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Prague: spring in winter

by [John O'Sullivan](#)

On the fortieth anniversary of the Prague Spring.

Under the glowering gaze of the National Museum at the top of Wenceslas Square stands a forty-year-old Russian tank. Its fuel tanks are strapped vulnerably to its rear and its gun aims at nothing in particular. Tourists and students walk around and past it with mild curiosity as if it were an exhibit from the distant past like a stone spearhead or a medieval pike. But behind the tank, pasted to the Museum walls and staircase, are placards with cartoons and graffiti of a deliberately crude style that evokes only yesterday. The names slapedashed down in whitewash give us a more precise fix on what is being recalled. “Dub?ek-Svoboda,” they proclaim.

Forty years ago those names were a slogan and even a chant. Old newsreels show tanks identical to that outside the museum, manned by nervous and disoriented soldiers, stationary in the midst of vast Czech crowds who repeat the names of the leaders of Czechoslovakia’s “ ...

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