

August 3, 1968

Shelest's Account of the Transfer of the 'Letter of Invitation'

Citation:

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Summary:

Excerpt from diary of the First Secretary of the Ukrainian Communist Party, Petro Shelest. Shelest describes arrangements to receive a letter from Vasil Bil'ak, a written appeal for urgent military assistance from the Soviet Union to thwart an imminent "counterrevolution" in Czechoslovakia.

Original Language:

Russian

Contents:

Translation - English

On 1 August 1968 we were at the border station of Chop. From there we were due to go to Bratislava. This is the first time I've ridden by train to Czechoslovakia. We will be passing by the Lower Tatra mountains, one of the most beautiful spots in the Czechoslovak Republic.[1]Aside from the meeting itself among the fraternal Parties, I'm particularly eager to link up with V. Bil'ak to receive the letter that is of such great interest to us. During one of my conversations with Bil'ak in Cierna, he told me that he'll have the letter and will transmit it to me. It's very difficult to believe there will be positive results from the Bratislava meeting. It would be nice if there were such results, but things have gone so far already that you can't believe anything.

Late in the evening I managed to link up and speak with V. Bil'ak. All of this was done after taking great precautions. I reminded Bil'ak that we were awaiting the letter promised by him and his group. During the conversation with me, Bil'ak was very ill at ease and disturbed by something, but he did not renege on his promise and requested only that he be given a bit more time, until the following day. Bil'ak was not entirely clear in indicating the reason for this delay. I consulted with our liaison, Savchenko, a KGB employee, and he knew that I must receive a letter from Bil'ak. We decided to wait for a while and give Bil'ak more time to snap into action, since the step he was taking was important and risky.

Toward evening [of 3 August] I met again with Bil'ak, and he and I arranged that at 8:00 p.m. he would go into the public lavatory, and that I also should show up there at that time. He would then transmit the letter to me via our KGB employee, Savchenko. This is precisely what happened. We met "by chance" in the lavatory, and Savchenko inconspicuously transferred from his hand to mine an envelope containing the long-awaited letter. It assessed the situation in the KSC and the country, the nefarious activities of rightist elements, and the political and psychological terror being waged against Communists, that is, people supporting correct positions. The gains of socialism are under threat. An anti-Soviet frenzy has overtaken the country, and the economy and politics of Czechoslovakia are fully oriented toward the West. A very alarming and complicated situation has emerged in the country. The letter expresses a request that if circumstances so warrant, we should intervene to block the path of counterrevolution and prevent the outbreak of civil war and bloodshed. The letter was signed by Indra, Bil'ak, Kolder, Barbirek, Kapek, Rigo, Piller, Svestka, Hoffmann, Lenart, and Strougal.[2]

Aside from me and the authors of the letter I'd received, no one knew about the contents of the document. Finally, the [top-level] commission finished its work, and Brezhnev appeared. I went up to him and said, "Leonid Ilyich! I have good news." He somehow pricked up his ears, and I hurried to tell him that I'd received the letter from Bil'ak. I then gave the letter to Brezhnev. He took it with his hands trembling and his face pale. . . . While I was handing over the letter to Brezhnev, he expressed gratitude to me by saying: "Many thanks to you, Petro; we won't forget this."

[1] The Tatra mountains, located in the central portion of the Carpathian mountain range along the Slovakian-Polish border, include the highest peak in the Carpathians, Mt. Gerlachovka.

[2] Shelest lists the surname "Kofman" rather than Hoffmann, but he clearly meant Karel Hoffmann, a notorious hardliner who abetted the Soviet invasion. No official with the name Kofman was around at the time.