New Research on February 1948 in Czechoslovakia

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HISTORICAL RESEARCH ALWAYS REFLECTS THE PRESSURES of the period in which it is produced. It is influenced both by the availability of information and by how aspects of the past seem relevant to the present. The period since 1989 has created huge scope for a new perspective, or new perspectives, on Czechoslovakia's development in the first years after the Second World War, culminating in the communist takeover of February 1948, often referred to as 'the February events'. This essay aims to look at new contributions to the history of that period, asking how far they have led to a better understanding of the period and setting them against the political pressures of the post-1989 period. The focus is restricted to the Czech Republic, leaving aside the somewhat different process of reinterpretation in Slovakia.

The open questions

As covered in previous work (Myant 1981), the period 1945–1948 saw Czechoslovakia emerge from World War II with a coalition government. There were four Czech parties—the National Socialists (*Československá strana národně socialistická*), the People's Party (*Československá strana lidová*), Social Democrats (*Československá sociálni demokracie*) and the communists (*Komunistická strana Československa*)—and two Slovak parties, the Democratic Party (*Demokratická strana*) and the communists (*Komunistická strana Slovenska*). These six parties formed the 'National Front' (*Národní fronta*) and no parties outside that structure were allowed. They were all nominally committed to a programme of revolutionary social and economic changes; this included close alliance with the Soviet Union—the West was widely seen as having failed the country with the Munich Agreement of 1938—nationalisation of almost all of industry and the expulsion of much of the substantial German minority. Elections in 1946 confirmed the communists as the largest party, with 40% of the Czech and 30% of the Slovak votes making 38% overall, and the same coalition continued under the communist Prime Minister Klement Gottwald. President Edvard Beneš was closer to the National Socialists, but tried to stand above party politics.

From mid-1947 the coalition was gripped by increasingly deep divisions over a wide range of internal policy issues, with the communists either standing alone or backed only by the Social Democrats. Division culminated on 20 February 1948 when the ministers of the remaining three parties offered their resignations in protest at the failure by the communist Minister of the Interior to implement a government decision reversing personnel changes in the police force. The communists portrayed this as a step towards removing them from government and reversing the direction of post-1945 policies. They mobilised mass support and exploited the positions of power they held to establish an effective monopoly of power. This was achieved by nominally constitutional means. The key event was President Beneš's acceptance of a new coalition government under firm communist domination on 25 February 1948.

Controversy begins once those bare bones are filled out with explanations for events and their outcomes. Previous work can be divided by period and political perspective. In the West, where work was dominated by émigré writers, major themes included the communists' apparent dishonesty and determination to take power and whether Beneš had broken his word when he accepted the ministers' resignations. Within Czechoslovakia approaches passed through an early dogmatic phase into the beginnings of doubts about the Communist Party's policies (Belda *et al.* 1968), including speculation on how far Czechoslovakia was pursuing its 'specific' road to socialism. Historians were very active in 1968 and many suffered from the purge of the following years. This meant that in the 1970s and 1980s there was a division between 'dissident' historians, who continued to develop new ideas and address new themes, and the 'official' historians with some access to sources, but whose published work contributed little of value.

In the post-1989 period new sources became available and the atmosphere of open dialogue and free international exchange of opinions should also have created scope for posing new questions. The biggest advances have come from access to archives while the posing and answering of new questions has been patchy. The prominent 'dissident' historian Jan Křen set what he saw as the tasks for future historical research in a way that seemed free from political pressures (Křen 1990, pp. 41–42). He saw an abundance of available information, but gaps on some themes remained. These included: the expulsion of Germans; the nature and fate of conservative forces; how thinking changed and how peoples' mentalities and everyday life changed; a possible 'decline in feelings for democratic values'; and programmatic ideas for a non-communist socialism and the implications of the newly acquired mass base of the Communist Party set alongside a leadership coming from emigration in the Soviet Union. With this research agenda, Křen was directing attention away from the struggle for political power alone. He also recognised the need for access to the Soviet archives.

As the following sections demonstrate, political pressures have been important, sometimes encouraging and sometimes discouraging the posing of important questions. The political atmosphere has contributed to the new emphasis on researching the expulsion of Germans, particularly because of pressures from the changed international environment. A strong desire to condemn the communist past and to expose the 'crimes of communism', well reflected in the popular media, has focused attention on repressive aspects of the past and made it less attractive to follow the leftward movement in society and the popular base that the communists enjoyed.

The February events themselves have widely been characterised as a 'putsch', a term firmly favoured by Václav Havel when president. This again directs attention onto the use of force and repression and away from the place of the February events within a broader social transformation over the preceding years. However, this has not been the only force setting the agenda. It may have discouraged the addressing of some of Křen's questions, but professional historians were building on past research that itself raised questions requiring a more nuanced view of the period, particularly in relation to the communists' strategy. Nevertheless, gaps remain in bringing together diverse themes into a synthesis that can set the period in a wider span of Czechoslovak history.

The expulsion of Germans

The expulsion of the German minority represented an enormous change in the make-up of society and might therefore be judged as being at least as important as the communist victory. Indeed, it emerged as 'without question the most discussed theme in Czech history after 1989' (Kopeček & Kunštát 2003, p. 293). Justifications at the time included notions of collective guilt, of restoring the Czech nation to its historical territory and, more pragmatically, of creating a secure state in the face of a possible future threat from Germany which was considered a serious danger by Czechs of almost all political persuasions. Published Czechoslovak sources had given practically no information on how Germans were living or how they experienced either the forced expulsions of mid-1945 or the more organised transfers from January 1946. The first press reports of bad treatment of Germans came after concerns were expressed by British and US sources (Kaplan 1990, p. 133). More public information over the following years came from German sources and was dismissed as both exaggerated, as estimates of deaths did seem to be excessive, and as serving the political purposes of diverting attention from Nazi atrocities and discrediting post-war Czechoslovakia.

This was therefore a theme that needed to be treated with great care or, perhaps better, left alone. For many years it was not a popular question for historical study inside Czechoslovakia, where there was little desire to question the policy of expulsions, and there were few doubters concerning the general policy direction among the generation that had lived through the period. However, there were pressures for serious study among professional historians before 1989. There were uncomfortable personal memories and stories of excesses on the Czech side, and it was difficult to explain away all the injustices as reflections of the post-war atmosphere. While the National Socialists made no distinctions among Germans, the communists nominally did, but were soon advising anti-fascists to leave. In the end only 5,071 Germans and Hungarians were granted Czechoslovak citizenship in 1948 (Kaplan 1990, p. 158), a fraction of those identified as anti-fascists by the very restrictive criterion of membership of communist or social-democratic parties.

This led to questions being raised about the nationalist thinking that had emerged out of the war and occupation, which in turn led to questions concerning the moral status of the Czech nation if it could not confront possibly uncomfortable elements in its past. The result was the publication of a small amount of work by 1968 and some subsequent discussion in dissident circles. However, in view of the difficulty of

consulting new sources, much of the dissident discussion was only at the stage of recognising that there were difficult questions that should be explored (Černý *et al.* 1990). There was also a pressure for reinterpretation once the post-1945 period was set within the longer span of Czech history. 'Germans' could not be simply characterised as oppressors since the two nationalities had lived and developed together for centuries, bringing the benefits of outside contacts to the Czech side. This issue of a 'partnership of conflict' was covered in a work by Křen (1989) which was published in the West before it became available to a wider Czech audience.

After 1989 the issue gained more direct political significance. The German Federal Republic became a friendly, rather than an enemy state and the voice of Germans who felt they had been wronged became a potential obstacle to diplomacy and international recognition. Havel set the scene with a comment made before he had become president, to the effect that an apology was owed to the expelled Germans. This was not a popular view and caused considerable offence to much of the generation that had lived through the occupation. Civic Forum (*Občanské forum*) argued, in a statement issued on 3 January 1990, that an apology was not the answer.

Havel returned to the theme on several subsequent occasions and his approach was echoed by some other politicians. For example, Petr Pithart (1994, p. 11) suggested that Czechs should admit their moral mistake but explain to a presumably reasonable German side that there could be no revision of property confiscations undertaken before the communist takeover. Many felt this encouraged demands from the *Sudetendeutsche Landsmannschaft*, an organisation in Bavaria representing the expelled Germans and calling for a restoration of their property. Its influence on German politics was unclear, with formal support from the Bavarian Christian Social Union (CSU) and its leader Edmond Stoiber, but this was given minimal publicity to other audiences in Germany for whom returning to the outcome of the Second World War was not a popular theme.

The persistent target of criticism was the 'Beneš decrees' which deprived Germans of Czechoslovak citizenship, confiscated their property and legalised their expulsion. The terminology here has political connotations as, in the period in 1945 before the re-establishment of a parliament, all laws were passed by decree, and subsequently ratified when formal constitutional structures had been re-established. Moreover, as works from earlier periods had made clear and as was re-emphasised in subsequent Czech accounts, the policy of expulsion had developed over the preceding years with a number of inputs. Its author was not Beneš alone and it was far from clear exactly how ideas developed in emigration would be applied on the ground. The policy was also incorporated into the Potsdam Agreement on 2 August 1945, providing formal approval from the allies.

This context inevitably politicised interpretations of the expulsion of Germans. Czech views spanned a spectrum (Kopeček & Kunštát 2003) from condemnation, based largely on moral principles, to critical support, based largely on a pragmatic view of what was most desirable in a specific period. Protagonists of the 'moral' position often implicitly saw the need to confront the pragmatic issues, highlighting anti-Nazi activity, or at least apathy, among the German population (Mandler 2002, p. 4; Mlynárik 2002, pp. 4–8). However, there is not enough evidence to support the view that the great majority of Germans would not again, after 1945 as in the 1930s,

have supported the destruction of a Czechoslovak state if backed by an aggressively nationalist Germany.

However, the 'moral' position was well represented in parts of the media. In the lead-up to parliamentary elections in 2002 it provoked a very public response from a group of prominent historians who saw an attempt to revise Czech history 'in the interest of returning central Europe to before 1918' (Pravec 2002, p. 8). At a press conference on 7 May 2002 under the title 'Historians against the rape of history', Jaroslav Pánek, director of the History Institute of the Academy of Sciences, presented 15 'theses' on Czech–German relations in the twentieth century in an effort to counter the 'spontaneous historicism' of journalists and politicians and their 'manipulated accounts of history' (Pravec 2002). Their theses were also open to some challenges (Kopeček & Kunštát 2003, pp. 309–10), but this politicisation of interpretations accompanied and encouraged, rather than obstructed, a desire for deeper research and openness to alternative approaches.

From the early 1990s there was a powerful focus on reconciliation and working jointly with German colleagues, including joint meetings, joint bilingual publications and the translation of some important works, especially that of Seibt (1996).[1] Joint investigations led to a rough consensus on the numbers of deaths in some way linked to the expulsion process: the figure was estimated at between 15,000 and 30,000 (Staněk 2005, p. 327). Cooperation became a permanent feature of research on this theme, further stimulated and financed after the two governments signed a joint declaration in January 1997 in the hope of somehow drawing a line under the past.

Cooperation and mutual respect did not require formal consensus. Nevertheless, a reasonable basis was provided by Křen (2002, p. 4), joint chair of the commission of Czech and German historians. His position included a recognition that the German minority overwhelmingly backed Hitler; that the expulsions were approved by the great powers, but that fact could not be used to divert responsibility as the idea was developed and pressed from the Czechoslovak side; and that the expulsions did involve significant loss of life and that was nothing to be proud of. However, he argued, it was very difficult to see how a stable and peaceful state could have been developed while keeping the German minority. Removing the Germans, albeit in as humane a way as possible, was the best option.

Research on more specific events was already proving possible in work under preparation before 1989. It became clear that there was information on how the German population had been treated and that led to a growing body of local research, plus more serious general studies (Staněk 1991, 1996). It was, in some cases, possible to match up personal accounts from the German side with Czech archival sources. An example was the issue of the 'massacre' in Ústí nad Labem on 31 July 1945 (Kaiserová & Kaiser 1995, pp. 227–29; Staněk 1996, pp. 131–37, 2005, pp. 151–56). Reports from the German side, albeit based on second-hand rather than eyewitness accounts, referred to up to 2,000 deaths. The desire for good relations with Germany pointed to the need for an honest and thorough investigation.

The events were sparked by an explosion in an armaments store which Czech sources suggest killed 27, mostly Germans. Subsequent violence in the town led to German

[1]Originally published as *Deutschland und die Tschechen* (Munich, 1993).

deaths which Czech sources estimate at least 43 and probably approaching 100. This is based on substantial investigations after 1989, including evidence from available sources on who was missing from work, on German bodies burned in the neighbouring crematorium and on eyewitness accounts from the time, written to support an investigation that was kept secret. It remains unclear who carried out the massacre, which started well away from the explosion, but the culprits probably included incoming Revolutionary Guards, Czechoslovak and Red Army soldiers and some recent settlers. The local Czech population, itself small by the end of the war, was probably not involved and the situation was brought under control by Czech civilian authorities.

The explosion was played up by the government and media at the time as evidence of the underground Nazi organisation *Werwolf* and as confirmation of the need to expel the German population as quickly as possible. Defence Minister Ludvík Svoboda, coming to investigate on 1 August 1945, concluded that 'it is necessary for once and for all to dispose of the fifth column and we can take as our example the Soviet Union', referring to the policy towards the Volga Germans (Staněk 1996, p. 135).

Research gradually revealed more details of Czechoslovak 'excesses'. In many cases no reports were made at the time, but about 50 incidents were investigated in 1947 and early 1948 with 164 individuals under suspicion (Staněk 2005, pp. 105–06). This included one incident close to Žatec in North-West Bohemia (Staněk 2005, pp. 114–29) for which the country's political leadership accepted the need to reopen mass graves, albeit with a determination that there should be an absolute minimum of publicity that could harm the country's reputation in the West. It appeared that about 800 Germans had been killed by Czechoslovak army units, egged on by the conviction, which was in clear conflict with the government policy referred to below, that all Germans were potential enemies in a possible future war so that 'the only good German is a dead German' (Staněk 2005, p. 118).

No criminal charges were brought for this or other 'excesses'. The official line was that regrettable incidents were the result of the atmosphere of the time. A presidential decree, confirmed by a law in May 1946, ensured an amnesty for acts of resistance during the occupation, and acts of conflict in the immediate following months which would not be acceptable in peace time. Some attempts were made to reopen cases after 1990, but they had little chance of leading to convictions and were soon abandoned.

This and similar evidence raised questions about the role of the central authorities. These were partly answered by a study of the 'wild' expulsions of mid-1945 (Staněk & von Arburg 2005–2006) which showed that they received strong encouragement at the highest political levels and were organised first by the army, as the only Czechoslovak authority in predominantly German areas, and then increasingly by civilian authorities as they were established. The aim was to take advantage of a sympathetic approach from the Soviet authorities to transfer as many Germans as possible across the frontier, largely into the Soviet occupation zone. An estimated 750,000 Germans were expelled in this early period (Staněk & von Arburg 2005–2006, p. 374).

Everything was done to minimise publicity so as not to alienate the Western powers who were considered to be reluctant to support the policy of mass expulsion. Even quite important instructions were often carried by word of mouth alone (Staněk & von Arburg 2005–2006, p. 471). Evidence of a continuing danger from the German population was played up, partly to convince the Czech population and partly to

impress the Western allies prior to the decision at Potsdam in August. This sets the context for the public portrayal of the Ústí nad Labem incident which was followed by a marked acceleration in the pace of expulsions. This also puts the question of 'excesses' in a slightly different context: retribution against former occupiers and collaborators was common in European countries, but here there was an additional aim of encouraging the German population to leave.

There are still open questions about the German population in the post-war Czech Republic, but the years since 1989 have seen a major change. Professional historians have started to tell a story that can be reasonably complete and acceptable to the mainstreams on both the German and Czech sides. Nevertheless, the place of this story within Czech development remains under-explored, leaving open questions about its impact on economic and social development and on political conflicts. There is an obvious view that repression in 1945 may be linked to repression from 1948 onwards, a discussion set in motion in the 1970s in émigré and dissident circles (Danubius 1990) which then inspired some of the research referred to above (Staněk 1996, p. 15). The links would be difficult to draw, partly because the kinds and methods of repression were substantially different. Another theme has been to blame Beneš for setting in motion a nationalist revolution that led to the communists' victory and a 'retarded' national consciousness, or a moral weakness that led to an acceptance of totalitarianism (Staněk 1996, p. 182). Again, the relevance of such broad abstractions remains to be demonstrated.

A more direct link to February 1948 may be found through considering the involvement of all the parties in, or at least their passive acceptance of, the policy of mass expulsions. This appeared as a common endeavour and as a popular nationalist policy. Beneš was fully involved in implicit support for the 'wild' expulsions, although it is unclear how well informed he was of conditions on the ground. He was also an enthusiastic propagator of the notion of collective guilt of the whole German population. He and others saw the Soviet Union as their natural ally and the Western powers as more reluctant friends. Even when there was evidence of 'excesses', the National Socialists backed away from exploiting the issue politically to accuse the communists of imminent totalitarianism (Staněk 2005, pp. 94–101).

Although the majority of those who came under investigation probably were communists, some were from other parties and there was no political mileage in raising issues that could harm the country's reputation in the West, or weaken any party's reputation among the Czech population. It can be added that all parties had supported the law granting amnesty for acts of resistance and post-war violence. Thus the important point is that the policies towards the German population made it very difficult to develop and propagate a clearly anti-communist and pro-Western strategy. However, it is remarkable how work on the expulsion of Germans has remained isolated from work on developments in Czech politics, highlighting the lack of an overall, synthesising framework.

Thinking, mentalities and socialist programmes

There is a continuing gap in research on mentalities and thinking, possibly an unattractive theme in the post-1989 atmosphere. Indeed, the most substantial work

has come from the USA (Abrams 2004) where it has also broken with that country's traditional Cold-War interpretation of post-1945 Czechoslovak history by seeking to explain why the communists won rather than just condemning them. Abrams has examined cultural and church publications—an area somewhat removed from state control—to build up a picture of a strong shift towards the left in general (rather than towards any particular party).

A similar kind of picture emerges from looking at the fate of advocates of liberal and pro-capitalist views. For example, a study by Drápala (1999) on 'the fate of liberalism' focused on the political career of Helena Koželuhová, a journalist from the People's Party and one of the most prominent protagonists of a greater reliance on the free market. Her prospects were poor, due not just to society's shift to the left, but also to the strength of other elements from the country's past, including conservative Catholic views that had a strong influence within her own party. Similarly there was little support for the most 'pro-capitalist' vision for an economic system, proposed by Jiří Hejda, a leading National Socialist economist who had previously been director of a major engineering company. His proposal was for nationalised enterprises to become joint-stock companies with 51% state ownership. The remaining shares could be traded (with the share price providing an indicator of the firm's performance) or sold to foreign companies (some of whom had apparently expressed an interest). He made clear that he was 'obviously for a reasonable management of the economy and therefore against liberalistic laissez faire' (Hejda 1991, p. 253). Such was his conclusion from the experiences of the inter-war period. Nevertheless, specific policy proposals met a very negative response at the time and he was partially disowned by his own party.

A study by Lenka Kalinová (2004) builds up a picture of a widespread acceptance of the benefits of a substantial state role, even if its exact nature was not clear. Beneš, she demonstrates, was moving firmly in this direction before Munich, and also towards the need for alliance with the Soviet Union. These trends found a reflection in the post-war period in a development of economic and social policy thinking that reflected world, and particularly British, thinking and practices, while still based on a determination to build from Czechoslovak traditions and experience.

Thus, a specific Czechoslovak road to socialism was much more than a communist tactic. Indeed, frequent sympathy for the communist position was mixed with misgivings, for example from cultural life where disillusionment seemed to be spreading through 1947 as party rhetoric became more belligerent (Kalinová 2004, p. 95). Kalinová also argues that the communist emphasis on eliminating private property led to less emphasis on building the foundations of a modern welfare state, although that did also face various practical obstacles.

This redirection of attention towards the broader context of changes helps set the 1945–1948 period in the context of a broader sweep of history and to set the communist victory in the context of a leftward move in society's thinking. It also points to further questions about the nature of the communists' support, about possible alternative socialist strategies and about the strength of attachment to forms and institutions of democracy.

'Conservative' forces

The non-communist part of the political spectrum was diverse and divided. However, the post-1989 political atmosphere has encouraged some acceptance of the 'standard' position from post-February émigré writers. In this view, they were determined fighters against communist attempts to undermine democracy. A partially alternative interpretation, put most clearly by Kaplan, points to the failure of those opposed to the communist victory to recognise the true nature of that party's determined drive for a monopoly of power. In this view, therefore, they were rather poor defenders of democracy who could have done better. In view of the international situation, they could not have altered the broad outcome, but 'they did not need to lose quite so badly' (Kaplan 1996, p. 540). There is some flexibility in interpretations here, depending on whether the perceived mistake was a misinterpretation of communist strategy only from mid-1947 or over the preceding years as well. The former view could help better explain the general unpreparedness as the communists' potential opponents were partly taken by surprise. The latter view is harder to sustain. It lays the basis for studies that point out mistakes, missed opportunities and naïve actions (Kocian 2002), but still leaves questions about what may lie behind them.

The depth of these unanswered questions was highlighted by Eva Schmidt-Hartmann (1994), using published memoirs of non-communist politicians to demonstrate serious inconsistencies in their claims to have been charting an alternative to the communists' positions. The public face of these politicians was to accept the direction the country was following both internally and in foreign policy. Above all, they accepted the alliance with the Soviet Union as the foundation for foreign policy, and post-war internal changes as the foundation of the new Czechoslovakia. Their failure to mobilise any significant public support in 1948 was, therefore, not due to mistakes at the time, but had deeper roots.

The relationship with the Soviet Union was central to Beneš's position. It derived in part from scepticism about the reliability of the West, based on experiences in the inter-war period, over Munich, and in diplomatic activities during the Second World War and in the post-war period. As chronicled by Kaplan (1990), Czechoslovakia had disputes with all its neighbours, even including hopes of gaining significant territory from Germany, and the Soviet Union was the most important potential benefactor. The experience of the expulsion of the German minority pointed in the same direction. Scepticism towards the Soviet Union was tempered by the need for a strong ally against Germany, by hopes that Stalin would continue to want good relations with the West, and by an assumption that there would be a trend in that country towards greater democracy. The experience of the Second World War, it could be hoped, would encourage the Soviet Union to favour strong and friendly neighbours, with a democratic Czechoslovakia an attractive candidate.

At least part of this was accepted across most of the political spectrum. It remains an open question whether, with the new state consolidated and its borders decided, the resigning ministers saw the Soviet Union as less essential and saw scope for a more exclusively pro-Western orientation. This could have marked a fundamental difference from Beneš's view. There is so far no evidence of any serious rethinking

along those lines. However, this kind of issue and the difficulties in confronting the central issues of the country's post-war development, rather than in individual mistakes, is likely to provide the key to understanding the failure of the right of the post-war Czech political spectrum. They had a conception of defending democracy, but that was not enough when they were appearing reluctant on other issues that appeared important to much of the population (Myant 1981, Chapter 5).

Communist strategy and aims

Křen's list of themes that are yet to be pursued in detail did not emphasise communist strategy and tactics inside Czechoslovakia. This was well-researched before 1989 and set at the centre of studies of that period. However, much new information has come from work by Karel Kaplan, a historian with a long pedigree, who emigrated to Germany in 1976 and returned to the Czech Republic after 1989. He has been cautious about joining in polemics with other historians and developing new frameworks or posing those questions that might set the period in a different context. Rather, his contribution has been to pursue as exhaustively as possible the established themes of how political forces viewed each other, set their strategies and related to organs of power (Kaplan 1996).

He argues that, up to mid-1947, the coalition worked reasonably well. It required concessions from all sides, but seemed to function. The big break came with the changed Soviet view of the world: they feared loss of influence in Eastern Europe and responded by consolidating their bloc. This is consistent with the limited information available on reports that were received by the Soviet authorities. The latter seemed broadly satisfied, albeit with concerns that the Soviet message was not being put effectively enough to the public (Marjinová 1997). There is nothing to conflict with Soviet hopes of a friendly Czechoslovakia based on its existing political structures, but nor is there evidence of a rejection of the alternative, of a communist monopoly of power which, in the Soviet view, was obviously the ideal political form. The Soviet side may simply have kept options open. However, by 1947 they were worrying that the communists would be forced out of the government, as in France and Italy, and the country would become an ally of the West. The emphasis shifted to concern over whether or not the Czechoslovak communists were taking an unnecessary risk by trusting in parliamentary elections and whether they should be consolidating positions of power in the state apparatus and armed forces.

The communist response points to some differences and doubts within the Party leadership. Gottwald had won considerable respect from politicians of other parties as a man who behaved correctly in both personal and political relations and seemed to accept compromises when he had to. However, he and others in the Communist Party clearly were convinced of a danger from the West. Moreover, they would never really challenge Soviet policy, nor voice any doubts publicly. In September 1947 the Soviet leadership initiated the Informbureau of nine communist parties, a body that incorporated the key parties from Eastern Europe plus the Italian and French parties and was used as an agency for consolidating the Soviet bloc. It served as a platform for criticising first the French and Italian parties and subsequently the Yugoslav party. Gottwald was not enthusiastic when this new body emerged and felt under attack for

alleged 'parliamentary illusions' (Kaplan 1996, pp. 197–98), but he accepted some of the language required by the Soviet leadership about 'class enemies', 'bourgeois' politicians and 'imperialists' which created a clear tension in relation to internal coalition politics. He was always cautious of setting Beneš up as an enemy and although the Soviets regarded him as 'pro-Western' it remains unclear exactly what Gottwald really thought.

He still seems to have seen the elections, due in May 1948, as the decisive battleground. The aim of winning 51% of the votes had been set in general terms in January 1947 but in the new international situation, this became even more urgent. However, Gottwald was not panicked when the radical Minister of Agriculture Julius Ďuriš warned that 51% was not assured and that mass action should be organised to decide the election result 'before the elections' (Kaplan 1996, pp. 325–26). Gottwald seemed confident that the parliamentary arithmetic would work out, even without a 51% majority, and saw no way to make the result certain before the elections.

Gottwald saw the key to success in transformations within the coalition parties. The communists had close allies, and in some cases informers, throughout other parties who provided them with information and helped to influence those parties' policies. These were now encouraged to create organised groups that would either gain control of their parties or join a communist-backed election list. Approaches were also made to prominent non-Party figures, such as the Foreign Minister Jan Masaryk, who had ambitions to become president, but he was more likely to join a Social Democrat list.

The Gottwald strategy contained two further elements. The first was a mobilisation of public opinion around demands for further nationalisations, approval of the new social security system and further agricultural land reform. These came to a head in the congresses of works councils and of farmers' representatives that took place during the February events. When the congresses were originally planned it was still unclear exactly how they would influence the question of power. Ďuriš's radical alternative went beyond Gottwald's to foresee mass mobilisation leading to the establishment of 'dual power' (Kaplan 1996, pp. 345–46), albeit still without precise specification of the next stage.

The second element was a strengthening of the communist position in the police force, with Party members forming over 50% of uniformed police (or so they told the Soviet leaders) and the dominance of a special, well-armed unit that patrolled the frontier. It was not clear how this would contribute to the communists' victory, but plans took shape for a police presence at all election meetings with the potential to take legal action against those making statements judged to be 'anti-state' (Hanzlík 1997, pp. 210–13). They could, however, make little progress in the army. They reassured the Soviet leaders that one third of the generals were with them, but these were mostly specialists rather than commanders.

There was also a more radical desire in the police and security forces to settle matters quickly with a putsch. Indeed, there were a number of provocations (finding alleged links between spies and leading politicians) that seem to have originated within the security services. There is no evidence of prompting from the domestic Party leadership or from Soviet agents, but the communist press took these cases seriously and gave them full publicity. Communists in government defended the integrity of the police and security forces, exasperating their coalition partners. There is no evidence

on whether they felt at all embarrassed, or whether they genuinely welcomed such activities, but there is good reason to believe that the Party leadership was not in control. Potentially the most dangerous case was an assassination attempt in September 1947 on three ministers, including Masaryk, which was investigated at the time thanks to the strong National Socialist position in the criminal police (rather than the security police). There was probably involvement from former communist partisans and security personnel. Investigations continued after February 1948, with the last attempt in 1957, suggesting that the authorities may genuinely not have known who was behind the attempt. It can be added that investigations also failed to confirm communist propaganda that it was a provocation by their political opponents.

Thus it is difficult to speak of a single communist strategy in late 1947 and early 1948. There were distinct, but overlapping, conceptions of the exact aim and of how to achieve it. One approach focused on elections, but increasingly sought means to influence their outcome, at least to ensure communist dominance. Others sought to use some of the same means to transform the power structure without regard to elections and that meant more decisively eliminating other political forces from any chance of sharing power. All approaches from the communist side, and particularly the most radical, served to frighten other parties and hence to isolate the communists in government, without actually making victory more certain or the road to victory any clearer. All of that changed on 20 February when the ministers of three coalition parties (the Czech National Socialist and People's Parties and the Democratic Party from Slovakia) resigned, leaving the majority of the government, made up of communists, Social Democrats and non-Party ministers, in post.

The February events

'New' evidence on the February events has come from Kaplan and others who have carefully sifted through Czechoslovak archival sources, and from some important hints on Soviet thinking during the February events and over the preceding years. However, there are still large gaps in our information on the thinking and interpretations of people involved, or not involved, at the time and even on the thinking of the key actors. There is also scope for different interpretations depending on how February is seen to fit with the developments of the immediately preceding years.

All evidence on the thinking behind the resignations of the ministers of three coalition parties confirms a lack of preparation and that the decision was taken by a very narrow circle: it was a surprise to their own parties and to their own MPs (Kaplan 1996). The balance of evidence supports the view that Beneš was not consulted in advance and Masaryk was furious at the 'culpable naivety' of 'the fools, idiots' (Kaplan 1996, p. 445); he saw their hope of some kind of help from the USA as ludicrously unrealistic (Kaplan 1996, p. 523). Remarkably, there had been some discussions with the US ambassador, Laurence Steinhardt, who was pleased that the ministers were taking a firm stand, expecting it to raise Czechoslovakia's prestige in the USA (Kaplan 1996, p. 352). He was confident they would win, as he thought the Soviet side would give priority to good relations with the West, and would therefore put pressure on Gottwald to calm down. Happy to believe implausible claims of a

substantial decline in communist support,[2] he looked forward to Czechoslovakia leaving the Soviet sphere of influence.

The key Soviet influence came from Deputy Foreign Minister Zorin who arrived in Prague as the crisis broke. Somewhat thin evidence had been used to support the view that he came threatening an armed intervention to resolve the crisis. Alternative evidence suggests Gottwald may have asked for at least some Soviet troop movements to frighten the opposition, which Zorin flatly rejected, telling Gottwald to 'be harder' and use his internal strength while reporting back that Gottwald was trying 'to avoid any sort of tough measures in the fight against reaction' and was 'in the grip of parliamentary illusions' (Murašková 1997, 1998; Šiška 1998a, p. 10, 1998b, p. 10).

This theme provoked some heated debate (Gibianskij 1998, 1999; Kaplan 1998) perhaps partly because it could be seen shifting the focus from Soviet pressure onto internal Czechoslovak responsibility for the outcome of February. The question of possible Soviet military intentions remains unclear. Zorin has not been shown to have ruled it out in any eventuality, and Gottwald felt able to warn Beneš that there is always the Soviet Union. The exact impact of Zorin's visit on events therefore remains unclear, but he probably pushed Gottwald away from emphasising constitutional means and more towards a 'putsch'. The details were decided on the ground.

Gottwald was initially surprised by the resignations and took a few hours to gather his thoughts. He then formulated the response of insisting that Beneš should accept the resignations, replace the resigning ministers with ones Gottwald was proposing and resist calls for early elections; this was a solution in line with the constitution (Kaplan 1996, pp. 323 and 347). It also proved massively popular with a large part of the public (Myant 1981, Chapter 9), as indicated by demonstrations, a near unanimous vote in favour of the communists' position at the Congress of Works Councils, near unanimous participation in a token general strike and telegrammes and resolutions to Beneš with 5,237 supporting the communists' position against 150 for the other side.

Repressive measures were not particularly important at first, but strengthened after the Congress of Works Councils with arrests of several hundred political opponents over the following days. The reason for the shift is unclear. There may have been a freelance element, but it was backed from above, as indicated by an insistence that ministers and MPs were not to be arrested (Kaplan 1996, p. 404). Indeed, a secret list of arrests was drawn up, suggesting some preparation for a real 'putsch', but it was not implemented. It is conceivable that the leadership took seriously state security claims to have found evidence of a planned putsch by the National Socialists. It is also possible that greater repression seemed necessary to bring the crisis to an end, possibly as pressed for by Zorin and reflected in a strong line taken by *Pravda* on the same day, intended as a call to Gottwald to get on with the job. Demonstrations of public

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[2]The National Socialist leaders appeared convinced that the communists would suffer a substantial drop in votes in the forthcoming parliamentary elections. This may be the source of a claim that an opinion poll actually showed a likely drop in communist support of about 10% since the 1946 parliamentary elections. In fact, a poll was undertaken in January 1948, but the returns were not counted and reported until later in 1968. They suggested only small changes from 1946. Estimates based on changing party memberships, with all of them recording growth, similarly pointed to little substantial change from the 1946 election outcome (Myant 1981, p. 192; Abrams 2004, pp. 188–89).

opinion need not have brought any conclusion if the president simply sat tight and refused to appoint new ministers to the vacant posts, as the National Socialists hoped.

The communist tactics continued to suggest that they were combining two different approaches. Gottwald wanted a constitutional solution, but this was not his only option. He was able to avoid a full-scale putsch, with mass arrests and internment of opponents, but he reached 'the boundaries of a putsch' (Kaplan 1996, p. 487). However, arrests to ensure the paralysis of potential political opponents clearly crossed the boundaries of a constitutional process.

There was early reluctance to 'arm the workers', despite pressure from the Party's 'radicals' (Kaplan 1996, p. 365). The creation of the Peoples' Militia was only approved later in the crisis as a small and inadequately armed force, unable to get help from the army and in some cases even parading without arms (Kaplan 1996, pp. 445–46). Its main practical contribution seems to have been an attempt to ensure, by brute force, victory for pro-communist elements within the Social Democrat Party. In this it failed. Indeed, it remains unclear whether repression contributed to Beneš's decision to accept the resignations and to other ministers' decisions to remain in the government. (The possible negative impact on Masaryk is discussed below.)

However, repression did set the change in the nature of power. Having once silenced the opposition, it was unthinkable to return to the old form of coalition or to allow genuinely contested elections with no certainty over their outcome, although that was even given passing consideration after February. Thus, although a monopoly of power may not have been the sole and clear aim of the Party in the immediately preceding years, the communists' ideological position meant that they had no reservations about imposing their dictatorship when the opportunity presented itself. Indeed, a firm line was probably a requirement for impressing the Soviet leadership. It seems to have been some months after February 1948 before Gottwald felt reassured that he was in the Soviet leadership's good books again. An initial Soviet report on the Czechoslovak communists' 'mistakes' criticised practically the whole post-war approach (Marjinová 1997, p. 467). Stalin passed on praise in September 1948, for the first time (Kaplan 1996, p. 521).

Jan Masaryk

A discussion of new work on the February events cannot be complete without a consideration of the death of Jan Masaryk, the theme that has attracted probably the greatest volume of media attention, alongside remarkably little concern from professional historians. Masaryk did not join in the resignations and was set to continue in the post-February government when his body was found in the courtyard under his flat on 10 March 1948, only hours before the new government was to be presented to parliament.

The investigation was almost immediately taken over by the security police who were untrained in criminal investigation—and therefore perhaps unaware of the importance of checking the position and state of the body, or whether anyone else had been in the flat at the time—and reached a speedy verdict of suicide. This was announced in parliament even before a medical examination of the body, although the report from that examination subsequently gave no grounds for doubting the original

verdict. Those closest to Masaryk gave, and continued to give, further circumstantial evidence supporting the view of suicide. His personal secretary helpfully accumulated and provided negative comments on the range of alternative explanations (Sum 2003). Stories were nevertheless soon circulating suggesting murder and even naming the culprits. This was an attractive verdict, particularly in the USA, with unequivocal condemnation for anyone who would question it (Ulč 1982, p. 818).

The case was reopened in 1968 and, before its suspension in mid-1969, a substantial investigation had looked at a wide range of possibilities, concluding that 'no significant fact has so far emerged that provided evidence for murder' (Kettner & Jedlička 1990, p. 182). That book, giving details from the investigation, was ready for publication in 1970, but the authorities preferred to destroy the copies.

The case was reopened again in 1993 by the *Úřad dokumentace a vyšetřování zločinů komunismu* (Office for the Documentation and Investigation of the Crimes of Communism) and considerable efforts were expended to find new evidence. That investigation ended in 1995 without a clear result and with doubts over whether new evidence was reliable. The case was further reopened in 2002 and new evidence was provided by an expert witness who had studied photographs of the position of the body when it was found. This allegedly proved that Masaryk must have been pushed.[3] This appeared very difficult to prove, not least because the body may have been moved at any point (Šiška 2004, p. 19). Nevertheless, the investigators this time concluded in December 2003 that the evidence justified the conclusion that Masaryk had been murdered. The state prosecutor in Prague concurred with this conclusion, but without further elaboration and indicated that there was no prospect of any prosecutions.

Indeed, no serious progress was reported in identifying suspects. The favoured chief suspect in this, as in several previous accounts, was Augustin Schramm, a man assassinated in May 1948 (Boháč 2004). In fact, evidence linking Schramm to Masaryk's death had always been thin. His name first appeared in a report in West Germany in 1965, built around the claim that Schramm had been assassinated by agents sent from the West who knew that he had murdered Masaryk. However, the most complete account of his role, based on the investigations in 1968, found very little to associate him with Masaryk's death while a number of testimonies ruled out such a link. The case against him seemed to be based largely on supposition, invention and inaccurate information. Schramm had had the job of verifying claims by individuals of participation in partisan groups during the wartime resistance and that could have created enemies keen to see him dead (Kettner & Jedlička 1990, pp. 143–54).

The point about Jan Masaryk's death is that it can crystallise a whole number of judgements. It is a substitute for a more substantial historical investigation and discussion. The alternatives of suicide or murder, presumably involving the Czechoslovak or Soviet security police, have substantial implications for interpretations of the early post-war years. Suicide suggests that Masaryk felt depressed by events, powerless and maybe ashamed of staying on in the government. It suggests failure and that he was no threat to anyone. The communists could have wanted him to stay in office as a cover while they consolidated power. This would be consistent

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[3] 'ÚDV: Jan Masaryk byl zavražděn', *Hospodářské noviny*, 14 March 2002.

with his behaviour and statements during February 1948. He indicated both privately and publicly that he was 'going with the people' when he joined the general strike and agreed to participate in Gottwald's post-February government (Kaplan 1996, p. 507). At the same time, he could not betray 'the name and ideals of his father, or even himself' (Sum 1996, p. 6) which the repressive measures used against the communists' opponents would have implied.

Murder changes his standing completely, obscuring from view his positions before, during and after February 1948. It also fits with a more negative view of the communist period as a whole, supporting condemnations of brutality from start to finish and providing a narrative for the following years that begins with a symbolic tragedy. However, a serious view would reject the Czechoslovak communist leadership as likely culprits. They could only be enthusiastic about his role in the preceding days and could well have been as stunned as they claimed over his death. It is also reasonable to assume that any written evidence in Czechoslovak sources would by now have come to light. However, the Soviet leadership could have had a motive, not least as Masaryk would have been a character with minimal appeal to Stalin (Boháč 2004; Sum 2003, p. 262). It can be reiterated that the assassination attempt of autumn 1947 remains to be explained. There is, then, scope for seeking further information here, but a role for Soviet agents would not be decisive for overall interpretations of the period. Indeed, Masaryk's death has been largely ignored in the substantial works of professional historians, attracting attention only in the light of wider media coverage.

Conclusion

New information on February 1948 and on the preceding years has helped to answer some previously unanswered questions. However, new knowledge also serves to highlight the continuing blank spaces. Three interrelated themes can be mentioned.

The first concerns the issue of public attitudes and perceptions. There clearly was a substantial move to the left in popular thinking and this set a context for all parties' activities. There is a serious gap in the kinds of personal memoirs that would show how this affected behaviour. It remains remarkable that during the February events public support for the communists' position was so strong and opposition so weak. This presumably did not represent support for a monopoly of power for one party. The point was that the communists were able to appear as representatives of a dominant trend in society. This theme remains under-researched and somewhat sidelined by a focus on issues of pure political power alone.

The second concerns the failure of the political parties that suffered defeat. The resignations in February 1948 were a mistake that proved catastrophic, but it is unclear how far that was a one-off mistake and how far it reflected deeper problems in those politicians' more general failure to understand how the thinking of much of the Czechoslovak population had been shaped by the preceding years, making it extremely difficult to develop a convincing alternative. There are also gaps in our knowledge of how potential supporters viewed the situation. The failure of leadership, with some resigning ministers heading off to holiday homes and recreational activities rather than behaving as if they wanted public support, could not have helped. It still remains remarkable that active opposition to the communists' position was so weak, leaving

open questions about the thinking that led to immobility of that large part of the population that did not welcome the communist victory.

The third concerns the communists' approach and the contradiction between the steps Gottwald took to follow a constitutional road alongside the extent of repressive means used to establish a monopoly of power. Gottwald has received an understandably negative press in recent years, but even an unflattering account of his life leaves open questions (Pernes 2003). It can be added that he, and a number of close colleagues, behaved in the period 1945–1948 as if he rather liked cooperation with other parties. It provided a framework for political stability and for the post-war revolutionary changes. It was something he was good at, as a man who communicated well, could earn trust and liked getting on with a job in hand. He was not a natural demagogue, still less a theoretician, and nor were many of those around him. Despite some rhetoric from an earlier period, he did not necessarily relish revolutionary politics as traditionally understood.[4]

Křen's question about the nature of the mass party may also be relevant. The mass of new members and supporters, all of those who gave unequivocal backing during the February events, were not committed Marxist–Leninists who might see an armed uprising as a necessary step to break with a capitalist past, although that was the view of a minority. Not enough is known about their thinking, but a possible indication could come from the memoirs of one young official at the time whose background was in a combination of nationalist and socialist thinking and an admiration for T.G. Masaryk. He remembers a significant lack of enthusiasm over clearly repressive measures (Císař 2005, p. 249). A 'radical' solution, breaking ties with Beneš and the symbols of the country's past, would have risked narrowing the Party's base.

To this could be added possible fears over the international situation. Gottwald apparently asked Zorin about the credibility of rumours of possible US armed intervention and was told they could be dismissed. However, a breakdown of order, some doubts within the Party's own ranks and the continuing uncertainty over the army could have been a prospect Gottwald feared. These would have been tactical considerations. He never indicated any awareness of the dangers of a one-party state and even occasionally speculated that parties would voluntarily merge to produce just one. Moreover, despite cases in the 1930s of reluctance in the face of Comintern policies, he never expressed any sort of public opposition to Soviet policies. To have done so would have been unthinkable for him personally and for his position within

[4]In his maiden speech to parliament on 21 December 1929, Gottwald responded to the claim that he was taking orders from Moscow with the words: 'we go to Moscow to learn from the Russian Bolsheviks how to wring your necks' (available at the Czech parliament's website: http://www.psp.cz/eknih/1929ns/ps/stenprot/007schuz/s007003.htm, accessed 10 August 2008). This has very frequently been used as an indication of his political philosophy. It should be treated more cautiously. The phrase appeared in the context of Gottwald responding to interruptions from his parliamentary critics and the report of the parliamentary session indicates that the flamboyant language, in this and other parts of his speech, was met with laughter from some MPs. It is an indication that Gottwald, newly elected to the position of Party leader at the age of 33 following Comintern backing, was capable of reproducing the belligerent rhetoric of the Comintern in that period. It had little to do with the actual activities of the Party at the time and should not, in the absence of other evidence, be taken as proof of enthusiasm for the use of violence. Indeed, it is out of line with Gottwald's normally rather dull style in speeches and articles from both earlier and later years.

the Party. This ultimately overruled any concerns that he may have had over the possible benefits of a purely constitutional road.

Thus there are points of detail still to be resolved. Some may never be resolved. They are important for setting 1948, and the subsequent communist period, into a longer time-span of Czech and Czechoslovak history. So far, Czech historiography has not produced such a synthesis. It would need to provide an explanation for the communist victory in 1948, including its popularity and the weakness of opposition, set against the background of the experiences of the preceding years. It should also set the scene for the nature of the ruling party in the following years, including the two diverse communist traditions as displayed in the loyalty of the Stalin period and normalisation—and even in the continuing strength of a Communist Party after 1989—and in the reform communism of 1968. Both need to be related to the kind of party, and society's approach to socialist ideas, that was shaped in part by the 1945–1948 period.

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