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M. R. Myant

Excerpt

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Introduction

A considerable amount has been written, both in Czechoslovakia and in the West, on the events in Czechoslovakia in the 1945–8 period. This is not surprising, as in three different respects it is of great importance for modern European history. The events of February 1948 had considerable international significance at the time in the division of Europe into opposing blocs. The governments of the United States, Britain and France even issued a joint declaration suggesting that the February events were a threat to their own political institutions. They were subsequently quoted as a major argument for setting up NATO. Today the period has a second international significance as certain Western European Socialist and Communist Parties have hoped to unite in implementing socialist changes within a multi-party system. Although Czechoslovakia's experience after 1945 can neither prove nor disprove the feasibility of a similar social transformation in another place and at another time, it remains a unique example of a democratically elected multi-party government implementing socialist changes in what, even then, was one of the most advanced countries in Europe. This experience is therefore invaluable for the sharpening and clarification of a number of theoretical concepts that have recently become more topical.

The third reason for attaching importance to Czechoslovakia's immediate post-war experience is that events in the late 1960s and in more recent years too have served to highlight the inadequacies of the model of socialism developed since 1948. Study of the 1945–8 period may therefore provide useful ideas for the evolution of a model of socialism more suited to conditions in Czechoslovakia and possibly other Eastern European countries too.

This work is therefore directed at two related questions. The

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first is to explain how socialism, understood in a broadly Marxist sense, was established in Czechoslovakia. The second is to see why it took a form basically similar to the Soviet model which, as later experience showed, was ultimately unsuitable for so advanced a society. To provide the basis for serious answers to these questions an approach is needed which shows not only what did happen but also what else could have happened. That, it must be emphasised, does not mean writing extensively on what did not happen. Nevertheless, there clearly were alternatives available and the events that took place were not all inevitable. Otherwise, of course, Czechoslovak experience would refute the ideas of those in the East and in the West who hope for a more democratic model of socialism. That, however, is not the conclusion of this work.

The starting point is the creation of the Czechoslovak state in 1918. This longer historical view can be justified on the grounds that the records of the various parties throughout the inter-war period were extremely important in the political struggles immediately after World War II. Moreover, there were some analogies between the situations after the two world wars: references to events in the 1918–20 period were very common in the 1945–8 period and undoubtedly influenced the various parties' strategies.

The centre of attention, however, is the development of the Communists' thinking to see how far they were able to prepare themselves for the role they took on in later years. It becomes clear that, although in this period as in the post-war years their ideas cannot be seen as a simple imposition from outside, the Comintern was of decisive importance in preventing the development of a strategy for socialism relevant to Czechoslovakia. Nevertheless, the party was able to build up and retain a significant body of support before the destruction of the republic in 1938 and 1939.

The occupation is discussed in more breadth, including consideration of the Nazis' aims and of the strategy of Beneš who led the administration in exile in London. This provides the necessary background for an understanding of how the Communists were able to evolve a strategy that won them a prominent place in post-war politics. To some extent this showed that there was flexibility in their ideas and that the heritage of the Comintern did not rule out all development. The Communists' post-war prestige can also be attributed in part to the apparent failure of the pre-Munich republic and hence of all the parties that had shared in its government. The

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Communist Party then appeared to many, on the basis of its past record, as the most credible vehicle for a more just and a more secure republic. This historical background therefore goes a long way towards explaining the general strength of the Communist Party after May 1945 and the general direction of post-war events. To understand the precise model of socialism that emerged the analysis of the crucial post-war events has to be far more detailed.

It is important to adopt a broad methodological approach in interpreting the nature of the changes that took place. It is quite inadequate to follow the typical approach of émigré writers, especially in the early 1950s, who portrayed events as a perfidious plot by Communists to subvert Czechoslovak democracy. It is just as unconvincing to follow the approach that was used inside Czechoslovakia during the same period when the only permissible analytical framework was one derived from Lenin's writings on the 1905 and 1917 revolutions. Both of these approaches are far too simplistic and overlook much of what was taking place. Above all, they implicitly deny what becomes obvious from a detailed study of the period i.e. that a novel revolutionary process was taking place leading towards a new model of socialism.

Moreover, despite conflicts and various sources of discontent, this new model of socialism was extremely popular. It was widely felt to be a real advance that all legal parties were united in a 'National Front' government and were committed to maintaining national unity while implementing deep changes in society. It seemed as if constructive unity had replaced the divisions and bickering between politicians that were believed to have weakened the pre-Munich republic. It also seemed to many in Czechoslovakia that they *were* treading a new path heading towards a synthesis of parliamentary democracy and socialism. Although not the first to recognise this, the Communist Party began cautiously suggesting that they were following their own, specifically Czechoslovak, road to socialism which would not require the establishment of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat'.

The framework adopted in this work aims to reveal both the potential of these steps towards a new model of socialism and the reasons for its ultimate demise. It owes a great deal to the writings of Czechoslovak historians in the 1960s. Special mention must be made of one of Karel Kaplan's works.¹ His starting point was a detailed analysis of what he felt to be the most important

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revolutionary measure, the nationalisation of industries in 1945. He showed the interaction of forces that brought it about culminating in widespread acceptance of a multi-sector economic structure. This destruction of the power of big business confronted political leaders with completely new problems as it gave them the power to shape and direct the economy. Kaplan discussed the programmatic principles of the political parties against this background thereby showing how well or badly equipped they were to confront the problems and possibilities raised by the nationalisations.

This work differs from Kaplan's approach as it does not seem valid to single out one aspect of the revolutionary changes of 1945 as being more important than the others. The revolution was a broad and wide ranging process and recognition of that is itself important for an understanding of the model of socialism that was emerging.

Discussion of the revolutionary process naturally involves consideration of the Communist Party's role within it. It certainly does seem valid to refer to the party exercising a leading role, although this is very different from the absolute and rigid notion of leadership embodied in the concept 'the dictatorship of the proletariat'. Under the conditions of a coalition government, broadly speaking, they were able to win support for, and implement, proposals that were well thought out and generally corresponded to the needs of the time. This was the basis for the gradual evolution of a model of socialism including nationalised industries, the beginnings of economic planning and a considerable equalisation of living standards. This goes a long way to refute arguments from many quarters that socialism and democracy are incompatible.

This of course leads to the crucial question of why the Communist Party felt it necessary to take an effective monopoly of power in February 1948. Although there certainly were sources of conflict in the social structure these are hardly adequate to explain the intensity and nature of the struggle that developed in the last months of 1947. Czech historians argued about this during the 1960s and two opposing positions emerged. In Opat's view the 'blame' should be placed primarily on the beginnings of the cold war which, he argued, led to a political offensive from the Czech right wing.² The alternative, put by Belda, placed the principal emphasis on the long-standing aim of the Communist Party inherited from the Comintern.³

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Neither of these views is accepted in total in the present work. Although the principal political offensive did come from the Communists, Belda seems to have underestimated the flexibility and uncertainty in their thinking. It seems more accurate to place the roots of the fight for power in the impact of the beginnings of the cold war on Soviet foreign policy and hence on Communist Party strategy, which underwent an unmistakable change in the latter part of 1947.

This work also differs from many previous ones on the same subject as it does not stop at the February events. A look at the first few months after February serves to illustrate quite dramatically the unsuitability of the new political power structure for Czechoslovak society at the time. This does not mean that the pre-February system was in any sense an ideal. The intense competition between a small number of parties could itself restrict serious discussion and this made it possible for some, both inside and outside the Communist Party, to believe that February might lead to a more genuine form of democracy. Even if such views were to prove sadly mistaken, it certainly does seem that a simple reversal of the February events is neither a precondition for, nor necessarily the best way to achieve, a democratisation of Czechoslovak political life.

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I

The development of the Communist Party
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I THE ROAD TO A COMMUNIST PARTY

The Czechoslovak state came into being at the end of October 1918 out of the ruins of the Austro-Hungarian empire. Leadership in the new republic was soon in the hands of the progressive Czech politician Masaryk and his assistant Beneš. They had spent the war in emigration where they succeeded in creating an army of legionnaires from prisoners of war and deserters: it apparently numbered 128,000 men at the end of the war. This enabled them to win some measure of international recognition for a Czechoslovak state in the autumn of 1918 and Masaryk then returned home to be elected Czechoslovakia's first President. Beneš stayed in Paris to negotiate the Czechoslovak case at the peace conference. His strategy was to incorporate Czechoslovakia's cause into the emerging French strategy for Central Europe. This meant becoming part of a potential counter to German influence and a defence against the spread of 'Bolshevism'.¹

He therefore advocated firm measures against opposition to the new state from the large German minority as this strengthened his standing at the peace conference where there was strong anti-German feeling.² He also argued for the maximum show of domestic stability and this helped persuade the more right-wing members of the first Czechoslovak government to welcome the Social Democrats into the government and to allow the speedy enactment of social reforms including the eight-hour day, social insurance measures and emergency unemployment benefits.³ There was also a conscious effort to strengthen the standing of the cautious right wing within Social Democracy by encouraging confidence that 'socialisations' – i.e. establishing social ownership of the means of production – were

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imminent.⁴ Even the National Democrats, the most explicitly bourgeois of all Czech parties, complied with this.⁵

This helped to ensure working class support for the regime. In fact, despite talk of the threat of 'Bolshevism', there had been no real inclination towards revolution. Workers, like Czechs generally, were gripped by nationalistic euphoria and they expected the new state to lead naturally to socialism.⁶

Thus the strategy evolved by Masaryk and Beneš set the most general direction for the consolidation of the Czechoslovak state. It was pro-Western, anti-German, and capitalist but some important social reforms were implemented and a fairly broad coalition government was established. Marxist historians were for a long time unable to understand the meaning of this for the creation of a political-power structure as they tended to imply that Czechoslovakia was simply capitalist and therefore ruled by the bourgeoisie. A more thorough analysis revealed a less rigid structure including the President, the coalition parties and big business.⁷ The relationship between these three centres had already assumed a fairly permanent form by the end of 1919 at the latest. The relationships within the coalition were an important part of this, particularly after local elections on 16 June 1919 which gave the Social Democrats 30% of the Czech vote. A secret agreement was then reached between Masaryk and Švehla, the astute leader of the moderately conservative Agrarian Party, giving the right-wing Social Democrat Tusar the post of Prime Minister. Far from being a step towards 'socialisation' this was intended only to give the government a socialist appearance to help withstand the dangers of 'Bolshevism'.⁸ Švehla himself took the key post of the Interior so as to dominate the police force which he regarded as the 'backbone of the state'.⁹

In purely electoral terms the Social Democrats were the strongest of the Czech parties and yet they seemed unable to take any independent, let alone united, initiative. Their leaders have been condemned for 'betraying' the movement in this period and there certainly were issues on which they joined in the deliberate deception of their own members. Nevertheless, this can hardly be an explanation for the absence of a socialist revolution during the 1918-20 period or for the policies actually pursued by the Social Democrats. The real point was that, although there certainly was scope for a more vigorous policy, the only alternatives presented at the time were singularly unattractive. This can be seen from a discussion of

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the party's three main possibilities; Šmeral's strategy during World War I, allegiance to the Russian October revolution and the policy of participation in the post-war coalition.

Šmeral, who led the Czech Social Democrats up to 1917, had advocated support for the Austrian war effort. His argument for this was partly simple opportunism, partly fear of the consequences should Austria be defeated by Tsarist Russia and partly a belief that Austria-Hungary, containing as it did several nationalities, could become the nucleus of a future United Socialist States of Europe.¹⁰ He strongly opposed the idea of an independent Czech, or Czechoslovak, state on the grounds that it would be very dangerous to try to satisfy Czech national aspirations at the expense of the rights of the German nationality.¹¹ The point was that to be economically viable and militarily defensible, a Czechoslovak state had to incorporate significant German and Hungarian minorities who were opposed to its creation.

Nevertheless, Šmeral's thinking was overwhelmingly rejected by the Czech population after the Tsarist regime had been overthrown and, above all, after the entry of the United States into the war had sealed the fate of the Central Powers. After October 1918 he became an object of public derision as other Czech politicians tried to imply that he alone had been responsible for the pro-Austrian policy that they had all accepted in the early years of the war.¹² When the campaign of vilification led to an assassination attempt in a Prague tram, Šmeral quietly left the country.¹³

The second major alternative for Czech socialists was to ally themselves with the Russian October revolution. This was not publically advocated by anyone in 1917 or 1918 partly because the news which penetrated through Austrian censorship was so distorted that even the most sympathetic view was that the Bolsheviks might not be responsible for everything bad in Russia.¹⁴ Not surprisingly, it was unanimously agreed that their 'methods' were quite unsuitable for Czechoslovak conditions. Moreover, the Czech national cause had been damaged by the Bolshevik revolution which, particularly after Brest-Litovsk, removed one of Austria's potential enemies from the war scene. Even if some Social Democrats felt a class sympathy with the Bolsheviks their national aspirations seemed to be better served by Masaryk.¹⁵

As Soviet Russia was clearly too weak to protect the new Czechoslovak state, orientation towards the Bolsheviks could only be

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based on allegiance to the idea of a world revolution which was too abstract to appeal to the Czech working class. This was quickly realised by the small number of Czech Communists, mostly former legionnaires, who returned home with eye-witness accounts of the revolution. They therefore postponed their original intention of forming a Communist Party and took the opportunity to work within Social Democracy.¹⁶

In practice the Social Democrats participated in the Czechoslovak government and could thereby claim some of the credit for the establishment and consolidation of the new state. Although, as has been shown, there was no serious and attractive alternative to this strategy, it still caused doubts within the party, stemming at first from a traditional suspicion of participation in bourgeois governments. This general issue therefore had to be debated at the party's Twelfth Congress in November 1918 where it was accepted that the party should remain in the government on the assumption that 'socialisations' were imminent. Should that not be the case, then another congress was to be held.¹⁷ There was no debate around the real problem of *how* the Social Democrats should use their positions in the government. The leadership was therefore left to drift without needing to take any initiative on socialisations, which they even began to argue would be positively damaging.¹⁸ They were also indecisive on land reform policy and allowed the Agrarians to dominate village politics and to consolidate a rural base by very slowly implementing a land reform that benefited the wealthier peasants at the expense of the nobility but gave nothing to landless labourers.¹⁹

It is hardly surprising that grave doubts about the general direction of the party's policy continued during 1919, especially as the promises of socialisations were not backed up with action. It was only after strikes and demonstrations in the mining industry that the Social Democrat Ministers proposed a start, but even that ultimately led only to a law confirming the existing powers of workers' organs in mining.²⁰

Shortly after this those with serious doubts about the leadership's policies formed the 'Marxist Left'. It was to be a temporary body aiming to bring forward issues for discussion at the party's next congress. They produced a strongly worded programmatic statement calling for the development of worker's councils and ultimately the establishment of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat'.²¹ Most of

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this remained empty rhetoric as, in deference to the party leadership and presumably from fear of being condemned as 'Bolshevik', the Left still made no attempt to get involved in workers' struggles. The weakness of their political perspective was revealed at a conference chaired by Zápotocký, on 7 March 1920, shortly before the first parliamentary elections. While forcefully opposing the leadership's coalition policy, the only alternative presented was an 'oppositionist' policy in parliament allowing M.Ps to take up a 'pure and principled proletarian stand.'²² This did persuade the leadership to adopt a strongly worded election programme setting out the need to direct all activity 'to the socialisation of the republic',²³ but it did not ensure that they would try to implement any part of the programme even after the elections confirmed that there was a strong desire for change. The party emerged with 25.7% of the total vote. Thanks particularly to big gains by the German Social Democrats, the socialist parties together, including the explicitly non-Marxist Czech National Socialists, won 47.5% of the vote.²⁴

The Left responded to these results by opposing the formation of another coalition, preferring to leave responsibility for 'the collapsing capitalist regime' to the bourgeoisie.²⁵ This naivety made it easy for Tusar to win the party's representatives for a new coalition with the Agrarians without any conditions on its programme. The point was that there seemed to be no other possible government. Nevertheless, the new government itself appeared to be only a provisional arrangement pending some future act of clarification.²⁶ The fundamental weakness was within Social Democracy as the leadership could not avoid betraying its own policies and incurring the uncontrollable wrath of its left wing.

In a bid to avoid defeat at his party's forthcoming congress, Tusar withdrew from the government in September 1920 and successfully advocated the creation of a 'government of officials' excluding all political parties. He could then claim that there was no longer any urgency in holding the congress as the central issue of dispute, participation in the coalition, had been resolved. The Left, however, were determined to proceed with the congress as quickly as possible and achieved something of a tactical success by attracting the great majority of the previously elected delegates.

The real task for the congress, however, was to formulate definite policies as the Left could no longer survive on little more than