

FOREIGN OFFICE FILES: UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
Series Three: The Cold War
(Public Record Office Class FO 371 and Related Files)

Part 2: The Prague Spring and Soviet Intervention in Czechoslovakia, 1967-1968

Publisher's Note

The second in our series of projects documenting cold war flashpoints deals with the Prague Spring and the Soviet Intervention in Czechoslovakia in August 1968, providing records that have only recently been released.

Hopes of détente between the two superpowers following the 1967 summit meeting between President Johnson and Prime Minister Kosygin were dashed as the world witnessed the mobilisation of troops and aircraft by the Warsaw Pact countries to crush the reforms and counter-revolutionary trends inspired by Alexander Dubcek.

Britain followed all the events closely with regular reports from officials across Western and Eastern Europe. These describe the changes in Czechoslovakia early in 1968 that provoked the repression, the deterioration in relations between Czechoslovakia and her Warsaw Pact partners, the invasion itself and the fate of the 'counter-revolutionaries', and an assessment of the threat posed to the security of Western Europe by this Soviet show of force.

Early in 1968, Czechoslovakia precipitated a crisis. Succeeding Antonin Novotny as First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, Alexander Dubcek promised to abolish censorship, restrict the role of the secret police and introduce greater parliamentary rights. This attempt to steer a middle way between communism and reform introduced the Czechoslovak people to a growing sense of freedom that was to become known as the Prague Spring. Dubcek's initiatives were welcomed by intellectuals and students, as well as by many others who were disenchanted with Soviet ideology, the severe housing shortage, a failing economy and a chaotic transportation system. Key officials connected with the old Novotny government were gradually replaced. Novotny resigned on 28 March 1968 and was replaced as Czechoslovak President by Ludvik Svoboda. A new government, headed by Oldrich Cernik, was appointed on April 8. Its new programme was approved by Dubcek and the Central Committee of the Communist Party.

Public opinion in Czechoslovakia was further influenced by Ludvik Vaculik's article, *2,000 Words*, calling on the people to struggle against everything they considered to be bad, and urging them to take control of their lives. The piece received wide circulation in the literary weekly *Literarni noviny* and in the daily publications *Prace* and *Zemedelske noviny*. The cause of reform was taken up by many other writers and artists including Bohumil Hrabal, Jiri Menzl, Josef Koudelka, Ivan Klima, Josef Skoverecky, Milan Kundera, Arnost Lustig and Milos Forman.

Pre-Dubcek, Czechoslovakia had been known to be a model member of the Warsaw pack. The introduction of such 'radical' reforms, together with the symbols of Western culture (jazz music, rock clubs, pop culture and mini-skirts), brought open criticism by the Soviet Union and Soviet bloc countries. By May 1968, political antagonisms peaked when Dubcek announced plans to hold a special party conference on reform to take place in September of that year. The other Pact members (Hungary, Poland, East Germany, USSR and Bulgaria) formed themselves into the 'group of five' and issued a warning letter stating that Czechoslovakia must 'suppress anti-socialist forces'. Only Romania was willing to support the political changes in Czechoslovakia.

In August 1968, the 'war of nerves' gave way to military intervention when 200,000 Warsaw Pact troops crossed the Czech border in order to 'save' the Czechoslovak people. Over 70 deaths occurred and some 266 injuries as fighting took place on the streets of Prague. Dr Gustav Husak was made leader of the Czechoslovak Communist Party (CCP), purging it of all those who had played a part in the Prague Spring. FCO 28/38-42 begins the run of Public Record Office files and provides briefing notes for a proposed visit by the British Secretary of State to Eastern Europe. Cancelled due to the invasion, the files offer records of conversations with the Prime Minister on various topics such as cultural relations, proposed speeches and relationships between Czechoslovakia and other European countries.

Files FCO 28/47-53 uncover the reactions to the changes in Czechoslovakia leading to the invasion. Several documents show how the Soviets were afraid that Czechoslovakia would defect from the Warsaw Pact and leave a damaging gap in their outer defences ("whoever holds the Bohemian bastion controls Europe"). The Soviets also feared the ideological consequences of Dubcek's reforms. FCO 28/48 reports that the growing tension in Czechoslovakia caused the British Government in particular, increasing concern *"that we should not fail to bring home to the Russians our appreciation of the very grave consequences for our relations, which will follow if they pursue their bullying tactics against Czechoslovakia much further."*

The documents also refer to East/West relations and offer a perspective on the part played by world powers such as the United States and China. File FCO 28/51 reports on US/Soviet relations and how the crisis would affect their future relationship especially as the most pressing problem concerned the expected discussions on offensive/defensive:

"On the one hand it would be very difficult to appear to go on talking ordinarily about a number of bilateral and other issues. On the other hand the real problems, particularly those relating to disarmament, still remain." (FCO 28/51)

Officially the Chinese compared the Russian invasion *"to that of Hitler"* (FCO 28/52) and Peking newspapers not only *"denounced and resolutely condemned the barbarous aggression of the Soviet Revisionists and their servants,"* but they also attacked the *"traitorous Czechoslovak"* leadership of Dubcek's *"revisionist clique"*.

A number of files discuss the various aspects of the military intervention, in particular FCO 28/68-69. In his despatch of the 20th August 1968 (FCO 28/69), Sir Geoffrey Harrison wrote, *"if there was one thing of which we could be sure it was that the Soviet leadership would spare no effort to bring down Mr Dubcek and all he stood for."* The invasion took place within the next 24 hours.

Harrison continues:

"The decision appears to have been hastily taken. The military operation was well planned and executed, but the political aspects were ill-thought out and Soviet expectations of a reasonable amount of Czech support failed to materialise. Despite pressure on President Svoboda, the Russians were forced to continue dealing with Mr Dubcek."

Faced with the option of dealing with Mr Dubcek or imposing direct military rule on Czechoslovakia, the Russians compromised. The Moscow agreements represented a grave reverse for the Czechs, but also failure for the Russians. They still face the dilemma of tolerating a Czechoslovakia leadership, which, though forced to modify, has not abandoned its programme, or imposing military rule. They appear still to be waiting."

Files FCO 28/87-92 offer a view on the internal political situation in Czechoslovakia, and focus on the leadership crisis within the Communist Party. FCO 28/90 looks at a visit by President Svoboda to central and East Slovakia as well as the problems faced by Dubcek on his rise to power ("Dubcek has delayed advancing any further and he may well be criticised by liberal elements for his inaction"). Dubcek's first 100 days, regional party conferences, the fight for deposition of Novotny, new trends in Czechoslovakia, various groups and coalition movements and the part played by religious denominations can also be found here.

To complement this, the Annual Review for 1967 (FCO 28/93) confirms that it was *"undoubtedly a year of trial and disappointment for communist leaders in Czechoslovakia"*. The country's foreign policy *"showed no volition of its own. It was manifested in Slavish endorsement of Soviet views and actions and in the parroting of hackneyed slogans about Germany and the European 'status quo.'"* The leadership crisis in the communist party (though never officially referred to) *"had its roots in differences over economic policy but developed into a personality conflict."* With Novotny's leadership plainly in jeopardy at the end of 1967, the review shows that there was not a single international issue on which the Czechoslovakia government diverged from the line of the Soviet Union, *"unless one counts the war in the Middle East... the basic aim of the Czechoslovak policy is to strengthen the unity and cohesion of the 'socialist' bloc centred on the Warsaw Pact and the council for Mutual Economic Assistance."* The file also shows Czechoslovak support for *"the just struggle of the Vietnamese people against US aggression"* and *"the liquidation of the consequences of Israel's aggression in the Middle East."*

Czechoslovakia's attitude to the United States is raised again in FCO 28/97. The document shows that in an interview in the December 22 issue of the Slovak Party weekly *Predvoj*, Deputy Foreign Minister Klicka alleged: *"the US had 'clearly' disqualified itself as a partner in international relations."* After citing the natural revulsion of decent people against violence, aggressions and the use of force, Klicka ticked off a

series of more precise grievances against the US, including "discrimination", trade restrictions, complicated visa procedures and the withholding of Nazi-looted Czech gold. The latter is discussed in a meeting between the US and Czech Ambassadors:

"The question of the Czech gold held by the United States came up: apparently the Americans are now ready to negotiate on this question and believe that a solution satisfactory to the Czechs could be reached... progress in settling the dispute would be inexpedient in present circumstances." (FCO 28/99)

Discussions held by the United Nations on the Czechoslovak crisis are covered in FCO 28/101-103. In a document dated 22 July 1968, the Northern Department of the Foreign Office question the economic drawbacks that could emerge from the crisis:

"There might be some demands in the West for a cutting down of East-West trade, but it is not usually practicable, or in our view desirable, to cut trade for political ends, and the development of economic relations with the East is a trend which we consider serves Western interests, politically as well as economically. Some selective actions or gestures in this field might be possible." (FCO 28/101)

Political relations with the Soviet Union are unveiled in FCO 28/109 and 110. A note dated 5 July 1968, from Richard Thomas, UK Delegation to NATO, Brussels, to Christopher Makins in the Northern Department at the Foreign Office, reports:

"...Most speakers saw the recent Warsaw Pact exercises, with their accompanying spate of rumours and denials, as the latest phase in the war of nerves against the Czech leadership. The Dutchman reported that the Netherlands Ambassador in Prague had heard from a reliably and highly placed source that Marshal Yakubovsky had asked the Czechoslovak Minister of Defence on 26 June for permission to repeat the exercise in July since it had not gone altogether 'satisfactorily'. The Minister turned this request down on the spot but on the next day the Soviet Ambassador put the same request to the Minister of Foreign Affairs. The Presidium then spent the night of 27/28 June in secret session and decided to reject the Russian request. Dubcek himself received the Soviet Ambassador and told him that any further attempt to prolong or restart the exercise would be regarded as intolerable interference in the internal affairs of Czechoslovakia, or words to that effect... The Military Committee representative, however, described the scenario of the exercises as an attack by the West, followed by a counter-attack by the East, and reported that the exercise would be extended until 5 July in one of the training areas just beyond the Czech frontier in East Germany." (FCO 28/110)

"It seems clear enough that the main ultimate results which the Russians expected from their ruthless invasion of Czechoslovakia included a compliant, reconstituted Czechoslovak leadership, a retreat from the post-January Czechoslovak reform programme . . . They gained virtually none of these objectives, whereas they earned undying hatred and contempt in Czechoslovakia and widespread odium and condemnation elsewhere.

For their part, the Czechoslovaks suffered appallingly, both materially and spiritually. But by way of compensation they gained a most complete unity within their frontiers and tremendous prestige and goodwill abroad. So fortified, they have been able in the main to withstand the pressure put upon them by Moscow. The Czechoslovak leaders are evidently acting on the assumption that they are meeting their obligations under the Moscow agreements if they legalistically fulfil their literal undertakings. Thus, they have changed a few office holders, mostly by replacing one progressive by another; they are in process of re-instituting censorship; they have invalidated the emergency XIVth Party Congress held on 22 August; they have banned the Social Democratic Party and the quasi-political clubs KAN and K231; they have asked for the withdrawal of the Czechoslovak item at the United Nations; and they have economic co-operation with the CMEA. Notwithstanding the attacks of the Warsaw Pact press and radio, however, there has been no purge on any front, no victimisation, no abandonment of fundamental aims or principles, not the least hint of unqualified submission."

(FCO 28/110 - From Sir William Barker, British Ambassador, the British Embassy, Prague, 20 September 1968)

FCO 28/111 uncovers a despatch from the British Embassy in Prague to the Foreign Office (dated 3 September 1968), which describes relations between Britain and Czechoslovakia:

"The situation in Czechoslovakia has changed fundamentally since 20 August, the decisive new circumstance being that the country is occupied by an enormous, hostile military force and that the leadership is therefore operating, if I may say is the understatement of the week, with a pistol at its head. In other words, for the foreseeable future the Czechoslovaks have no option but to do the Soviet bidding and, for practical purposes, they have reconciled themselves to this fact... Nobody I take it, would dispute

that we want, on the one hand, to make it plain to the Czechoslovaks that we cherish only the greatest sympathy and goodwill towards them; and, on the other hand, to leave nobody in doubt that we wholeheartedly condemn the invasion and occupation, if, for good measure, we can at the same time avoid halting the process of East-West détente, so much the better..."

The sale of British aircraft to Czechoslovakia can be studied using files FCO 28/122-124.

File FCO 28/123 confirms that commodity deals and the granting of air traffic rights for transatlantic flights via London, played an important part in negotiations. The sale of aircraft to Czechoslovakia was seen as an extremely important breakthrough both politically and economically.

"Because of their political disagreements with the U.S. and their requirements for an aircraft capable of flying the North Atlantic, this made it very likely that they [Czechoslovakia] would buy 2 B.A.C. Super V.C. 10's. As an interim measure they were also seeking to lease at least one aircraft, probably of necessity, from a foreign airline."

Correspondence and papers from the British Prime Minister's Office are also included in this microfilm project. PREM 13/1993 contains a statement made by US President Johnson, issued at the White House on Wednesday 21 August 1968, on the Czech crisis.

"The tragic news from Czechoslovakia shocks the conscience of the world. The Soviet Union and its allies have invaded a defenceless country to stamp out a resurgence of ordinary human freedom. It is a sad commentary on the Communist mind that a sign of liberty in Czechoslovakia is deemed a fundamental threat to the security of the Soviet system. The excuses by the Soviet Union are patently continued. The Czechoslovakian Government did not request its allies to interfere in its internal affairs. No external aggression threatened Czechoslovakia... in the name of mankind's hope for peace, I call on the Soviet Union and its associates to withdraw their troops from Czechoslovakia. I hope responsible spokesmen for governments and people throughout the world will support this appeal. It is never too late for reason to prevail."

This file also documents a telegram sent by Sir William Barker in Prague to the Foreign Office in London, describing the aftermath of the invasion:

"At 10.00 hours today the situation in Prague is on the surface calmer. This is due presumably to the consolidation of Soviet Control on the outskirts of the city, artillery and anti-aircraft guns are dug within. The squares in which the people tend to rally are completely commanded by tanks, infantry and anti-aircraft weapons. The road to, but not from, the airport is barred by Soviet tanks but the bridges are almost all free and movement is comparatively easy."

There are lots of people in the streets especially in Vaclavske Square. Some are wearing anti-Soviet placards on their backs – young people are still driving around in cars with Czechoslovak flags and placards. 'Go home!' and similar inscriptions are still going up. Newspapers including since yesterday evening a new one called 'Freedom' and all unmistakably pro- Dubcek are being distributed from quick moving vehicles... One's conclusion is that the Occupiers have total text book military control but that the population as yet are showing no signs of reconciling themselves to the situation." (22 August 1968)

PREM 13/1993 also documents the British Prime Minister trying to use the Czech crisis to gain some advantage with De Gaulle, due to a possible French withdrawal from NATO in 1969.

"You will have seen from an earlier letter I sent you today about the Prime Minister's discussion of the Czechoslovak situation with the Foreign Secretary and the Defence Secretary, that the Prime Minister suggested that we might be able to use this as an opportunity to get a little closer to France and to further our broad European policy... when the Prime Minister had seen him last year he had complained at the fact that there was no 'European' policy towards the Middle East – though, as we know, this was the General's fault and not ours. But in regard to Czechoslovakia where there was apparently broad agreement between Britain and France it might be possible to turn this complaint against him, so to speak, by approaching him in the context of the need for European political cohesion in face of the problems presented by the Soviet attack on Czechoslovakia. Moreover, while the Prime Minister had no illusions about De Gaulle's general attitude there might be some small benefit to be gained from indicating to him, at a time when his prestige, both internally and externally, had suffered a series of heavy blows, that we attach importance to his views in a matter of European concern and that we were not simply in cahoots with the Americans about it. Clearly the prospect of De Gaulle doing any serious re-thinking of his European policy must be regarded as exceedingly remote. But if recent events were causing any such re-consideration, a gesture in the European context by ourselves might conceivably be of some value..."

(Letter of August 22, 1968 sent to D J D Maitland at the Foreign Office).

PREM 13/1994 offers documents on talks between the British Prime Minister and other world leaders as well as information on the beginning of wholesale secret arrests in Czechoslovakia. Controversial press articles, reporting that the Kremlin had checked first with the US before they invaded Czechoslovakia, are also discussed in length.

By studying these key archive holdings, scholars will be able to gain new interpretations on the Prague Spring and events leading up to the Soviet Invasion of Czechoslovakia. Topics covered include:

- The Leadership Crisis and the CCP
- Church, State and non-party organisations in Czechoslovakia
- Culture, Education and Trade
- Multilateral and United Nations discussions on the Czechoslovakian crisis
- Activities of the Czech Writer's Union and Free Czech Radio
- Applications for Asylum by Czech students in Britain
- The relevance and validity of the Munich Agreement
- Anglo-Czech trade talks
- World government reactions to the invasion of Czechoslovakia and East/West relations

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Technical Note

Our microform publications are prepared and produced in accordance with recommended and established guide-lines for the production of microform of superior quality. These conform to the recommendations of the standard guides to good microforming and micropublishing practice.

Attention should be drawn to the nature of the original material. All the material consists of PREM 13 and FCO 28 files. Although the original material is in very good condition, some records are written on many different types, thickness and colour of paper. Coupled with the variety of inks, pens or pencils used, this has created problems of blurred text and contrast. Some items consist of carbon copies or comprise material on very thin paper, which has created problems of show-through, rendering the original documents difficult to read. Every effort has been made to minimise these difficulties and some openings are microfilmed more than once in an attempt to bring out all the features of the original. Nevertheless these original characteristics present difficulties of image and contrast which stringent tests and variations of density cannot entirely overcome.

The most responsible care has been exercised in the filming of this unique collection and every effort has been made to ensure that this microform publication meets the standards established by the Association for Information and Image Management (AIIM), the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) and prevailing European standards.

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Extracts from the Documents

Howard Smith's minutes on Czechoslovakia, 28 August 1968. (FCO 28/110):

"The publication of the communiqué on the Moscow talks has created in Czechoslovakia a mood of anger and bitterness which the speeches by Svoboda and Dubcek have not yet succeeded in dispelling. There have been demonstrations in Prague which, however, have not led to bloodshed..."

Comments on the communiqué published on 4 October 1968. (FCO 28/69):

"The communiqué published on 4 October after the Soviet-Czechoslovak talks in Moscow gave some indication of the general areas in which the Czechoslovaks had had to make further concessions to Soviet demands. But there may still be scope for differing interpretations. Although the Czechoslovaks seem to have been forced to agree to tighten control of the mass media further, it is by no means certain that they have abandoned all their proposed reforms or agreed to stifle by increased controls in the Party and Government all the liberalising pressures which still exist in the country.

The Czechoslovak leaders have also now publicly accepted that some of the Allied troops will remain indefinitely in Czechoslovakia. Although the Czechoslovak Minister of Defence, General Dzur is reported to have said that some troop withdrawals will be complete by 28 October (the 50th Anniversary of the Foundation of the Czechoslovak Republic), no definite date has been given for the start of the withdrawals. There are no signs of any substantial movement of troops out of the country."

I F Porter, a representative of the UK Delegation to the Eighteen Nation Disarmament Conference, in Geneva, reports on his discussions with Lahoda, to Howard Smith, in the Northern Department, Foreign Office, 5 September 1968. (FCO 28/110):

"Lahoda, the Czech Number Two, told me last night that his Foreign Minister would probably return to Prague during the next few days. Meanwhile his Ambassador was with him at Berne. In view of the Moscow attacks on Hajek I thought this a little surprising but Lahoda was inclined to laugh them off. This, in the words of Le Monde, was 'un drôle d'occupation'. So far as he and his friends could tell no one had yet been arrested (he repeated this when I reverted to it later), the majority of the Praesidium were still progressist, Dubcek was still Prime Minister, you heard the same voices as before on Radio Prague, they still read out passages from the London 'Times' on Czechoslovakia and Russia and there were very few collaborators. To have Russian friendship for 4-5 years in exchange for Czech mistrust for the rest of your life was not worth the candle; some people had learnt this lesson during the Nazi occupation. The '4-5 years' came out quite naturally. When I asked him whether he really thought the process, started under Dubcek, would go on he said he did. Dubcek was a bit of an idealist and the press had gone wild—which was natural enough after being muzzled for so long. There would be a pause but no question of going back to Novotny conditions. They would, of course, have to be careful not to bring about a second stage of occupation..."

Lahoda's optimism at this stage was somewhat ill-founded. Spirits had been severely dampened by the Moscow communiqué, signed at the end of August. This document confirmed the failure of the Prague Spring. Lahoda thought in terms of a "pause", rather than an end to reform. The reformists tried to cling to some of their planned constitutional measures. They met with limited success with the introduction of a new federal system on January 1, 1969 and the creation of two separate Czech and Slovak Republics. Yet two months later, the Federal Assembly adopted three further laws curtailing and undermining the federation. The new measures ensured strict centralisation of the State administration. The next seventeen years were to be one of the bleakest periods of Czech and Slovak history.

Bilak's Statement on Events Leading up to August 1968. (FCO 28/618):

"Today's 'Tribuna' and 'Rude Pravo' publish a testimony by Comrade Vasil Bilak, member of the CPCz Central Committee Praesidium and Central Committee Secretary. The interview, headed "From Dresden to Bratislava", was prepared by Oldrich Svestka and Zdenek Horeni. In the introduction, they say:

An article [Note: by Oldrich Svestka] about the events of the fateful night of 20th to 21st August, and an interview with Comrade Oldrich Cernik indicated a series of significant circumstances in our domestic political development between January and August 1968, and in their way contributed toward a broader

and more intimate view of questions posed by the party and society. Striving to make this picture as objective as possible, the editorial board of 'Tribuna' submits to its readers and, at the same time, also to the readers of 'Rude Pravo', an interview with Comrade Vasil Bilak, member of the CPCz Central Committee Praesidium and Central Committee Secretary. Its topic deals primarily with international policy.

[Question:] Comrade Bilak, between January and August 1968 there were a number of summit meetings between our representatives and those of the socialist countries. At all of them Czechoslovakia was discussed. In your view, what was the motive of this interest? Many people think that the motive was the democratisation process, for instance.

[Bilak:] To assert that our allies did not approve of the correction of wrongs is, I think one of the great frauds which certain people tried to impose on the honest citizens of our fatherland with the help of the press, radio and television. They did so first of all to create the impression that the fraternal parties of the socialist countries were attempting to interfere in our internal affairs, and, second, as if they had objected to the healthy process which began to develop in our country under the leadership of the CPCz after January 1968. It is now difficult to believe that our leadership did not energetically refute these views. Any socialist country, and the Soviet Union in particular, has a sincere and selfless interest in the prosperity of its socialist allies—in their achieving successes in their political and economic development. Although all socialist countries differ from each other because of a series of national characteristics, special national developments, and other historical facts, they are mutually linked by their international interests, ideology and aims. The success of one country is the success of all. On the other hand, none of them can be neutral or indifferent when another allied country is threatened..."

Interview with Colonel Viliam Šalgovic, former Chairman of the Slovak Party Central Committee Control and Auditing Commission. (FCO 28/618):

"... Mr Šalgovic recalls that on 4 May 1968 Mr Brezhnev told Mr Dubcek and other members of the delegation very clearly that Czechoslovakia could not under any circumstances "fall out" of the socialist system. Mr Šalgovic explained that he left with his family on 3 August, 1968, to Burgas in Bulgaria to spend his holidays and returned back on 17 August. This was with the approval of the appropriate department of the Central Committee. He was not and he could not be one of those who allegedly invited the allied troops to Czechoslovakia. Their arrival did not depend on whether he wanted it or not. He believed that the decision was made by the leadership of the Communist Parties and Governments of the fraternal socialist countries..."

Letter from the British Embassy, Rome, dated 7 October 1969, regarding a speech on Czechoslovakia by Italian Foreign Minister. (FCO 28/571):

"...Moro then referred to the protest movement within Czechoslovakia and to the measures taken to repress it. Political problems could not be resolved by force: the Italian Government would continue to pay close attention to every phase of this difficult situation which, in a certain sense, was the 'touchstone' for any real possibility of creating a constructive European dialogue. If one sincerely believed in the cause of détente and friendship with the peoples of Eastern Europe then one could only regard it as one's duty to judge and censure what had occurred in Czechoslovakia. Human rights and the prospect of European political evolution were at stake. Moro then concluded this section of his speech with the statement referred to by the Czech spokesman..."

Adam Matthew Publications is an imprint of Adam Matthew Digital Ltd, Pelham House, London Road, Marlborough, Wiltshire, SN8 2AG, ENGLAND

Telephone: +44 (1672) 511921 Fax: +44 (1672) 511663 Email: info@ampltd.co.uk