CHAPTER VI
CONCLUSION

This is a study of the Soviet policy towards crisis in East Europe with case study of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and Poland, 1981-84. Apart from trying to answer the questions as to what in Soviet perception, constituted a crisis situation and what were the underlying factors of a crisis, the character and behavioural pattern of the percipient in the upheavals. We have primarily tried to study the Soviet response to each specific instance of crisis in East Europe. Accordingly, we have tested and proved the following hypothesis in the course of this study.

- The crisis in Czechoslovakia in 1968 and in early 1980s in Poland was due to the systemic failure to meet the aspirations of the people.

- The Soviet Union consistently treated East European crisis as potential threat to socialist ideology and system as well as to its own authority and security and determined its policy accordingly.

- Within the broader uniformity of the Soviet approach, there were behavioural variations, as was clear from its different responses to Czechoslovak and Polish crises.

- In defining its response to the crisis in Eastern Europe on different occasions the Soviet Union could not keep itself oblivious of the relative strength and weakness of internal and external factors - economic, military - strategic, political and ideological.

Ever since the Red Army occupied most of East Europe after the Second World War, the Soviet Union had shown its determination to maintain communist-ruled
governments and the Soviet model of political-economic systems in all the countries of the region. However, even after four decades of being in power, the communist regime in Eastern Europe failed to satisfy the basic aspirations of the people and gain democratic legitimacy. There was an overall stagnation, particularly in economic and political fields. The people of the East European countries slowly began to raise their voice against the policies pursued by their communist regimes. As a result, severe economic and political crisis cropped up in most of the East European countries, particularly in Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland, though at different times. The public disapproval was directed not only at the several inadequacies that these regimes were supposed to be suffering from, but also, and quite prominently, at what they perceived to be the blatant hegemony perpetrated by the Soviet Union in the East European region. All such developments were characterized by the Soviet Union as constituting the crisis situation. It was considered legitimate to initiate action to bring the crisis under control or to suppress it.

Yugoslavia was the first among East European countries to raise its voice against Soviet hegemony in the region. The Soviet Union responded by expelling Yugoslavia from the Communist World in 1948 and branded the latter as heretic and anti-communist. In 1953, material grievances brought masses of East Berlin workers in open clash with the authorities at a moment when some new departures in political and economic management were being planned. For two days, the communist regime lost all control of East Germany. The Soviet troops were deployed to restore order. The revolt in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968 which were in the nature of national uprisings posed serious challenges to the Soviet type of socialism and to Soviet hegemony in the entire Eastern European region.
The Hungarian revolt of 1956 was the cumulative result of the unsatisfactory situation created by ‘high Stalinism’ and the destalinization process initiated by the new Hungarian leadership in the wake of similar process that was going on in the Soviet Union. The psychological train of events leading to the revolt was set in motion by the new Hungarian leader, Imre Nagy, who came to power in June 1953. His first speech in parliament made an electrifying impact. His basic aim was to transform the party, which acted as authoritarian, and to substitute what was called ‘good communism’ for ‘bad communism’. Nagy instituted a broad reform programme in which the emphasis was shifted from heavy industry to the production of consumer goods. In his agricultural policies he laid less emphasis on collectivisation. In the political sphere, he took steps in introducing multiparty system and secret ballot. The Nagy programme, moreover, was evolving into a form of ‘national communism’. It is worth emphasizing that the Nagy programme only attempted to reform the Hungarian socialist system from within to satisfy the aspirations of the people; it did not suggest any systemic alternative to the model that existed and operated in Hungary.

Nagy had laid down a concept of alternative political and economic policies, thereby, paving the way for the pluralization of the political and economic life. This was obviously against the socialist principle from Moscow’s point of view. A growing feeling of nationalism developed, focussing on the Nagy reforms. On 23 October 1956, national uprising started in Hungary to bring about radical changes in both economic and political sphere. This uprising which was basically aimed at internal reforms, however, created great concern among some of the other Warsaw Pact communist governments and parties.
The crisis of Czechoslovakia in 1968 was the most articulate example of both
the non-viability and non-acceptability of the Soviet model of socialism in East Europe.
Although it did not yet call for the replacement of socialism, the reformers did have
an elaborate programme of far reaching consequences. Quite like the Hungarian
experience the economic difficulties were the main cause of the crisis in
Czechoslovakia, particularly its rigid over-centralized systems have become an
impediment to economic growth. The solution of the problem demanded the need for
economic reform: a shift from extensive to intensive economic growth.

Although Czechoslovakia had witnessed high rates of development till the early
1960s, especially in the industrial sector, its economy had begun to show signs of
recession. In the middle of the decade, for the first time now the gross national
product did not meet the planned target. Even more serious was the state of
agriculture, which necessitated heavy import of food, thus upsetting the balance of
payments situation. The problem altogether upset the balance of economic plan
which, in imitation of the Soviet Union, had placed an enormous degree of emphasis
on the development of heavy industry and downgraded the state of agriculture. It
was at this point that some of the defects of the system began to show up glaringly.
The pressure for more basic changes in the critical areas grew in the party and in the
leadership. Novotny and others were removed from leadership because of their
refusal to work for change.

In 1968, Alexander Dubcek succeeded Novotny as first secretary of the Party.
The Dubcek leadership discussed and began to initiate practical steps towards
political, economic and social reforms. It was broadly recognized by the new
leadership that problems bedevilling Czechoslovak socialism did not have an isolated
character, i.e., being only economic or political or ideological or social or cultural. On the contrary, the Czechoslovak socialism like many others of its genre was suffering from a problem of multi-dimensional character. It was, therefore, logical for the new leadership to initiate a reform which aimed at addressing most of these problems simultaneously. Thus, a programme adopted in 1968 set guidelines for a modern, humanist socialist democracy that would guarantee freedom of religion, speech, press, assembly and created independent courts, introduced multiple-choice as well as secret ballot elections and effect economic reforms.

All these projections of the reform programme were of enormous significance and they had potentials of far reaching consequences not only for Czechoslovakian socialism, but for the entire Soviet block. If allowed to go through undisturbed they would have shaken the very foundation of the model of socialism that was existing and operating with the Soviet Union and East Europe. It was thus natural for the Soviet Union to look in them the source of danger to the ideology which had so far provided the justification and legitimacy to its regime as well as its continued hegemony in East Europe. It is in this context that the meaning of crisis attributed to any alternative reform movement with formidable magnitude in East Europe becomes evident. It was quite natural, therefore, that any demand for a change in the system was looked upon in Moscow as a ‘counter revolution’ and thereby a threat to the Soviet power and regional domination. That is why the Soviet leaders were unanimous in their aversion to the reforms in Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Considering the perceived threats to the Soviet interests in Czechoslovakia and the surrounding region, the military intervention should not have come as a surprise. The
Soviet Union responded to the crisis by sending military tanks to suppress the ‘counter-revolution’ in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968.

The Soviet decisions of military intervention was justified on the ground that it were undertaken not merely to suppress the opposition but to restore the socialist order in Hungary and Czechoslovakia and to prevent its possible repercussion on other East European countries. The military intervention was also carried out to preserve the Soviet political hegemony and military alliance to counter NATO in Europe.

In the background of the Hungarian and Czechoslovak crisis, the Polish crisis assumes greater significance. However, the situation in Poland in 1980 differed from that of Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Poland was in the midst of a severe economic crisis, a crisis that had been caused by the years of blatant command mismanagement of economy and polity. The immediate stimulus to the crisis came from an announcement by the Polish authorities to increase food and meat prices. But the workers were better prepared to carry their struggle to victory.

In the middle of August in 1980, the strikes had encompassed the whole of the country. They were led by the interfactory strike committee under the banner of the solidarity. The solidarity played a vital role in the worker’s movement of Poland. It organised strikes, mass demonstrations and work stoppages at various industrial centres. The solidarity in Poland was the most impressive and sustained worker’s movement of the post-1945 world. But it, too, had to suffer a defeat under the onslaught of the martial law regime.

According to Timothy Garton Ash, the Solidarity’s defeat showed that an unarmed worker’s movement had little chance against the repressive forces of a modern state. The Polish workers were not unaware of the bitter fact of state’s
readiness to use physical violence against them. Interestingly, there was a two-pronged myth about the army. On one hand, there was a belief that the army would not fight against the Polish people, whereas, on the other hand, it was also widely propagated that the Polish people would not fight their army.

The Solidarity leaders were aware that a confrontation was coming, that the regime was likely to play the card of repression, but they thought it would begin with legal moves. Believing that the process would begin with legislative proposals in Sejm for a state of emergency, and not with a military coup and a state of war, they overestimated their own room for manoeuvre and were taken by surprise.

However, apart from the state repression, the Solidarity also suffered from its own limitations. The Solidarity’s idea of self-limitation which rested on a crucial presupposition that it was possible to transform ‘civic society’ without touching the heart of state power, and that somehow a way could be found to effect a permanent compromise with those who headed the Polish state was largely founded on hope, rather than on experience and analysis.

Thus the Solidarity’s self-limitation was disastrous, not simply because it represented a search for the unattainable, but also because its very pursuit weakened the worker’s movement. Time and again, the leaders of the Solidarity found themselves urging their members not to go too far and not to frighten the authorities. Time and again, they reined the movement, rather than encouraging it forward.

The Solidarity was a radical movement for popular democracy, yet the tensions between the leaders and the rank and file promoted the incipient tendencies of what may be called movement’s bureaucratization. The pressure from below and unease about the damaging trend towards compromise led to the emergence, within the
solidarity, of various more radical trends. But none of these seems to have offered a coherent alternative to the main leadership line.

In the summer and autumn of 1981, the immense pressure of the crisis pushed large sections of the Solidarity’s membership into fragmented local strike and hunger marches. But none of the radical groupings within the movement tried to give leadership and encouragement to the wildcat movements, or to attempt to generalise them and link them together. Thus, what did not emerge inside the Solidarity was a coherent socialist current capable of effectively uniting theory and practice.

What was missing in Poland was a socialist organisation which could strive to show workers the logic of their own struggles more clearly, to point the way forward. Such an organisation would have needed to establish its own press, independently of the union leadership, to express its own views and offer them to the members.

The argument that the Solidarity should have pursued a revolutionary solution raises obvious objections even from those who do not in principle oppose social revolution. The threat of Russian military intervention, of the kind that smashed workers movement in Hungary in 1956 and the party renewal movement in Czechoslovakia in 1968, was always the final and most impressive justification for self-limitation.

The Soviet response to the Polish crisis was different from the one adopted at the time of Hungarian and Czechoslovak crises. There is no doubt that the events in Poland had greatly alarmed Moscow. The Soviets were almost close to invasion both in December 1980 and again in March 1981. The Soviets considered the Polish crisis as a threat to their security and the threat of force was always present in their dealings with the Polish leadership. However, they seemed to prefer a conciliatory
approach. But in any case, the Soviets never refrained from giving the impression that they were ready to use their power to restore political discipline in the country should events go beyond the control of the P.U.W.P. In the late fall 1981, along with the question of intervention the Soviet leadership headed by Brezhnev favoured a diplomacy of conciliatory approach.

The events in Czechoslovakia in 1968 and Poland in 1981-1984 constituted some kind of systemic crisis towards which a definite Soviet reaction was inevitable. However, there was a qualitative difference between the nature of Soviet responses on the two occasions. The situation in Czechoslovakia was different from that of Poland because the Czech crisis was a matter of great concern not only to Soviet Union but also to the entire East European region; their leaders feared that the crisis may cross over into their boundaries. The events in Czechoslovakia were perceived by the Soviet Union as potential threats to the system. This threat was initially perceived as local in its ramifications but later the perception was magnified as a threat to the authority and security of Soviet Union itself. Moscow was also apprehensive about western powers taking undue advantage of the Czechoslovak crisis that might escalate rivalries between her and USA which was already existing in the form of cold war. These factors made Soviet Union to organise a near total of bloc intervention to crush the reform movement in Czechoslovakia in 1968. But it could hardly afford to repeat the same feat in Poland in early eighties.

The Soviet government had impressive reasons for not intervening in Poland. The very strength of the Solidarity, and Polish traditions of resistance to invaders was to make the undertaking hazardous. Their forces were already dangerously bogged down in Afghanistan. Moscow was also worried about the East-West relations which
were more important to her now than they were in 1956 or 1968 and which had already been strained due to her invasion of Afghanistan. Poland was a large and populous East European country and unlike Czechoslovakia, it had a long history of desperate resistance to occupying forces, especially Russian forces. Further, Poland’s economy was so devastated that it might be difficult to restore it after a messy intervention and, in particular, Poland’s massive foreign indebtedness could be a severe embarrassment to any Soviet occupation of the Polish regime. The Soviet decision to refrain from a direct military intervention in the Polish affairs was sufficient pointer to the emerging change in its policy towards Eastern Europe, a departure from what was known as the notorious ‘Brezhnev Doctrine’.

The post-Brezhnev leadership of Yuri Andropov and K.U., Chernenko, served Soviet Union only for a two and half years. During their short transitional period, there was hardly any perceptible change in immediate effect on Moscow’s policy towards Poland. In a way the whole Soviet policy towards Poland from 1981 to 1984 appears to have remained one of conciliatory approach. Moreover, this conciliatory approach also contained the seeds of the eventual abandonment of the ‘Brezhnev Doctrine’ accomplished under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev. The repercussions of this policy shift were, indeed, epochal for they led to the downfall of socialism and the end of Soviet hegemony in East Europe, nay the end of Soviet socialism itself.