

CZECH HISTORY

LECTURE NO 13

THE ARRIVAL AND CONSEQUENCES OF STALINISM IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA

The abolishment of the political system of interwar Czechoslovakia

On 3rd April, 1945, Czechoslovak president Dr. Edvard Beneš arrived in the East Slovakian town of Humenné. He returned to Czechoslovakia after six years of exile. ON 4th April, 1945, new government formed. Czechoslovak Ambassador to the Soviet Union, Zdenik Fierlinger, became Premier.

The new government was a result of negotiations between the London and the Moscow centres of Czechoslovak exiles. No dramatic conflicts. Both emigré politicians secured positions of power. Distrusted indigenous resistance. No representatives of indigenous resistance in the postwar government.

Kořice government programme, published on 5th April, 1945. The banning of right-wing parties. Only social democrats, national socialists, the People's Party, Slovak Democrats and Czech and Slovak Communist parties were to be allowed.

The views of more than fifty per cent of the Czechoslovak population, who had voted for agrarians, national democrats, the small businessmen's parties were arrogantly ignored.

Moscow negotiations were run by the communists. Each party was to have three ministers in the government, but since there were two communist parties, the communists got six government posts. Interior Ministry, Information Ministry, agriculture, labour and social work. Two deputy premiers were communist. Communist sympathisers Zdenik Fierlinger and Ludvík Svoboda were Premier and Defence Minister. Thus communists wielded enormous power in the post war Czechoslovakia.

NATIONAL UNITY was to become the principle of political life! Allegedly, "political fragmentation" and "disunity" was the cause of the end of the interwar Czechoslovak Republic.

The "National Front of Czechs and Slovaks" was set up, with representatives from all permitted political parties. The National Front was to discuss political problems first, and was to allow or disallow political parties. Above parliament and democratic accountability.

Presidential decrees radically changed the nature of the Czech state.

24th October 1945 - presidential decree nationalised mines and key industries, food industries, banks and insurance companies. Two thirds of the Czechoslovak economy was nationalised.

Questionable justice: "revolutionary justice" against Nazi collaborators. Summary punishment according to the "Large Retribution Decree" (of 16th June 1945) (punishment of traitors) and "Small Retribution Decree" (27th October 1945) - smaller offences against "national honour".

Atmosphere of fear and suspicion. Only few journalists were willing to risk pointing out injustices.

The Czech political class decided to get rid of all the minorities. Thirty per cent Germans and 17 per cent Hungarians. Their property was confiscated, their citizenship was abolished. Murdering women and children. Ústí nad Labem.

Critical reactions from the Allies. The removal of the Germans was approved, but was supposed to be organised and humane. By August 1945, the "wild deportations", when Germans were brutally driven out of their homes, had ended. Organized deportations started in January 1946. 2,25 million Germans were deported. The rest of the Germans were scattered within Czechoslovakia. In 1950, Czechoslovakia had 1,8 per cent Germans.

The Potsdam Conference did not approve the deportation of the Hungarians, Czechoslovak government had to negotiate with the Hungarian govt., only limited population exchange. More than 10 per cent Hungarians still in Czechoslovakia in 1950.

On 28th October 1945, Provisional National Assembly began to meet. It approved the presidential decrees and passed a special law in May 1946, guaranteeing immunity from prosecution to those who participated in post-war massacres. "Normally criminal actions are free from immunity, if they occurred between 30th September 1938 unto 25th October 1945 as part of a legitimate struggle for freedom by Czechs and Slovaks or as an expression of a desire for just revenge for actions of the

Nazi occupiers or their helpers."

Elections in 1946

Free elections. The whole Europe had gone to the left, communists were in the government in France, Churchill fell to Labour in Britain. General popularity of the Soviet Union and the Red Army.

Retribution terror, organised by the Interior Ministry, was directed against members of the other political parties. Joining the Communist Party meant impunity for real collaborators. The communists distributed freely the land, confiscated from the Germans and the Hungarians, to landless people. Before the elections, the Communists gave out Land Decrees in the Sudeten regions - no legal validity, but impressive. Communists used Czech nationalism. "We are doing away with the White Mountain defeat" - by confiscating German property. Information Ministry controlled and directed the media in this sense.

To make sure that non-communist voters would not vote for the most right wing permitted party, the national socialists, the communists introduced the so-called "white ballot papers" - to be used by those voters who did not want to vote for a National Front Party. This was like abstaining.

The results of the elections: Czech Lands: Communists 40, 17 per cent, national socialists 23,66 per cent, the people's party 20,24 per cent, social democrats only 15,58 per cent.

However, in Slovakia, the Democratic Party gained 62 per cent and the communists only 30, 37 per cent.

In the new parliament, the communists got 114 seats, national socialists 55 seats, the people's party 46 seats, Slovak Democrats 43 seats, social democrats and others 39 seats.

7th June 1946: new government, headed by Klement Gottwald. Czech Communist Party had 7 ministries, Slovak communists 2 ministries, national socialists, people's party and democrats 4 and social democrats 3.

After the elections, communists wanted to work for more hegemony. On the other hand, the national

socialists, social democrats and the people's party wished to return to normal democratic politics. New parliament was starting to reject the National Front.

The democratic forces came to be locked with the communists in conflict over economic policy, especially land reform in agriculture. Democratic parties also condemned the interference of the Information Ministry in radio, film newsreels and the newspapers. Joined anti-communist bloc. No permanent cooperation. Party political interests prevailed.

The democratic parties used parliamentary politics, the communists used extraparliamentary means: thousands of resolutions supporting communist demands, communists used threats of riots. Strikes. The united trade unions led by Antonín Zápotocký helped the communists.

The Security apparatus was fully mastered by the communists. In 1946, the communist secret police manipulated testimony by arrested Nazis in order to discredit anti-communist resistance during the war, especially Krajina. Two national socialist ministers received letter bombs, they were traced to communist offices. In Slovakia, the Communists managed to discredit the leaders of the Democratic party by accusing them of collaboration with the Slovak emigration, connected with the war regime in Slovakia.

1947: the National Front system got into crisis. Conflicts between the coalition partners, dissatisfaction, unfavourable economic developments. Nationalised firms were ineffective, their products could not compete in foreign markets. The productivity of agriculture dropped considerably below the pre-war levels. Drought. Crisis of new farms in the border regions.

Czechoslovakia and the Marshall Plan

Czechoslovakia fully followed the Soviet foreign policy line. The beginning of the Cold War - problems. Czech delegates enthusiastically applauded Soviet anti-american attacks on international fora. 1946: the International Bank refused to continue negotiations with Czechoslovakia about a loan.

The Soviet Union began brutally to sovietise countries in Central and Eastern Europe. Czechoslovakia was the only country to retain formal features of a democracy.

March 1947: Truman's doctrine: two kinds of countries: (a) democratic, aspiring towards democracy, (b) totalitarian countries. USA was going to support only (a).

5th June 1947, US Secretary of State George Marshall offered Europe the Marshall Plan, to rebuild the economies of Europe. The Soviet Union refused to participate in June 1947. Yugoslavia and Poland originally wanted to participate, but refused. Czechoslovakia wanted to participate, but Gottwald went to Moscow to ask Stalin. He was told to reject the Marshall Plan - no independent decision making. Stalin said that Czechoslovak participation in the Marshall Plan would be seen as anti-Soviet.

No Czechoslovak politicians had the courage to defy Stalin. The Iron Curtain divided Europe. Thus Czechoslovakia ended on the Russian side, without any discussions in parliament. The fateful, historic content of the trip to Moscow was not even reported in Czechoslovakia at the time.