II. The National Front

The Second World War was drawing to a close. The German armies were being squeezed into Central Europe from the east and west. In March 1945, the Soviet army fighting in Slovakia reached the Czech Lands. On March 17, exiled Czechoslovak political representatives began to negotiate the programme and structure of the first post-war government. Participants included people working in London under President Beneš, Communist Party members who had spent the war in the Soviet Union, and representatives of the Slovak domestic resistance. The talks, which took place in Moscow, were initiated and led by the Czechoslovak Communists. These two factors, the conference site and the activities of the Communists, reflected what had occurred in exile circles since the beginning of 1944, intensifying by the autumn. The balance of political power had swung from the London to the Moscow group. This was due not only to the stepped-up efforts of the Czechoslovak Communists in Moscow but also to the growing interest on the part of their Soviet hosts in the internal and foreign policies of the countries in their future sphere of influence.

A complicated path led to the Moscow meeting of both exile groups and the domestic resistance fighters. Right up till Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, the Czechoslovak Communists conducted themselves precisely in the spirit of the policy of the Communist International by condemning all resistance movements at home and in exile that centred on President Beneš. They viewed these organisations as a major foe and refused to commit themselves to Beneš' aim of the restoration of Czechoslovakia.

Not even in the wake of the signing of the German-Soviet Non-aggression Pact of August 1939 did the President ever doubt that the Soviet Union would eventually join the anti-Hitler coalition and play a major role in post-war Europe. It was not only his conviction but also his wish. In June 1941 the Czechoslovak Communists, again following the line of the Comintern and the Soviet Union, abruptly changed their position.

Moscow now recognized the Czechoslovak Republic with its pre-war boundaries and with Beneš as its President, and the London exile government. So did the Czechoslovak Communists, who announced that the main goal of *their* struggle was the restoration of Czechoslovakia. They dispatched their own deputies to exile institutions other than the

London government. They began to develop mutual cooperation with politicians and political groups that had earlier stood against them.

The authority of the Communists both in exile and in the domestic resistance grew markedly. Their support was certainly based on the Communists' own activity and initiative but climbed even more in response to the foreign policy and military successes of the Soviet Union. In particular, Beneš' visit to Moscow in December 1943 greatly boosted this trend. He went there to sign the Czechoslovak-Soviet treaty of alliance, to be valid both in wartime and in the post-war era, and met Stalin and the Foreign Minister, Molotov. They were in agreement on all basic questions of post-war development of Central Europe. Beneš found it easy to obtain their support for Czechoslovak demands, above all for the future transfer of inhabitants of German and Hungarian nationality from the Republic. For the first time during the war the President held talks with the leading Czechoslovak Communists, Klement Gottwald, Jan Šverma, Václav Kopecký and Rudolf Slánský. They discussed several questions concerning the post-war Republic, for which the Communists presented specific proposals. Beneš agreed with them and conceded to the Communists the role of strongest party immediately after the war's end. He granted the Communists the right to have a Communist prime minister in the first post-war government and the right to place Communists in important government positions.[1]

Starting with the talks in Moscow, the government in exile and Beneš himself increasingly took into consideration Moscow's foreign policy interests and the political standpoint of the Communists. This tendency became even stronger after the Slovak National Uprising in September 1944, and especially after the entry of Soviet troops onto Czechoslovak territory.

The Communists' participation in the institutions of the exile government and their political activities had still another aspect. They brought a special component into exile politics. On the one hand, the Communists recognized the exile government, albeit with critical reservations, but at the same time they created political groupings that operated parallel to the government, exerting pressure on and against it. From the end of 1941 the Communists began to form a socialist bloc in which they grouped exiled representatives of those parties pushing for socialism — the National Socialists, the Social Democrats and the Communists. The Communists were interested in the socialist bloc chiefly from the standpoint of their political power intentions. In their plans for organizing the liberated Republic, the bloc was to represent a strong political base. To this end, the

Communists launched negotiations concerning the post-war government and its programme.

Five Communists, four Social Democrats, four National Socialists, and two representatives of the People's Party participated in a discussion of the Communist proposals on March 22–28, 1945. Two members of the exile government were among the participants. The original programme proposal met with only minor changes. The biggest conflict arose over the position of Slovakia in the new Republic. The Communists proposed extensive political autonomy. Delegates from the National Socialist and People's parties opposed this, perceiving in autonomy a threat to state unity. Against this opposition, the Communists took advantage of the delegation of the Slovak National Council (Slovenská národná rada/SNR), the supreme Slovak organ of resistance and a new power. The SNR was made up of the two parties then in existence in Slovakia, the Communists and the Democrats. They insisted on the principles contained in the programme proposal. The opponents finally yielded.

The Communist proposal for the government programme outlined such deep and far-reaching changes in the political power and socio-economic areas that it in fact amounted to a blueprint for building a new order.[2] Why this did not meet with stronger opposition from the representatives of the non-Communist parties and President Beneš was hardly to be explained by the Communists' political tactics alone. As has been noted, the Communists were gaining more and more authority with every Soviet military victory and foreign policy coup. They also benefited from the Russian setting of the discussions as well as the apprehension of their partners that the programme and the government organization could be negotiated without them, either with other representatives of their parties or without any participation by their parties. The Communists also had a tactical variant: they led the talks as a socialist parley, in which three of the four Social Democrats were left-wing; the representatives of the People's Party were invited there as guests. The SNR delegation negotiated independently and participated in the discussion only in matters dealing with Slovakia.

But the main reason for the acceptance of the Communists' programme proposal was rooted elsewhere than in the tactical area. All participants were convinced of the necessity for or expediency of deep structural reforms in the resurrected state. This involved not a momentary pause in the post-war revolutionary wave but rather a clean break, and the drawing of the proper lessons from Czechoslovakia's fate during the previous ten years. For the politicians in exile and in the domestic resistance,

the priority task was to redress what had happened at Munich in 1938 and guard against its recurrence. President Beneš considered this the purpose of his wartime activities and encouraged all his followers at home and abroad to work towards this end. The Communists identified themselves with the policy of restitution because they could inject their own aims into it and so enforce their demands with no great difficulty and with the consent of their partners.

In the history of Czechoslovakia, Munich 1938 is of key significance. After 20 years of independence following its founding in 1918, the Czechoslovak Republic ceased to exist. The Western allies, France and Great Britain, gave Hitler a part of Czechoslovak territory inhabited by citizens of German nationality, and what was left of the country vegetated for six months waiting for Hitler's next move. On March 15, 1939, Hitler liquidated the state entirely. Hungary and Poland annexed areas inhabited by minorities of their nationalities. Leaders of the Slovak autonomous movement severed Slovakia from the rest of the country and set up a new state dependent on Nazi Germany.

Beneš, who had been President during the Munich crisis in 1938, reacted to these events not only as a great injustice perpetrated by the West against the Czechoslovak people, but also as a personal loss. For the rest of his life, he suffered from a complex about Munich. Most Czech politicians and a number of their Slovak counterparts regarded the Munich betrayal as the consequences of Nazi expansionism, but they also blamed the young state's domestic political development and foreign policy orientation.

A policy of abrogating the results of Munich naturally grew out of those tragic events. It contained three main points: (1) the revival of Czechoslovakia within the borders of 1937; (2) a change in foreign policy orientation from an alliance with the unreliable West to one with the Soviet Union as the safest guarantee against German aggression; (3) enacting political and socio-economic reforms that would protect the state internally from a recurrence of Munich. Point three meant, among other things, the establishment of a national state of Czechs and Slovaks, which would involve the liquidation of the national minorities through emigration or assimilation. Other proposed measures included the division of the latter's property among the lowest levels of Czech and Slovak society, nationalization of banks and industry belonging to the Germans, collaborationists and traitors, and the abolition of political splinter groups within the parties by restricting the number of political parties and introducing a certain degree of regulation into the democratic system. Beneš spoke of a national and social revolution, about socializing or regulating democracy,

and he even speculated in concrete terms about the political party structure in the future state. The programme announcements of the exiled representatives of the National Socialist and Social Democratic parties also contained, even if only in rough outline, demands for social reforms.[3]

In addition to declaring that in foreign policy Czechoslovakia would "above all rely on the treaty of alliance with the U.S.S.R.", the leading faction of the National Socialists in London called for important changes in domestic policy, "socialization [nationalization] of the mines of the coal trade, the metallurgical and heavy industries", banks and spas. The Social Democrats' action programme stipulated the "speedy creation of a unified socialist party of Czechoslovakia, which is the only party that can guarantee that our new Republic will be and will remain a socialist Republic". Meanwhile, back home, the demands of the resistance organizations were similar. The underground leadership of the revolutionary trade unions defined "as the foremost and main task the liberation of the country from the occupiers; as a second goal the taking of power by a socialist social order". The Democratic Party of Slovakia called for "a democratic, progressive and socially just Republic, which in international affairs will orient itself primarily towards the fraternal Soviet Union". It also committed itself to land reform and nationalization or collectivization of the property of large enterprises, as well as the protection of private property and its limitation, if demanded by the interests of a wide cross-section of the population.[4]

The exile government in London employed a relatively large cadre of specialists and civil servants who also drew up proposals for measures to be taken in the liberated Republic. Their recommendations, however, did not become a basis for negotiation over the government programme. Neither the members of the exile government nor those of the Council of State took along any programme proposals to Moscow.

The Communists devoted a great deal of effort to preparing their own programme. The proposal they came up with would implement contemporary political slogans, considerations and programme announcements, which only occasionally exceeded those of the other participants in the discussion. Thus it slipped through without serious argument. The negotiations were concluded on March 28 with the assembling of the first post-war government, for which the approved programme was binding. All accepted the structure of the government as it was proposed by the Communists. The most important deviation from earlier practice was the establishment of the institution of a government Presidium. It consisted of the prime minister, or chairman of the government, and five deputies, one

from each political party. The Communists suggested that these be the party chairmen. The government Presidium was conceived not only as the executive organ of the government, which was to provide a check on the sharing of power, but above all as a supreme political organ of the state, as a mini-National Front. In practice, as matters developed, the government Presidium would decide all important political questions of the government and state and, in fact, stand above Parliament.

In the first post-war government, the Social Democratic, National Socialist and People's parties each had three seats, the Slovak Democratic Party had four seats, the Czech Communists three and the Slovak Communists four seats. There were five ministers without party affiliations, of whom one, Zdeněk Nejedlý, did not hide his links to the Communist Party. The Communists obtained one-third of the seats in the 25-member government as a result of a tactical division of their party into Czech and Slovak parts. They did not ask for the premiership, but proposed instead that Zdeněk Fierlinger, a Social Democrat who was Czechoslovakia's ambassador in Moscow, be awarded this function. Officially, they made their decision in view of the international complications that could arise for President Beneš if the head of the government were a Communist; but domestic political considerations were no less a motive. Fierlinger was considered the leader of the Social Democratic "left", that is, an advocate of unqualified cooperation with the Communist Party and with the Soviet Union. His appointment as prime minister put him at the head of his party and ensured the leadership of a "leftist" orientation. The Communists pursued a parallel scheme in proposing Jožka David, a National Socialist whom they also knew to be "leftist"-oriented, as deputy prime minister.

Before their departure for liberated Czechoslovak territory, Stalin held a banquet for President Beneš and the members of the government present. In offering toasts, he dwelt on the position of the Soviet Communists *vis-à-vis* their Slavic allies.

"We want everyone to be allies regardless of whether they are small or large, each protecting its independence and domestic life according to its ideologies and traditions, be they good or bad . . . The Soviet Union wants nothing more than to have allies who are always prepared to resist the German danger. The Soviet Union will not interfere in the internal affairs of its allies. I know that some among you have your doubts. Perhaps even you [he turned to Beneš] doubt a little, but I assure you that we will never interfere in the internal affairs of our allies. Such is the Leninist neo-Panslavism which we Bolsheviks follow. There can be no talk of any hegemony of the Soviet Union."[5]

Stalin's words had a deep effect on the participants. Some of them later returned to these words, recalling them in the government and in the press. As late as the spring of 1947, Fráňa Zemínová referred to them at the congress of the National Socialist Party.[6]

Stalin chose his toasts deliberately. In this period of Czechoslovak-Soviet relations, unpleasant incidents, such as will be described below, cropped up regularly, giving rise to fears among Beneš and his followers of interference by Moscow in Czechoslovakia's internal affairs. Nevertheless, Beneš perceived the alliance with the Soviet Union as a necessity for protecting Czechoslovakia against German aggression. France and Britain had let him down at Munich in 1938, and from the establishment of the Czechoslovak government in exile in 1939 onwards, they deferred recognition of Beneš as head of the exile government and refused to annul the Munich Agreement, i.e. to recognize Czechoslovakia's pre-1938 borders. This was one of the grounds for Beneš' pro-Soviet foreign policy orientation. Another reason was at first the conviction and later the objective reality that the Soviet Union remained the sole European power whose sphere of influence extended into Central Europe. In this light, friendly relations with Moscow appeared highly advantageous. Czechoslovakia secured certain support for its reestablishment as a nation-state from the one power that could exert pressure on the states of Central Europe. Beneš remained deaf to the voices of Western politicians and their followers who warned him against placing excessive trust in Moscow and who did not believe Soviet proclamations about nonintereference in the internal affairs of other states. In spite of such advice and in contrast to his earlier opinions about Soviet attempts to bolshevize Central Europe, Beneš grew convinced that lasting changes had occured in Soviet policy, including progressive democratization of the regime and abandonment of a programme of revolution in Europe. He envisioned a post-war European scenario in which the Soviet Union's interest in Central Europe was limited to the creation of a belt of neighbouring states with governments friendly to the Soviets, and to which the leading Soviet statesmen promised noninterference.[7] At the first series of talks in Moscow in December 1943 Beneš requested coordination of European policy, economic cooperation and military organization with the Soviet Union. Later he considered it similarly advantageous to align internal state organization with the Soviet regime.

At the end of 1944 and the beginning of 1945, the Soviets cast three heavy shadows on their alliance with Czechoslovakia, presenting the first serious test of Beneš' foreign policy. The first shadow lay over the eastern-

most province of inter-war Czechoslovakia, Subcarpathian Rus'.* In the autumn of 1944, the Red Army crossed into that province. On the basis of an agreement with the Soviet Union on the transfer of administration of liberated territory, the Czechoslovak government dispatched Minister Plenipotentiary František Němec there in October to take up his office. Shortly thereafter, a movement for annexation to the Soviet Ukraine sprang up, initiated by local Communists with the support of organs of the Red Army and the Ukrainian government. Local citizens were drafted into the Red Army and Němec and his staff were forced to abandon the province. The organs that had requested unification with the Ukraine took power; the others were suppressed. The Czechoslovak government was unable to assert its power on this territory and its annexation to the Soviet Union was only a matter of formality. Beneš initially refused to agree to the annexation but finally took pains to settle the matter by a treaty that would not weaken the bonds of alliance between Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union.[8]

The second complication was linked to the military policy of the Czechoslovak government in exile. The government proposed transfer of supreme command on liberated territory to the Czechoslovak armed forces led by Minister of Defence Sergej Ingr, under whose authority would come all Czechoslovak armed units. The Soviets initially expressed dissatisfaction with the exiled army leadership and later they communicated their lack of confidence in General Ingr and vetoed his appointment. Beneš made changes in the army leadership which culminated in the naming of Ludvík Svoboda, the pro-Soviet commander of the Czechoslovak Army Corps in the Soviet Union, as defence minister in the first post-war government.[9]

The third case had to do with recognition of the Polish government in Lublin, which had been set up at Moscow's instigation by individuals prepared to recognize the Soviet annexation of the parts of the Ukraine and Belorussia that had formerly belonged to Poland. Starting in November 1944, Soviet authorities urged Beneš to recognize the Lublin government. The President was prepared to comply, but he asked for a declaration from the Polish government recognizing the pre-Munich borders of Czechoslovakia, including those territories taken by Poland in September 1938. The Poles rejected this demand and pushed for unconditional recognition of the Lublin government. Molotov subsequently informed Beneš that it no longer mattered to Moscow whether Czechoslovakia did

* Also known as Ruthenia or Transcarpathian Ukraine, and inhabited chiefly by Ukrainians, Russians, Hungarians and Jews.

or did not recognize the Lublin government. After Molotov was vague about Poland's territorial boundaries, Beneš unconditionally recognized the Lublin government in January 1945.[10]

These three bitter experiences indicated that the Soviets had sufficient means at their disposal to enforce their interests where their allies were concerned. They exerted pressure even through the Czechoslovak Communists who did not yet sit in the government. Beneš and his exile government yielded and subordinated their actions to the exigencies of alliance with the Soviets, which they always considered to be the main guarantee of the state's existence against the German threat and a buttress for their demands in the international area. Although the Czechoslovak retreat was formally realized as a treaty between both partners, the three cases caused apprehension among Czechoslovak politicians in London of further Soviet misbehaviour. Therefore, Stalin tried to allay these fears and to a significant extent he succeeded.

On March 31, 1945, the participants in the discussion on the government programme departed Moscow. In Košice* on April 4, the President named the first post-war government in the form agreed upon on March 28. It was the first government of the National Front and the first government that included the Communists. Representatives of the six political parties formed or pledged allegiance to the National Front of Czechs and Slovaks. The front had a variety of goals; what interests us here is its function from the viewpoint of the government. The National Front as a political base of the government was in fact a people's democratic coalition. Three important facts characterized the National Front: (1) it was a coalition of two completely different and antagonistic political currents and forces; (2) it was a coalition in which the Communist Party demanded and assumed the leading position, thus making it a coalition of unequal forces; and (3) it was a coalition in which its participants had mutually exclusive roles.

The antagonism of the partners was due to the fact that the Communists entered the coalition with the clear intention of monopolizing power by liquidating all democratic principles and in the process, the people's democratic coalition itself. Communist leaders did not openly declare their aims until January 1947. On the contrary, they portrayed themselves as defenders of democracy. After a talk with Stalin in September 1946, Gottwald announced that the country would take a peculiarly Czechoslovak democratic road to socialism. Slogans about national paths to socialism

* On liberated Czechoslovak territory.

were then in vogue and were used by leading Communist representatives in Bulgaria, Hungary and Poland, and even by Stalin himself. In reality this meant a non-Soviet road to Soviet socialism based on the Communists' having a monopoly of power. They knew no other model of socialism, they considered no other, and they were not allowed to consider another way. Four months later, in January 1947, the Communists announced as their goal the securing of a majority of votes in the next elections, which a small circle of leading functionaries had already decided to do back in May 1946.

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That the National Front was a coalition of unequal partners was a result of the Communists' having assumed the leading position with sufficient means to push through their proposals and defend their interests. Following the Communists' return from Moscow, Kopecký described their view of how the National Front should function:

> We envisioned the Czechoslovak Communist Party as the guiding force, and closest to it would be the Social Democrats, headed by their left-wing leadership. We expected to find among them the most promising ground for sowing close cooperation and possible early unification. As regards the National Socialists, we saw them as becoming the traditional party of the middle classes and cooperating with the Communists, and we predicted that they would develop in such a way that they would join with us once and for all in close cooperation to create a single Czechoslovak workers' party. As far as the People's Party was concerned, they would be the Catholic party with a religious programme appealing to the middle, provincial and bourgeois classes; this would be the only bourgeois party that would cooperate with us within the framework of the National Front. That was our ideal. . . .[12]

For the Communists, the National Front functioned as an important weapon in achieving a monopoly of power. So long as it fulfilled this role, they were interested in its preservation. The representatives of the non-Communist parties regarded the National Front as one of the main guarantees of the democratic development of the state. This led them to believe that maintaining the Communists within the National Front

would make it impossible for them to take over the government alone.

Disagreement over the character of power, over the very existence of democratic principles, was at the heart of the National Front. What then united these differing political parties? What kept the National Front together? International circumstances had a strong effect, above all the cooperation of socialist and capitalist powers in an anti-Hitler coalition and their reflection in the political party structure in the states of Europe. Dominant internal factors included Czech and Czechoslovak nationalism and ever-reviving fears of a future German or Hungarian threat; linked to these feelings was the desire to rebuild the state on a new basis, with a pro-Soviet foreign policy orientation. The parties' common conviction of the necessity and expediency of cooperation and of the impossibility, for domestic and international reasons, of ruling without a partner, also contributed to their joining forces.

The achievement of a National Front resulted in a mutual illusion. The non-Communist politicians believed that the Communists had changed, that they really had turned into nationalists and patrons of democracy and that the Soviet Union had no interest in a Communist take-over, something that the Czechoslovak Communists would have to respect. Moreover, they were convinced that the Communists would never achieve more than 50% of the votes in an election to monopolize power as this would run counter to the democratic traditions of the people. Finally, they courted each other so as to muster enough concerted power to force the Communists to stay within the framework of democracy, which was the purpose of the coalition. So, for a variety of reasons, the non-Communists had their way and regarded the long-term existence of the National Front as a necessary tool of political cooperation.[13]

In the beginning, the Communists also believed that the non-Communist parties had changed, and that they would win from among these parties a majority of supporters for a socialist-directed policy. The Communists retained, however, a total lack of trust in most of the non-Communists' leading representatives and considered breaking with and even openly attacking them. As an argument for their readiness to cooperate, Kopecký stated that the Communists could have taken full power in May 1945 when the Red Army was on Czechoslovak soil. In fact, they did not do this for international reasons, as such a move did not correspond to current Soviet policy. They later introduced another, domestic political reason: the citizens had to recognize from their own experience, as the Communists said, the "unpatriotic" policy of the representatives of the non-Communist parties.[14]

Our consideration of the National Front as a people's democratic coalition brings us to the basic question: is coalition with the Communists ever possible, a coalition founded on democratic principles and strengthened by maintaining those principles? Is coalition possible, when it is built on false democratic proclamations, insincere promises on one side, hopes and illusions on the other? Is coalition possible with forces whose aim, albeit clandestine, is the liquidation of democracy while using that same coalition as an instrument to that end?

NOTES

1. M. Klimeš, P. Lesjuk, I. Malá and V. Prečan, *Cestou května*, Prague 1965, vol.I/1, pp. 40–59; K. Gottwald, *Spisy XI*, Prague 1955, pp. 259–72.
2. Ibid., pp. 380–90.
3. Ibid., pp. 56–9, 340–1, 358–66; V. Kopecký, *Gottwald v Moskvě*, Prague 1946, p. 33.
4. Klimeš *et al.*, op. cit., pp. 340–1, 353–66, 375; *Čas* (press organ of the Democratic Party), April 22, 1945, p. 2.
5. *Svědectví*, Brussels/Paris 1957, nos 3/4, pp. 210–13; *Nová svoboda*, 1945, no. 52, p. 1.
6. *A ÚPV*, govt meeting Oct. 25, 1945; *Archiv Ústředniho výboru Československé strany socialistické* (Archive of the Czechoslovak Socialist Party, hereafter A ČsSS), Prague, vol. XIV; Congress of the Czechoslovak National Socialist Party, Feb. 27–March 3, 1947, social-political section.
7. L.K. Feierabend, *Beneš mezi Washingtonem a Moskvou*, Washington 1966, pp. 69–109; Otáhalová, op. cit., pp. 240–2, 271–4; E. Beneš, *Šest let exilu a druhé světové války*, Prague 1946, pp. 374–5; H. Ripka, *S Východem i Západem*, London 1944, pp. 48–59.
8. J.W. Brügel, *Případ Podkarpatské Rusi*, London 1954; *Svědectví* 1957, vol. 3/4, pp. 200, 211–12; 1974 vol. 47, pp. 494–8; Otáhalová, op. cit., p. 198; Klimeš *et al.*, op. cit. pp. 67–8, 447–65, 470–6, 481–2; Z. Fierlinger, *Ve službách ČSR*, vol. II, Prague 1949, pp. 422, 424, 450, 453, 503, 517, 557–8, 600; J. Křen, *Do emigrace*, Prague 1963, pp. 555–6; E. Beneš, *Paměti*, Prague 1947, p. 207; *Historie a vojenství* 1967/3, p. 440; *Slovanský přehled*, 1968, pp. 342–51.
9. E. Čejka and B. Klípa, *Za svobodu Československa*, vol. III, Prague 1960, pp. 257, 264, 270–92; *Slovanský přehled*, 1966, p. 199; Fierlinger, op. cit., pp. 465–6, 476–9, 482, 490; *A ÚPV*, govt meeting April 6, 1945.
10. Fierlinger, op. cit., pp. 380–1, 429, 508–29, 548–61; *Slovanský přehled* 1966, p. 200; Klimeš *et al.*, op. cit., p. 404.
11. *Archiv Ústředního Výboru KSČ*, (Archive of the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, hereafter A ÚV KSČ), fond 01, meetings May 30, 1946, and Jan. 22, 1947.
12. Ibid., meeting Feb. 6, 1946.
13. Šrámek "assures the government that the People's Party is decidedly in favour of

KNIHOVNA KATEDRY
anglistiky a amerikanistiky
Filozofické fakulty
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BRNO, Arna Nováka 1

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> We envisioned the Czechoslovak Communist Party as the guiding force, and closest to it would be the Social Democrats, headed by their left-wing leadership. We expected to find among them the most promising ground for sowing close cooperation and possible early unification. As regards the National Socialists, we saw them as becoming the traditional party of the middle classes and cooperating with the Communists, and we predicted that they would develop in such a way that they would join with us once and for all in close cooperation to create a single Czechoslovak workers' party. As far as the People's Party was concerned, they would be the Catholic party with a religious programme appealing to the middle, provincial and bourgeois classes; this would be the only bourgeois party that would cooperate with us within the framework of the National Front. That was our ideal. . . .[12]

For the Communists, the National Front functioned as an important weapon in achieving a monopoly of power. So long as it fulfilled this role, they were interested in its preservation. The representatives of the non-Communist parties regarded the National Front as one of the main guarantees of the democratic development of the state. This led them to believe that maintaining the Communists within the National Front

preserving a unified National Front for as long a period as possible." Majer: "It is only necessary that it [the National Front — author] agree on 100% unity, for this unity to be strictly and consistently maintained" (*A ÚPV*, govt meeting Dec. 11, 1945, secret part). Ripka "is a stubborn advocate of the idea of the National Front; he supports an absolute agreement in basic matters. . . [otherwise] things would reach a point where we would be brawling in the streets". (Govt meeting June 28, 1946.) Ripka "agrees with the opinion that everything that threatens the unity of the National Front is damaging".

14. *A ÚPV*, fond Národni fronty (National Front, hereafter NF), meeting Feb. 5, 1948; *A ÚV KSČ* fond 01, meeting April 9, 1948.

III. The Border and the Frontier Regions

The restoration of the Czechoslovak Republic was accompanied by difficulties over settlement of the border question and that of the relations between nationalities in the frontier regions. Czechoslovak insistence on border and frontier adjustments constituted an attempt to assure the existence of the Republic. It was, at the same time, the outgrowth of inflated nationalism. The issue functioned as an important unifying factor, as all political parties shared the same point of view, with minor variations. The problems of the border and the frontier regions were of a diverse character.

The Czechoslovak government was unable to restore the state fully to within its pre-Munich borders. Subcarpathian Rus' (Transcarpathian Ukraine) fell to the Soviet Union. This annexation was decided on in the final months of the war and formally — i.e. according to the constitution — it was supposed to be concluded through a decree of the duly elected Czechoslovak Parliament. However, the matter received a swift kick. On June 18, 1945, the government dealt with a Soviet order to send a delegation to Moscow to negotiate with the Poles over the Těšín region (Cieszyn in Polish, Teschen in German). Klement Gottwald, chairman of the Communist Party and a deputy prime minister, asserted that the Polish government was forcing Moscow's intervention and that this was "some sort of attempt to blackmail the Soviet government, which has forced the Polish government to accept Soviet claims to Poland's eastern territories. [If] Czechoslovakia clearly announces that it is handing over the Transcarpathian Ukraine to the Soviet Union, it would be put in the same position as Poland is *vis-à-vis* the affair of the eastern frontiers, which would be psychologically advantageous." Another deputy prime minister, Monsignor Jan Šrámek of the People's Party, spoke out against this position, arguing that "the decision was reserved for the Constitutional Assembly" and that a change of opinion on the part of the local population could not be ruled out — and that in fact they now desired a return to Czechoslovakia. The majority of the members of the government agreed with Gottwald. Ripka understood Šrámek's misgivings from a legalistic standpoint but thought "it is necessary to view the matter pragmatically. Personally, I believe that the will of the people will not decide matters in Subcarpathian Rus' but that the international aspect of the matter will prove decisive for

XIV. February 1948

The tension caused by the political crisis permeated every segment of society and increased with every day that passed. On February 19 the Communists, the trade unions controlled by them and the Peasants' Commissions were on the offensive stirring up uncertainty and apprehension among members and functionaries of the non-Communist parties. At factory meetings plans went ahead to convene the Congress of Factory Councils, and delegates were elected. Village peasant meetings had a parallel purpose. Although outspoken opponents of the farmers' and factory congresses were few and their influence was minimal, they still made headlines. Radical wings gathered strength in both competing camps with their demands for a firm stand against the opposition, including a final power confrontation. This depended on the political decisions of the central institutions, in which feverish negotiations were taking place on how to resolve the gathering crisis.

The Communists, informed by their agents of the preparations for the resignation of the ministers, believed that this presented an opportunity for the setting up of a caretaker government. Their first reaction was to consider creating a majority or left-wing government with the Social Democrats. Gottwald, Slánský and Kopecký proposed this alternative to Laušman, Tymeš and Vilím, who answered: "We reject a caretaker government, we will not join any anti-Communist government, but we would not deem it politically wise to form a government with the Communists against the others." On the contrary, they demanded that Nosek should carry out the government decree. The Presidium of the Social Democrats discussed the offer for several hours. Despite the opposition of Fierlinger and Oldřich John, who were pushing for a leftist government, they confirmed the position already conveyed to the Communists. At the same time they stated that the party had "done everything [possible] for the pacification of relations in the National Front and in the government" and for the maintenance of the coalition.[1]

Zenkl called a meeting of Drtina, Hála, Procházka, Kočvara and Lichner. He again referred to his meeting with Beneš and the decision of the ministers of his party to resign. Several hours later Drtina spoke with Laušman and Tymeš about the results of this meeting, but said nothing about plans to resign.

The executive Central Committee of the People's Party also took a stand

on the situation. It called for greater cooperation in the National Front if order was to be restored in the security services, and approved of the resignation of the ministers if that were to become necessary. The Presidium of the Democratic Party voted down the proposed resignation by a vote of 7 to 3.

The Communist leadership held a tempestuous meeting. Two basic concepts were in conflict. Supporters of the radical course (Kopecký, Ďuriš and Zápotocký) rejected any further talks, proposed a "mobilization of the masses", and insisted on reorganizing the government to the advantage of the Communist Party. They felt like salivating horses champing at the bit, Kopecký shouted. The others were "surprised, and even Klema [Gottwald] urged that there was still time for that. Even Ruda [Slánský] believed in time, and suspended preparations." The participants broke up without approving any concrete measures for further action and without deciding to exploit the tense situation by finally seizing power.[2]

The most important event of February 19 was the sudden arrival in Prague first of Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Valerian A. Zorin, and then of the U S ambassador, Laurence A. Steinhardt. Zorin, who until a few months earlier had been Soviet ambassador to Czechoslovakia, flew in at 3 p.m., bearing news of Soviet fears concerning developments in the Republic. Stalin, he told Gottwald, insisted that the Communists should take advantage of the current crisis to stage the final confrontation. He also pointedly suggested that Gottwald should ask the Soviet government for military assistance; Soviet troops were already massed on the Hungarian border.

Stalin's order was, of course, motivated by reports received from Communists in the Czechoslovak security services and other proponents of the radical course. Gottwald declined to invite in foreign troops, making this the one instance in his entire life when he disobeyed the Soviet leader. When Zorin reminded him of the consequences of such disobedience, Gottwald explained that the presence of Soviet troops was completely unnecessary because the party was in full command of the situation, with control over the armed forces, and that Soviet intervention would significantly complicate the power confrontation both domestically and internationally. On the other hand, Stalin's insistence that the KSČ should plunge into the final confrontation was welcomed by Gottwald and the other members of the leadership as a binding directive. It helped them make up their minds over a course of action that they would otherwise have pursued more slowly and hesitantly.

Steinhardt arrived at Prague airport two hours after Zorin. He made no

secret of his optimism that democracy would prevail in Czechoslovakia, repeating assurances of moral and diplomatic support from the Western world for the representatives of the non-Communist opposition.[3]

The first decisive point in the course of events came on the second day, February 20. The public knew that the government would discuss the main issues in dispute and impatiently awaited the result. The National Socialist press published critical remarks about the Ministry of the Interior, under the title "We Will Not Allow a Police Regime". The Ministries of National Defence and the Interior published a joint report on the so-called spy affair in Most, which contained attacks on the National Socialist Party. The non-Communist party press stressed the duty of every minister to carry out the decrees of the government, since otherwise the latter would be unable to govern.

An extraordinary government meeting was called for 10 a.m. Gottwald had received a letter beforehand from Zenkl, Hála and Kočvara, asking whether the government decree of February 13 had been fulfilled, and in answer he informed them that this matter was on the agenda for the government meeting, at which Nosek would give his report. At this the ministers of the three parties informed Gottwald that they would not participate in the government meeting.

At 11.30 a.m., Zenkl informed President Beneš of the ministers' decision to submit their resignations. Representatives of each party handed in their written notifications to the Presidential Chancellery late in the afternoon. A minority of the members of the government resigned (fourteen members remained out of twenty-six). Under these circumstances, the position of the Social Democrats seemed crucial. In reality, however, their choice of action could change only the form or course of the confrontation, not its end-result.

The non-Communist opposition and the Communists intensified their duel over the Social Democrats. The same day, February 20, Ripka conferred with Tymeš, Majer and Jankovcová about the resignation of the ministers of the three parties and called on them to do the same. The Communists were afraid of a rapprochement between the non-Communist opposition and the Social Democrats; they had tried to prevent this from happening just a week before when they invented a political pact between Zenkl and Laušman directed against the Communists and began to write about it in the newspapers. Moreover, members of the left made telephone calls to the Central Secretariat of the Social Democrats, to lobby against the non-existent pact.

Also on that day, on behalf of the trade unions, Zápotocký and Evžen

Erban asked Laušman not to allow his party to join in the resignations but instead to set up a government together with the Communists. Towards evening, the Communist Party leadership sent an open letter to the Social Democratic leadership calling for socialist cooperation. Simultaneously, instructions went out to lower-level Communist organizations calling on them to enter into contact with the Social Democrats and send back joint resolutions requesting cooperation between the parties' central offices.

The members of the SD Presidium convened a stormy meeting to discuss their position *vis-à-vis* the ministers' resignations. Finally they agreed to play the role of mediator of the National Front: they condemned the resignations and criticized the Communists' action, decided to keep their ministers in the government, rejected a proposal for a majority government, and persisted in calling for a government of the whole National Front. In briefs to the party functionaries, the Presidium expressed its conviction that "the President will not accept the resignations and will retain the government until the elections."

The Communist leadership sat from the afternoon all through the night without a break. While the meeting was going on, Gottwald visited Beneš to explain his view of the reasons for the government meeting not taking place. He acquainted the President with the basic proposals for solving the government crisis: to accept the resignations of the ministers in any event and not to negotiate any further with the leaderships of their parties; and either create a majority government or fill out the government with other functionaries of the non-Communist parties and mass organizations. Ďuriš wrote in his diary about the meeting of the Communist Party leadership: "Yesterday [Friday, February 20], we spent all day looking for a solution, but Klema [Gottwald] already says: 'We have crossed the Rubicon — consider every step — a return is not possible . . ." The participants in the meeting readily drew the conclusion that "an agreement is not possible, the matter must settle itself." Unable to see any other way out, and resolved to turn the government crisis into the final power confrontation, they carried out a series of political and power measures.

The most important of these were: to organize a mass assembly in Prague's Old Town Square the next day at which Gottwald would give a speech; duly prepare the Congress of Factory Councils; set up organs of the new National Front, including a Central Committee; announce the preparedness of the security units; summon emergency regiments of the SNB to Prague; and ensure the defence of strategic points. Furthermore, orders were given to get all functionaries and the entire party into battle-readiness, to ensure that they would be quickly informed and that they

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would organize party meetings that same night at the district and factory level. Slánský enjoined J. Pavlava and Leopold Hofman to prepare a plan for interning the ministers in case Beneš did not accept their resignations, but both refused. The possibility cannot be excluded that someone else came up with a similar plan. On the night of February 20–21, meetings of the Communists took place in all districts and large factories.[4]

In effect, the die was cast on February 20. The non-Communist opposition counted on the resignations of their ministers causing the government's fall; when a new government was created, either the Communists would be compelled to retreat, or else early elections would have to be called; in that event, the non-Communist opposition would maintain the National Front even after the elections, in which they would strengthen their position. Such a result could be achieved only if the government crisis were to be settled by entirely conventional means in a parliamentary-democratic way — in other words, as the work of a triangle made up of the party leaderships, the President and Parliament. They did not consider any other solution, nor could they even have conceived of it. They had no alternative at hand, in case they should lose. They failed even to establish an effective political organization or to create forces that could carry out their intentions successfully. The triangle solution seemed so obvious to them. Moreover, their first step did not testify to excessive tactical forethought: they did not secure the resignations of the majority of the members of the government. They assumed, incorrectly, that their cooperation with the Social Democrats, of which there had been several recent instances, was going to lead to a joint stand in the event of resignation. They did not even win over Jan Masaryk. And so the government did not fall, and one of the preconditions for realizing the non-Communist opposition's tactical variants thus disappeared.

The non-Communist opposition relied too much on the President, and indeed the outcome of the crisis demonstrated that they knew him less well than did the Communists. As soon as they had handed in their resignations, they put the burden of finding a solution into Beneš' hands, and did nothing effectual that would have bolstered his opposition to Communist demands. They could not have foreseen that, even in this dispute, Beneš would not use his authority, and that as supreme commander he would not use the army. However, neither his political thinking nor his recent behaviour gave them any cause to assume that he would.

On the other hand, of course, the opponents of the campaign for Communist power had no choice in the tactical variants. Once the Communists, after their losses in the government, expanded their activity and

focussed the starting point for their offensive on a secondary matter — the salaries of state employees — they had their opponents in a corner, pressed for time. The non-Communists suddenly realized this just before the Congresses of Factory Councils and Peasants' Commissions took place and knew that they did not have the strength to halt the Communist offensive or even to obstruct the realization of congressional decisions with which they could not agree. The non-Communist parties condemned the convening of both congresses. At first the National Socialist leadership called on their members in the Factory Councils to refuse to participate, but later they had to modify their guidelines. All the parties tried, through advisory meetings with their party delegates, to influence the course of the Congress of Factory Councils and win supporters against the proposed resolutions of the Congress. The attempt fell flat. In addition, the instigators of the resignations barely considered, if at all, the possibility that the Communists could use the Congress of Factory Councils to promote their own solution to the government crisis. When Zápotocký proposed that the Congress screen the trade union leadership by adopting an initiative to establish a Central Action Committee of the National Front, several non-Communist deputies in the ÚRO Presidium objected, but were overruled.[5]

As soon as the Communists had decided to use the government crisis as the pretext for the final confrontation, they proceeded inexorably towards their goal. From this point of view, the fact of the ministers' resignations was a handy tool, and the functionaries in the security services got, to a certain extent, what they wanted, presenting the party leadership with a *fait accompli*. In April 1948, describing the course of the government crisis, Gottwald said, "At first, I couldn't believe it would be so easy. But then it turned out that this is just what happened — they had handed in their resignations." He added, "I prayed that this stupidity over the resignations would go on and that they would not change their minds."

From the very first moment, the Communists stuck to one basic premise: that the government crisis would not be resolved by the triangle of the party leaderships, the President and Parliament, but in a thoroughly different way — in the streets, where the Communists were invincible. Carefully they defined their final objective as the establishment of a new power, of a revived National Front with a Communist majority, whose organs would carry out a purge of public life, resulting in the elimination of the opponents of Communist policy. The ancillary mechanism of the National Front would be transformed into the political-power basis of the state, and its activity would become the primary means of bringing

about a monopoly of power. The Communists also delineated their tactical line with great accuracy, thus deciding that the government as a whole had not resigned and that the members who had left would be replaced. Initially they considered having a majority leftist government. When the Social Democrats advocated participation by all the parties, the Communists proposed having a government with a leftist centre, filled out by representatives of the other parties. Again, the Social Democrats did not agree with the Communists and so it was decided to supplement the government with functionaries from the "left" in the non-Communist parties. The Communists regarded the exclusion of the non-Communist opposition from political life as an especially important point. They therefore insisted that they would not talk about the next government with either the ministers who had resigned or the non-Communist party leaderships, but only with members of the "left". In spite of this, from a formalist point of view, by taking the step of naming the new ministers, a matter of the Communists' agreement with Beneš alone, Gottwald was also following another scheme. Referring to this scheme in April 1948, he said:

"What did we bank on? — that we would not negotiate with them, not even with the then party leadership; that we would succeed in finding groups of people with whom we would be able to negotiate and who are at our beck and call. We knew that this would mean [making] our tactical move — a rupture, smashing these parties; as we liquidated their leaderships, we would negotiate with the opposition, we would bring them into the government."[6]

The Communists possessed sufficient means to realize their plans, even in the event of some of the suggested steps not working out at all. They put into action a tested mechanism for mobilizing the masses, and they raised the "direct will of the people" to the highest level — by calling the Congresses of Factory Councils and Peasants' Commissions. They activated the party and exhorted members to assume a state of battle-readiness. They assigned great significance to creating new political-power organs completely subservient to them — the Action Committees of the National Front (AVNF) — and immediately called for their establishment in all communities, factories and institutions, granting them wide-ranging authority. They carried out a series of security measures (readiness of the SNB units) and made certain that the army would continue to stay out of the conflict. To neutralize suspected support for the non-Communist opposition from members of the armed forces, Communist workers were armed and formed into regular units of the People's Militia, subordinate only to the KSČ leadership (specifically to the party general secretary). And

the Communists stepped up their political pressure on Beneš to accept the resignations and name a government according to Gottwald's proposal. If he were to reject the proposal, a general strike would be called with organized public meetings demanding that he step down from the Presidency.[7]

On the day that the government crisis culminated in the resignations of the ministers, two forces faced each other with diametrically opposed conceptions of how to solve the crisis. Although the President named the new government only on February 25, the outcome of the crisis had already been decided the day after the resignations. On February 21, mass meetings took place in all large cities. The crowds taking part listened to Gottwald's speech. He proclaimed the Communist variant of solving the government crisis and called for the establishment of AVNFs — Action Committees of the National Front. That same evening, the first reports arrived of their appearance. Through intra-party channels, the Communist functionaries received instructions to ensure that they had a majority in the AVNFs. They were also given guidelines for their activity — to carry out a purge of opponents of the Communist Party from public life. In the course of that day and the night that followed, Gottwald secured promises from the National Socialists Emanuel Šlechta and Alois Neuman, the People's Party representatives Alois Petr and Josef Plojhar, the Slovak Democrat Ján Ševčík and also Vavro Šrobár, to accept a ministerial seat. While the Communists were abruptly assuming complete control of the political scene, representatives of the non-Communist parties asked their followers to stay calm and to have faith in President Beneš as the guarantor of a constitutional and democratic solution to the crisis.[8]

The process by which the non-Communist opposition ceased to exist as a political force quickly accelerated. Already its voice could barely be heard. On February 22, almost 8,000 delegates to the Congress of Factory Councils — members of all parties and nonpartisans — voted (there were nine dissenters!) for further nationalization, for Gottwald's solution to the government crisis, and for the formation by the trade union leadership of a Central Action Committee of AVNFs. The Congress of Factory Councils took over the functions of Parliament and approved further nationalization in industry and all branches of wholesale trade. In addition, the leadership of the trade unions instructed their functionaries to set up a national administration over those enterprises to be nationalized.

These events, especially the ruthless ascent of the Communists and the mass assemblies of the preceding two days, persuaded Beneš to consider accepting the resignations of the ministers. Through his political

adviser, he informed the leading functionaries of the National Socialist and People's parties of his decision. Horrified, the participants in the night-time meeting rejected Beneš' plan, asked him in a letter not to accept the resignations, and assured him of the support of the countryside. When Drtina and Ripka informed Laušman and Vilím of Beneš' intention, they did not rule out as an outside possibility their own agreement to an exchange of old ministers for new ones.

Beneš, believing the claim of rural support, changed his mind. Yet the peasants who supported the non-Communist parties were silent; only those influenced by the Communists spoke out. The promise of popular support was limited to one successful demonstration, when several thousand students in Prague marched to Hradčany Castle, the President's official residence. Their delegation assured Beneš of their endorsement of his stand not to accept the ministers' resignations.[9]

So the following day, February 23, Beneš received individual delegations of the National Socialist, Social Democratic and People's parties, and assured them that he would not name a government unless representatives of all the parties were included, with the consent of their parties' leaderships and chairmen. The delegations informed the President of the results of that day's meetings of leading organs of their parties. In their discussions and decrees, they quite clearly favoured efforts to save the situation. They urged the preservation of the National Front, announcing that they would not resign from it, and that they considered it to be the only basis of agreement and the only means of overcoming the current crisis. The Democratic Party came to the same conclusions.

By this time, voting for the National Front resembled nothing so much as an attempt to galvanize the dead. The Communists no longer took the coalition into consideration — a new, revived version, minus supporters of the non-Communist opposition, replaced it. Their parties' leaderships were presented with quite a different question: the participation of their functionaries in the new organs of the National Front. These organs mushroomed, with even individual members of the non-Communist parties joining. As far as power was concerned, the new institutions were in full control of the country. With merciless enthusiasm, they launched a purge of public life, unleashing a wave of barbarism and brutality. On the evening of February 23, the delegates of the parties and social organizations created a preparatory committee to establish a central AVNF.

Together with setting up the Action Committees, an increasing number of measures of an administrative or power-oriented character were taken which led to the isolation of the leaderships of the non-Communist parties and paralysis of their activities. The paper mills refused to supply paper to the central press of the People's and National Socialist parties. In Bratislava, the newspaper of the Democratic Party was not printed. The Ministry of the Interior forbad public demonstrations by the parties whose ministers had resigned, and announced the arrest of two officers, members of the Defence Commission of the National Socialist Party, about whom there were reports concerning "preparations for armed actions". This became the pretext for a search of the Central and District Secretariats of the National Socialist Party, conducted by members of the RR Commission, who planted weapons on them. Bratislava security forces informed the investigating judge that criminal proceedings were to be taken against the former deputy prime minister, Ursíny. Units of the People's Militia were formed in the factories as the Communist leadership had decreed the day before.

The representatives of the non-Communist parties were totally powerless in the face of these acts, possessing not a single means of defence or resistance. Nor could they do anything when the Action Committees in the ministries forbade Ripka, Stránský, Hála, Ivan Pietor and later Majer from entering their own offices. They were just as helpless when Gustav Husák, chairman of the Board of Commissioners, deprived the representatives of the Democratic Party of Board membership and transferred the Democrat-controlled commissions to Communist commissioners. They even surrendered the possibility of using Parliament to protest and resolve the situation. The parliamentary Presidium, led by the National Socialist Josef David, suspended the elected plenary meeting (on February 24), for the duration of the government crisis. Ripka, the spiritual father of the ministers' resignations, recognized in a message to Gottwald that he had "lost this battle. I wish to leave politics and work as a university professor."[10]

The following day, February 24, the political atmosphere was characterized by an increase in the political and administrative pressure being applied by the Communists. Social uncertainty was even more strongly present in the deliberations of the Communists' opponents, as was fear for their very political existence. This was most conspicuous in the one-hour general strike organized by the trade unions, in which more than 2.5 million workers participated. About 4,000 wage-earners did not strike.

The suppression of the leading organs of the non-Communist parties mounted steadily. These organs began to lose control of their own parties. In a meeting of the Central Committee of the National Socialist Party,

appeals were made to maintain both the unity of the party and a strong position, but reflected in the heterogeneous opinions of the participants were feelings of impotence and an inability to determine further steps. "What next?" asked Stránský. "One cannot say exactly. There should be elections." Leading party members were of the opinion that they lacked the power to exert strong pressure on their members in the factories and government offices to reject participation in the general strike, which was aimed against their policies. Therefore, they decreed that "the National Socialists may participate in the general strike." They were unable to adopt an effective position on the existing and future participation of their party members in the Action Committees, or to draw conclusions regarding Alois Neuman, who had admitted having talks about participation in the new government.

An Action Committee was set up in the central office of the People's Party, led by Petr and Plojhar, who took over the party's printing presses. An Action Committee headed by Milan Polák appeared the following day in the Democratic Party.

The situation developed in a more complex manner in the Social Democratic Party. The "leftists" were unable to assert their pro-Communist views and induce their party leadership to participate in Gottwald's new government. Angrily criticizing their ineffectiveness, the Communists decided to take steps of their own. KSČ members, together with several of the most radical members of the Social Democratic "left", occupied the SD central secretariat, cutting off the leadership from the rank and file. Afterwards, Gottwald sent word to Laušman that he had the membership list of the new government all prepared, and if the SD leadership did not expedite their decision on participation, their party would not be represented in the new government at all. Faced with this situation, the Social Democratic leadership agreed to participate in the government. That night, Fierlinger and Laušman decided on changes in the party leadership involving the recall of the most steadfast opponents of the Communists' power aims (Majer, Vilím, Bernard, Görner), as well as the co-optation of the "left".

That same night the Communist leadership was also dealing with Beneš' letter. It recommended a return to cooperation in the National Front and the solution of the government crisis by agreement of all the party leaderships. Gottwald and his comrades stood their ground in answering the President. They refused to negotiate with the leaderships of the parties that had resigned and proposed instead to augment the government with representatives of the parties and social organizations.

They had decided that if Beneš were to reject their proposal, they would call a general strike and force his resignation.[11]

At 11 a.m. on February 25, Gottwald, Nosek and Zápotocký presented the President with their proposal for the new government. During the crisis, the President's Chancellery at Hradčany Castle had received 5,327 resolutions supporting a Communist solution to the crisis and only 150 opposing. A crowd of 250,000 demonstrators in Prague and hundreds of thousands in other cities, determined to carry out Gottwald's proposal, awaited the President's decision in suspense. The leading Communists knew that it would be a difficult decision for the President whether to resign or not, but they counted on his finally giving in. In April 1948, Gottwald spoke about his predictions two months earlier:

> "We saw with our own eyes that his first gesture was: 'I will give it [the list] back to them, I will not accept it. . . .' But we knew, because we know him, that he has one good side, which is that he knows what strength is, and this led him to evaluate this [situation] realistically . . . The President then simply signed our proposal. We had expected this . . . I think that the knowledge that we were prepared for a different decision [the President's resignation — author's note], also played a role in his acceptance of our proposal. . . . Objectively, although under pressure and in view of the situation, when all is said and done, the President basically played a positive role [i.e. from the Communists' point of view — author]."

The President signed Gottwald's proposal for a new government at 4:30 p.m. In the twenty-five member cabinet, the Communists occupied thirteen seats, three ministers were not connected with any party, and the remaining seats were occupied by members of the non-Communist parties who were totally dependent on, and without exception subservient to, the Communists. The Communists had a considerably greater preponderance in all lower levels of authority, mass and social organizations as well as in economic, state and cultural institutions. In the space of five days, the government crisis had achieved its goal — a monopoly of power.[12]

The course of the February crisis proved that the non-Communist opposition had not been prepared for a coalition with the Communist Party, or for a conflict within the people's democratic system. As soon as the non-Communist opposition entered the coalition, they created a people's democratic power system and approved the country's incorporation into the Soviet sphere of influence as a necessary condition for the state's existence. Thus they forfeited the ability to halt the Communists'

march towards a monopoly of power. At the decisive moment, they felt themselves to be operating in an international vacuum, since they lacked effective support from even a single world power. Domestically, they could not balance the Communists' preponderance of power. Yet they need not have lost the contest in such a way that their voice was not to be heard at all during the February crisis, when they allowed the Communists to dominate the political scene, win the support of a large part of the population and present themselves as the spokesmen for the interest of the majority of the nation.[13] In February 1948 the non-Communist opposition came face to face with the consequences of their earlier political illusions and capitulations, their want of experience of power conflicts, unrealistic estimations of their own strength, and ignorance of the nature of their opponent.[14]

NOTES

1. *Ibid.*, fond SD, meeting of the Presidium Feb. 19, 1948. Two days earlier, the Social Democratic leadership, in the absence of the "leftists" Fierlinger and John, decided that the aim of the party is "not to create a bloc against the Communists, not to permit a caretaker government, nor a government without the Communists."
2. Belda *et al.*, pp. 286–7; Ďuriš' article, conversation between the author, two Czechoslovak historians and Marie Švermová in 1965.
3. Kaplan, *Moje rozhovory*, conversation with V. Široký in 1965; *Svobodné slovo* Feb. 21, 1948; *České slovo* (Munich), vol. 4, no. 2, article by Zenkl.
4. Belda *et al.*, pp. 287–91, *A ÚV KSČ*, fond SD, Presidium meeting Feb. 20, 1948; *A ÚML*, fond únor 1948; letters to regional political secretaries of the KSČ Feb. 20, 1948; Ďuriš' article; Kaplan, *Moje rozhovory*, conversation with J. Pavel and L.H.; Svoboda, Tučková-Svobodová, *Jak to bylo v únoru*, Prague 1949, pp. 51–3.
5. About 400,000 delegates participated at a preliminary National Socialist meeting on the night of Feb. 21–22. Stránský, Drtina, Ripka and Krajina represented the leadership but they did not carry out their plan. At a Social Democratic preliminary session, there were about 500 delegates with Laušman and Vilím speaking to them; there were about 200 delegates at the People's Party preliminary session.
6. *A ÚV KSČ* fond 01, meeting April 9, 1948.
7. Ibid., fond 02/1, meetings Feb. 20, 21, 23, 24, 25, 1948; *A ÚML*, fond únor 1948.
8. *A ÚV KSČ*, fond 01, meeting April 9, 1948; fond 02/1, meeting Feb. 21, 1948. *Svobodné slovo* (the central organ of the National Socialist Party) wrote on February 21: "The Presidium of the Czechoslovak National Socialist Party calls on all its followers to keep the peace at all costs and have complete faith in the party leadership. Do not participate in any debates but just go about your everyday business. And on Feb. 22: "None of those parties [that had resigned] has left the National Front. All consider the National Front still to to be the only possible instrument of our national and state policy." The central organ of the People's Party, *Lidová demokracie*, wrote on Feb. 21: "The Czechoslovak People's Party again repeats that the National Front continues. All parties are government parties". And on Feb. 22: "I call on you to maintain consistent civil and party self-discipline. Resolution of the government crisis as well as calling elections, which logically must take place as soon as possible . . ." according to the constitution. "On the basis of the maintenance of the National Front, the government will also continue" and no one may be excluded from it (Hála's article "Jen podle ústavy").
9. *A ÚRO* Protokol I. celostátního sjezdu závodních rad; A ÚML, fond únor 1948; M. Bouček, *Praha v únoru 1948*, Prague 1963, pp. 181–4, 214; *A ÚV KSČ*, fond 02/1, meeting Feb. 22, 1948; B. Laušman, *Kdo byl vinen*, Vienna, 1953, p. 114.
10. *A ÚML*, fond únor 1948; fond 71, meeting ÚVV SD Feb. 23, 1948; *A ČsSS*, organs, Presidium meeting Feb. 23, 1948; *A FS*, meeting of the Presidium ÚNS Feb. 23, 1948. Laušman speaking at a meeting of his party on Feb. 23: "The resignations are a fact and we must say what we will do now. We were together with Tymeš and Gottwald. The Communists gave us these proposals: create a joint government to be set up after the trade union congress and take on the Peasants' Commissions after the congress. I spoke with Zápotocký and Evžen Erban in the Národni dům this morning. Zápotocký told us, 'The die is cast. You and Gottwald must lead the working people and create a government of the two socialist parties.' "
11. *A ÚV KSČ*, fond 02/1, meeting Feb. 24, 1948; fond SD, Presidium meeting Feb. 24, 1948; *A ÚML*, fond únor 1948; *A ÚRO*, č.j.04874(1948)SS, 04877 (1948)SS, 049890(1948)SS, *A ČsSS*, organs, ÚVV meeting Feb. 24, 1948. The Communist leadership criticized the "left" in the Social Democratic leadership, Fierlinger in particular, and accused the party's members of wanting to "foil the party's decision on joining the government for personal reasons", as Fierlinger later described it. It was, however, a misunderstanding. After the "left" walked out of the Presidium meeting in protest against the unwillingness to join the new government according to Gottwald's proposal, it issued an announcement condemning the leadership's position. Meanwhile, the Presidium had called for joining the government. Laušman had made an agreement with Gottwald but without Fierlinger. He later described this event which caused the leading Communists to distrust the "left". After leaving the party meeting the "left" met.

    "With their agreement, I withdrew with Dr John and went to Comrade Gottwald. It was about 11 a.m. when we reached his apartment. Comrade Gottwald received us in the presence of comrades Slánský, Zápotocký and Nosek. We learned that Laušman had visited Comrade Gottwald in the meantime and informed him that the party had decided to accept his conditions and was sending myself, Laušman and Jankovcová. I realized that Laušman, in an attempt to protect the situation, had withdrawn from the Presidium meeting and gone straight to Comrade Gottwald without informing us and without having a mandate. I also realized that the Communist Party leadership had not understood our message, broadcast on the radio. They probably thought that we wanted to frustrate the party's decision to enter the government, perhaps for personal reasons. It was not possible to explain the matter fully in the heated discussion, although we realized right away we would settle the whole affair with Laušman" (Fierlinger, K historie boje . . .).
12. *A ÚV KSČ*, fond 01, meeting April 9, 1948; *Archiv prezidenta republiky*, Prague, fond vládní krize 1948, č.j. 101173–108000.

13. The chronology of the government crisis was worked out, in addition to consulting the above-mentioned archives, from the daily press and extensive literature Belda *et al.*, Jarošová, Jaroš; M. Bouček and M. Klimeš, *Dramatické dny února 1948*; *Únor 1948, Sborník dokumentů*; M. Bouček and J. Smutný *Únorový převrat*; V. Bušek, *Poučení z únorového převratu*; K. Kaplan, *Der Kurze Marsch*; L. Sychrava, *Svědectví a úvahy o pražském převratu*.
14. The non-Communist politicians underestimated the threat of the Communists. They considered this an example of the Communists' weakness and answered them by accentuating their own self-confidence. Ripka speaking in the National Front: "It is said here, that the National Socialist Party is worried about not switching from one side to the other [and liquidating itself — author] . . . I say the National Socialists are a self-confident party, that no such thing could happen to them" (National Front meeting Nov. 11, 1947). Procházka and Drtina made similar remarks (National Front meeting Feb. 5, 1948, and govt meeting Feb. 13, 1948).

XV. Concluding Thoughts

Czechoslovakia's Communists managed to install totalitarian power with the support of a large part of the population. They won them over on the basis of a programme and promises that they never fulfilled. One of the saddest periods in the history of the Czech and Slovak nations followed. A wave of sweeping illegalities, not least of which were political trials, tragically affected hundreds of thousands of innocent citizens and their families.

It is worth pondering Czechoslovakia's post-war experience concerning the struggle for democracy. Its course and end-result were, to a great extent, predestined by international factors: the Soviet Union's role as the strongest power in Central Europe and Czechoslovakia's subservience to the Soviet sphere of influence. Moscow had come to classify Czechoslovakia as within its orbit during the Second World War, and was even ready to risk a military conflict on its account. (In Stalin's instructions to Gottwald concerning the request for military aid, there may also have been a calculated attempt to test the degree of willingness of the United States to retreat from European affairs. Moscow in fact did just that several months later with the Berlin crisis.) Notwithstanding the crucial impact of international factors, we shall limit our thoughts to the domestic political arena.

The Communists and the non-Communist parties fought over democracy within the structure provided by the people's democratic system. This fact was of key significance, and worked to the disadvantage of the non-Communist parties. These parties jointly shared in building up the new system, and they accepted the political conception of a regulated democracy. Beneš was a prominent advocate of the latter as a defensive measure taken to prevent a repetition of Munich. A regulated democracy was a limited democracy and was conditional on the fact that if one or more government parties were to try to take full power, it would limit the forces of democracy to acting in its own self-defence. A regulated democracy can be justified only when there is cooperation between democratic parties with equal representation in the coalition.

The basic principles of a regulated democracy corresponded in large measure to the Communists' conception of a people's democratic system. This was derived from Lenin's teachings on the democratic dictatorship of the people (of workers and peasants), and from the resolution of the Com-