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Galia Golan

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION: 1956 TO 1962

As the only East European country with a democratic tradition centuries old and a newer albeit brief parliamentary heritage, Czechoslovakia has often been considered somewhat exceptional for that part of the world. So too the communist movement in Czechoslovakia has often stood out as somewhat unique in Eastern Europe. Yet this distinction has, at varying times, been achieved for what would appear to be contradictory characteristics: the movement's liberal, humanistic, democratic nature – at times *and*, at other times, the movement's dogmatism, cruelty, and docility. Both in the 1920s and in the 1940s, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia found itself at odds with the international communist movement because of its apparent lack of revolutionary fervor, its tendencies towards a peaceful, parliamentary, and perhaps evolutionary road to socialism. In both periods, however, it accepted the will of the international movement, in the 1920s by undergoing 'Bolshevization' through purges, in 1948, by staging a coup d'état. Yet, after coming to power, the party demonstrated its obedience by undertaking the most extensive and ruthless series of trials and purges known to Eastern Europe; and it became known as the most dogmatic, imitative, and loyal servant of Moscow in Eastern Europe.

It may be said that this conservatism was, in fact, because of the party and the country's democratic background, i.e. that the ruling hand had to be all the more firm. Czech communists themselves have explained the phenomenon as the logical outcome of the very use of terror whereby a dependence upon these methods becomes ingrained and the regime built on insecurity and police methods falls servant to both this insecurity and these police methods. Thus Czechoslovakia was even the last, or among the last, communist regime in Eastern Europe to respond to the process of liberalization begun after Stalin's death, and known in the West as de-Stalinization.

It is customary to date de-Stalinization from the year 1956, be it in the Soviet Union or Eastern Europe, and to trace its origins to Malenkov's 'New Course.' In Czechoslovakia, however, this process all but did not take place. The pressures for a thaw were present in Czechoslovakia as in the other East European countries, but the party was wary of both the New Course and the discrediting of Stalin. It made

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: 1956 to 1962*

every effort, therefore, to reduce the pressures to a minimum and to prevent the type of situation which had resulted from the New Course and rising expectations in Poland and Hungary. It was only after the Twenty-Second CPSU Congress in 1961 and, more directly, the Twelfth Congress of the Czechoslovak Communist Party in December 1962, that de-Stalinization began in earnest in Czechoslovakia. Begun belatedly, as a result of a variety of pressures and circumstances, Czechoslovak de-Stalinization was destined, however, to be of deep significance, for the Czech and Slovak de-Stalinizers had the benefit of their own traditions, as well as the experience of earlier 'de-Stalinizers' (Poland and Hungary). The result was an effort for a thoroughgoing, genuine, and lasting transformation of the institutions of Czechoslovak society rather than a superficial, precarious thaw.

The Prague regime more or less ignored Malenkov's New Course as a temporary phenomenon that they could safely 'wait out.' After the popular outburst in reaction to the 1953 currency reform, the party was aware of the dangers of a relaxation of controls. The political trials, begun in 1949, continued into 1953 and 1954, even after Gottwald's death and the replacement of the deceased leader by Antonin Novotny in 1953. One of the few concessions, if not the only one, the Prague regime made towards the new line from Moscow at this time was a pause in the till then intensive drive for collectivization. The regime did not, however, abandon the idea, nor did it look favorably, in public pronouncements, upon the exodus from the collectives which took place in response to the change in Moscow's line. Indeed by 1955 the regime reintroduced its harsh collectivization drive. Other than the short-lived thaw in agriculture, the New Course could be felt only in the regime's formal emphasis upon collective leadership (not an unwelcomed concept given the fact that Gottwald's death meant changes in the highest constellations of the Czechoslovak party) and a certain restraint in public mention or praise of Stalin.

The Czechoslovak party was not, however, interested in a downgrading of Stalin or an attack on Stalinism. The main reason for this, true in the 1960s as well as in 1956, and an important factor in the delay of de-Stalinization in Czechoslovakia, was that the party's leadership was intimately involved with the phenomenon of Stalinism. Novotny, who had come to power only after Stalin's death, was tainted both by his active contribution to the trials while working his way up in the *apparatus* prior to 1953 and by his continuation of Stalinist methods after

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: 1956 to 1962*

1953. If a relaxation of rigid controls was dangerous for the party insofar as its continued rule was concerned, de-Stalinization was dangerous for the individuals occupying the leading positions in both the Czechoslovak and Slovak parties. As a result as little as possible was instigated by the regime in the name of de-Stalinization. What little did lead to what might be called a thaw was the result of a minimum of obedience to Moscow and the initiative taken by certain dissidents: the intellectuals and the students. It is important to note two things in this connection, however. The New Course having failed to find strong (enough) adherents high in the party ranks, there was missing the figure of a dissident leader such as existed in Poland and Hungary. Moreover, the workers, for a variety of reasons, did not join the intellectuals and students in their protest, so that the worker-intellectual alliance which played an important role in the Hungarian and Polish events was also absent in Czechoslovakia. This is not to say that there were no pressures or disagreement within the party with regard to the response to be taken to Khrushchev's policy. There were indeed sharp differences of opinion expressed in the party's central committee meeting of March 1956, and it may be said that 1956 laid the seeds for personnel changes and reappraisals which facilitated the later rise of the liberals. However, the line which predominated both at the above meeting and at the special party conference called in June attested to the victory of the Stalinists in 1956.

There was to be no new Czechoslovak scapegoat or 'native Stalin.' Gottwald's memory was left almost entirely unscathed; there were no 'revelations' or purges. The only victim was Gottwald's son-in-law, First Deputy Premier and Minister of Defense, Alexej Cepicka, who was relieved of his party and government functions in April 1956. An unpopular figure, albeit a member of the politburo, his demise was not the cause of much concern or material for any break-down in discipline. It was only much later, in response to the Twenty-Second CPSU Congress in 1961 that Gottwald (and Zapotocky) was tentatively criticized – he was reburied and the statue of Stalin was ordered dismantled. By the same token 1956 saw no rehabilitations or renunciations of the political trials. The only revision of the trials was the dropping of the charge of Titoism – in keeping with Moscow's entente with Yugoslavia. The anti-Yugoslav allegations were declared fabrications created by Beria and Slansky. Slansky, executed in 1952, was thus represented as Czechoslovakia's major Stalinist. A commission for the review of the trials was created but no official action was taken. The

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction : 1956 to 1962*

only positive result of all this was that, without rehabilitation or publicity, many of the imprisoned victims of the 1949–54 trials were released in 1956 and 1957.

As elsewhere the greatest pressures for de-Stalinization came from intellectuals and the students who took advantage of the new policy in Moscow to press their demands for their own country. A minor thaw did take place in the cultural world, primarily as a result of a certain hesitancy on the part of the party as to how to handle this initiative from below. Thus briefly, in the spring of 1956, numerous bold and critical articles began to appear, a number of previously suppressed manuscripts were published, and demands for a change in cultural policies could be heard. All this reached a climax in the Second Writers Congress of April 1956 when such writers as Ladislav Mnacko and poets Hrubin and Seifert criticized Stalinist cultural practices and demanded change. The dissident writers even managed to gain control of the union and elect a liberal presidium. This outburst was followed and taken up by the students, whose own campaign climaxed in their traditional Majales Festival on May Day 1956. In their parades both in Bratislava and Prague, the students unfurled anti-regime slogans and demands for liberalization, such as freedom of speech, access to western press, contacts with the West, and so forth.

The party's response to these actions was relatively swift and by 1957 the brief thaw was over. The students were forbidden to hold their festival again and the liberal writers were castigated at both the party national conference in June 1956 and at the plenary session of the Czechoslovak Writers Union in June 1957. In January 1957, according to *Rude Pravo* of 29 January 1957, Novotny condemned 'the ambiguous word "de-Stalinization"' as standing 'only for the idea of weakening and giving way to the forces of reaction.' Prague's continued loyalty to the memory of Stalin was oft repeated and the policy of 'neo-Stalinism,' as some observers choose to call it, was enshrined. The 1958 Party Congress formalized the open continuation of Stalinism, sharply criticizing the writers for their earlier deviations; and the 1959 Conference of the Czechoslovak Writers Union returned the conservatives to the union's leadership. With the re-introduction of accelerated collectivization, the clamp-down on the writers and students, and the hard line declared at the 1958 Party Congress a period of harsh repression set in in Czechoslovakia. While this could by no means be expected to solve or eliminate the potential for dissidence within the party, a period of political stability and economic progress followed. Indeed a

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction : 1956 to 1962*

slight liberalization, the tentative agreement to a limited amount of decentralization of the economy, was wrested from Novotny but its genuine implementation was never permitted.

The Czechoslovak party affirmed the legitimacy and victory of its conservative policies with the 1960 Constitution and the declaration that Czechoslovakia had reached socialism, soon to be followed by the transition to Communism. Czechoslovakia was thus the first of the People's Democracies officially to reach socialism. This presumably was the result of Czechoslovakia's advanced economic position as compared with the other East European countries. The Constitution was to reflect more accurately this new reality in Czechoslovakia, replacing the former relatively parliamentary-democratic Constitution with a 'socialist' one resembling more the Soviet model. In addition to the need for a document more suitable to reality, it was revealed by a Czech theoretician in 1968 that there was a connection between this and the USSR's declaration in 1959 of the completion of the stage of socialism and the beginning of the transition to Communism in the USSR. The intention was a general step upward for the whole bloc on its way to Communism and, specifically, a recognition of the large role Czechoslovakia was to play in the expected 'overcoming of the West.' The Constitution was a centralist document in which the party and the government were more intimately drawn together and the party declared 'the leading force in society and in the State.' The conservative nature and purpose of the new constitution was confirmed by Novotny, as quoted in *Rude Pravo* of 17 April 1960: the Constitution was to 'cleanse our State of various "marks of birth" of the past, comprehensible in a transitional period.' By way of example he cited as such 'marks of birth,' 'liberal pseudo-democratic principles of the division of power.'

The declaration of Czechoslovakia as a socialist state was a high point for the regime, one marked by optimism and confidence in its chosen methods. The threat of de-Stalinization seemed a thing of the past, the party's central role both vis-a-vis the government and Slovakia ensured. Circumstances swiftly changed, however, and with these changes came new irresistible pressures which launched a drive for reform. Until 1968 this was a drive basically within the party, conducted by party members motivated by varying views of socialism – including the nationalist view of many Slovaks – but more or less agreed on the idea that the then present system did not provide the proper framework for socialist society as each understood it. This drive was of particular

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction : 1956 to 1962*

significance, not only for Czechoslovakia, because the reformers sought fundamental, institutional changes. In effect they sought to adjust Marxism–Leninism to the realities of a twentieth-century, advanced, industrialized country which would not accept a contradiction between the concepts of socialism and democracy. This book attempts to trace this drive for reform, the factors and ideas involved, and its results.

The major part of this text was prepared before January 1968 and, therefore, was based on published sources only. Interviews were possible only after January 1968 and served primarily for confirmation rather than as primary sources. I have made an effort to preserve the spirit of this period and its discussions through a frequent use of the participants' own terminology and words wherever possible. The classifications 'liberal' and 'conservative' are mine, although one prominent liberal described it thus:

One group wished to preserve the old, i.e., to conserve the old style and method of work; therefore one cannot but describe it as conservative. The others believed that the methods of work must be fundamentally changed. The important thing is that the progressive forces proved to be the more powerful.¹

These are nonetheless loose terms used for convenience to characterize, generally, the forces involved. These terms do not mark fixed factions for indeed these were amorphous groupings with many persons changing their views, many revealing certain tendencies only as a result of events. These reservations about the terms 'liberal' and 'conservative' may also be applied to the term 'de-Stalinization.' One might use this term for the first stage of the process, using the term 'liberalization' for a later (post-Novotny) stage; one might use the term 'liberalization' instead of 'de-Stalinization' altogether, and use the term 'democratization' for the later stage. Indeed all three words have been used more or less interchangeably in the literature on the subject, each often being a mere euphemism for the others. While there are essential differences between the three terms, the use of any one of them is a mere convenience to characterize a process of fundamental change. The basic elements or nature of the process, as well as of the terms 'liberal' and 'conservative' will, I hope, become more clearly understandable from the text than from the single one-word term used to describe this process.

¹ Ota Sik in *Kulturni Noviny* interview, 29 March 1968.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

1

THE TWELFTH PARTY CONGRESS
AND ITS BACKGROUND

The Twelfth Party Congress of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia which took place from 2 until 8 December 1962 was to most observers a disappointing testament to continued dogmatism in Czechoslovakia.¹ The rumored instability of party first secretary Antonin Novotny – attributed to Czechoslovakia's failure to respond sufficiently to the CPSU Twenty-Second Congress, the Barak affair, the deteriorating economic situation and growing popular discontent, combined with the postponement of the congress from October to December – had led to expectations that startling changes would be forthcoming at the congress.² At the very least, some liberalization such as had been expressed by the Hungarians at their congress a month earlier was expected. Given these expectations many observers were disappointed by the endless stream of phrases at the congress on the need to improve the economy (by the conservative method of tightening centralized planning). Indeed, the single most 'startling' event of the congress appeared to be the intensification of open polemics against the Chinese which came with the speeches of Soviet representative Leonid Brezhnev and of Novotny himself.

It was probably not an accident, however, that the congress destined to become a major turning point for the Czechoslovak party, perhaps the most important meeting since the historic 1929 Fifth Congress, was outwardly drab, doctrinaire, and uninteresting. It may be that just this impression was intended and achieved by the skillful handling of the congress by party first secretary Novotny. As we shall see, forces at play within the Czechoslovak party at that time presented a threat to continued stability, and Novotny most likely hoped to keep these forces under tight rein, conceding and compromising only where necessary, without undue publicity or drama. Liberal elements within the party central committee had been gaining in influence and, together with their Slovak colleagues, had been pressing for reform in Czechoslovakia.

¹ See for example, *The Economist*, 15 December 1962; Adam Bromke, *The Communist States at the Crossroads* (New York, 1965), pp. 96–7.

² See below for details.

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Galia Golan

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Events of 1963: The Decision to De-Stalinize*

The first, but symbolically significant, step for which the liberals were pressing was a review of the purge trials of 1949–54 which had marked the height of Stalinist terror in Czechoslovakia. This was not a new demand but one which had gained momentum since the Twenty-Second CPSU Congress and particularly since the Hungarians and Bulgarians revised their past records prior to the Czechoslovak congress. Evidence that such demands had been felt in Czechoslovakia was presented by Novotny himself when, in a speech to the central committee at the end of 1961, he dismissed demands for review and revision of the trials as ‘irresponsible and unjustified.’¹ The party leader had good reason to fight the demands, however, for he was faced with a three-fold problem. First, such a review was bitterly opposed by party ‘conservatives’ (basically the *apparatchiks*) who risked unpleasant publicity – perhaps even dire repercussions – if the injustice of these events and their own contributions to them were revealed. This group formed the backbone of Novotny’s support, support he could hardly afford to jeopardize in the atmosphere of division and factionalism then current in the party. Secondly, Novotny himself, along with many of his top associates in the party, had been intimately involved in the perpetration of the 1949–54 injustices and had come to power as a result of the massive purges.² He too was an *apparatchik*, whose major qualification like those of his *apparatchik* supporters was his unimaginative but dutiful loyalty to the system. A true redress of past errors would inevitably lead to questions about Novotny’s own qualifications or right to rule the party. Thirdly, Novotny as well as the rest of the party most likely realized that it would be difficult to restrict such a review solely to the trials, especially since not only many of the persons responsible for the 1949–54 events but also the malpractices themselves continued to function in the Czechoslovakia of 1962. Any rehabilitations or public redress of errors was likely to lead to a more general questioning of the atmosphere, conditions, policies, and organization that had permitted these malpractices *and* their continuation. Thus the opening of the whole issue was like the opening of a Pandora’s box, given the situation in Czechoslovakia in 1962, fraught with potentially uncontrollable repercussions.

¹ Cited in Victor Velen, ‘Czech Stalinists Die Hard,’ *Foreign Affairs*, 43:1 (1964), 322; *The New Leader*, 24 December 1962.

² See the then security chief Bacilek’s praise for Novotny’s role, *Rude Pravo*, 18 December 1952; Karel Kaplan, ‘Deliberations about Political Trials,’ *Nova Mysl*, xxii:8 (1968), 1058.

Cambridge University Press

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Galia Golan

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The Twelfth Party Congress and its Background*

Novotny was justified in almost all his fears, as was later borne out, but forces within the party, coupled with pressure from Moscow that Prague fall in line with the more liberal posture of the Soviet bloc, brought Novotny quietly to concede to a review of the trials. This concession, almost buried in the verbiage of the congress speeches, was apparently made grudgingly and most cautiously – which accounted for the outwardly uneventful course of the Twelfth Party Congress. However cautiously tucked between phrases of dogmatic rhetoric and exhortation the decision to review the 1949–54 trials (taken by the central committee three months earlier) was nonetheless revealed and adopted as a congress resolution. Following references to the Twenty-Second CPSU Congress Novotny, in his accountability report, admitted that ‘anti-party methods’ had crept into the life of the Czechoslovak party too and revealed that the party had decided that ‘socialist legality’ had also been violated in most of the 1949–54 trials. Anxious to find a scapegoat and to further discredit his former rival, Novotny claimed that Interior Minister Rudolf Barak, chairman of the committee set up in January 1955 to investigate certain trials, had withheld information from the politburo, with the intention of using it to his own advantage later, rather than see that justice was done.¹ Novotny then announced:

The central committee has decided once more to investigate in detail the political trials from 1949–54, to draw fundamental conclusions from them and write a definite conclusion to the matter . . . a commission of the central committee is studying in detail all materials from the archives of that time and is drawing conclusions chiefly regarding party activity, the activity of leading party and state organs, and also conclusions regarding individual cases . . . we propose to the twelfth congress that it instruct the new central committee within four months to deal with and conclude all remaining instances of political trials of the period of the personality cult.²

The political trials of 1949–54 actually had been composed of several sets of trials of two categories: the trials of ‘bourgeois nationalists’ directed against the wartime leadership of the Slovak party, and the trials of ‘Titoist-cosmopolitans’ which resembled the anti-semitic

¹ Presumably a reference to material Barak discovered about Novotny. After Barak’s arrest Novotny confiscated certain of Barak’s files, presumably those containing this information (*Reporter*, 5 June 1968).

² *Rude Pravo*, 5 December 1962.

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Galia Golan

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Events of 1963: The Decision to De-Stalinize*

purges throughout Eastern Europe and were climaxed by the execution of the Secretary-General of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, Rudolf Slansky. As a nod to de-Stalinization the Barak committee had been set up by the party in January 1955 for the purpose of reviewing the trials of the 1949–51 period, i.e. the period under Slansky's rule. In 1956 this period was extended to include 1952 as well, but only with the Twelfth Party Congress was the period extended to include 1954, i.e. the period of the trials of Slovaks, and others, when Novotny himself was party first secretary. Moreover, neither of the earlier reviews had produced rehabilitations as such and had merely confirmed Slansky's responsibility for Stalinism in Czechoslovakia.¹ Novotny made no reference in his speech to specific victims nor to which set of charges were now considered spurious. Politburo member Jiri Hendrych filled this gap somewhat, however, by the statement in his speech to the congress that 'nothing needs to be changed with regard to the guilt of Slansky and certain others.'² First secretary of the Slovak party Karol Bacilek, long-time Stalinist intimately connected with the trials and indeed destined to become the first victim of the redressment of errors, made no reference in his own remarks to the injustices suffered by his fellow Slovaks. Rather, he squarely placed the blame for all the purges – indeed for the entire personality cult – on the shoulders of Slansky.³ Nonetheless the congress confirmed the central committee's establishment of a committee in 30 August 1962 chaired by a then Novotny man, Drahomir Kolder, to investigate the cases of leading communists prosecuted in the 1949–54 period.⁴

The liberals in the party could garner little else of comfort from this congress. A few promising clichés were uttered about the need to increase socialist democracy by giving greater power to the elected organs, but this generally was to be at the price of increased control by these organs over the lives of the people. One significant step forward was Novotny's pronouncement that 'in the stage for proposing candidates for deputies [to the local government organs, National Committees], it will be right to take into consideration several candidates and let the workers decide on the most appropriate one for a particular election.'⁵ This was still a long way from having a choice on the ballot

¹ For details on the trials and reviews, see Kaplan, *Nova Mysl*, xxii:6–8 (1968).

² *Rude Pravo*, 9 December 1962. The name politburo was changed to presidium at the Twelfth Congress in accordance with the Soviet change.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Rude Pravo*, 6 April 1968 (Kolder speech). ⁵ *Rude Pravo*, 5 December 1962.