czechoslovak mainstream media had to submit to the ideological demands of the state and its government. Considering this specific context, the validity of the 'documentary' photograph as an evidence of a larger historical truth is in fact overshadowed by the use of photography as a legitimizing strategy of the repressive state.

I am interested in photographs that, even while produced under the repressive conditions of the state, subvert the norms of representation imposed upon them and become vehicles for social movement and agitation. One strategy of resistance was the active re-writing of the city streets by the Czechoslovak civilians in order to confuse the foreign military and prevent them from navigating and, in fact, reading the city properly. I examine such practices of contention and how they contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of opposition and resistance under repressive regimes. As a consequence, I argue that the Warsaw Pact invasion and occupation were played out not only on the political stage, but also within the theater of representation.