



# Soviet troops leave Czechs with

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*(Editor's note: Jeff Lilley, 27, was a reporter at The News-Sun for a year in 1986-1987. He recently received his master's degree in Soviet Studies from Johns Hopkins Nitze School of Advanced International Studies in Washington, D.C. This summer he traveled to Poland and Czechoslovakia. Fluent in Russian, he plans to relocate to Moscow soon.)*

**By JEFF LILLEY**  
(Sixth in a series)

For many Czech citizens, the withdrawal of the last contingent of Soviet troops on June 19 was a joyous occasion. The troops' departure marked the end of the 23-year Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia. It also heralded the disintegration of the Warsaw Pact, the military agreement which had bound Eastern Europe to the Soviet Union.

On Wenceslas Square in Prague, dozens of men gathered to shave off the beards they had grown to protest the 1968 Soviet invasion. There were fireworks and the launching of a huge inflated Soviet toy soldier.

But the legacy of the Soviet military presence in Czechoslovakia lives on in the form of safety and environmental problems. The abandoned Soviet camps fester with extensive groundwater contamination and discarded live ammunition. Environmental damage at the former Soviet military sites is estimated at \$133-\$167 million.

The completion of the troop pullout two years after the peaceful revolution that ended communist rule in Czechoslovakia has also left people weary and with a foreboding sense of responsibility.



# **safety, environmental woes**

"We're very happy that it's all over, and that we're finally becoming a sovereign country again. But it's been a tiring experience," Federal Assembly member Michael Kocab said in an interview with *The Washington Post*. "And the other thing is that we're becoming responsible for our own fate. Unlike the last 40 or 50 years, we won't be able to blame others for our failings now."

A photo exhibit in a Prague bookstore exposed the wretched conditions in which the Soviet soldiers lived. Though ostensibly the front line of the vaunted Soviet Red Army, the soldiers lived among ramshackle houses and dilapidated buildings. Posters exhorting the soldiers seemed strangely out of place. Pictures showed Soviet soldiers lounging on discarded mattresses, wasting away the hours before depar-

ture smoking or playing cards.

Many soldiers face an uncertain future back in the Soviet Union where housing is scarce and anti-military sentiment is on the rise.

Two Czech women wandering through the exhibit seemed to feel the plight of the soldiers. As they walked past the photo displays, they talked in hushed tones as if at a funeral.

"It is very depressing," said one of the women, an English teacher. "The soldiers are not the people responsible (for the occupation.) They are not the guilty ones."

A final snapshot captured a parting note from the Soviet military to the Czech people: "We are leaving — friendship remains."

Friendship remains? More likely it's a mixture of joy, relief, anxiety and even pity which remains.