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Czechoslovakia — Two Years After

TWO YEARS AFTER the Warsaw Pact Invasion. Two years after 1968 became yet another momentous historical date for the sophisticated Czechs and Slovaks. Dates such as 1415, 1620, 1848, 1918, 1938, 1945, 1948... Czechs know their history, and no-one who cannot appreciate the momentous significance of such dates as these to those people living in 'the cockpit of Europe' can appreciate their mood in 1970. For there are those of us whose emotional identification with certain concepts of government and certain ideological dogmas lead us to behave like leftwing Chamberlains: Czechoslovakia is a long way off, we know little about it, it's a small country — and what's all this prattle about sovereignty and nationalism anyway? We're internationalists, aren't we?

1415? The Prague preacher Jan Hus was burned because he condemned Church corruption and refused to recant in Rome. His death helped set off Protestant rebellions which caused radical changes in central European society. To many Czechs 1415 is yesterday. Hus's statue in the capital carries an inscription in old Cyrillic proclaiming that while it stood Czechs would always feel free. No-one apparently translated this for the nazis for they left it standing. Hus has come to symbolise national identity, national independence and freedom from domination by larger powers.¹ And at that time the preacher stared down Paris Street from the historic old Town Square at an enormous and bombastic statue

¹ It amazes me that the same socialists who demand that Papuans, Aborigines or Fijians have all these things cannot want them for Czechs or Slovaks as well, or for Tartars etc.

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of Stalin, a symbol of another kind and a constant affront to the feelings of the people until it was blown up.

1620? From 1620 to 1918 the Czechs (and Slovaks) were ruled by Austro-Hungary. 300 years of Catholicisation and Germanisation! The Czech language held out only in the country areas and it was such a catastrophic period that the Czechs remember it as the 'Period of Darkness' from the title of a book by Jirasek. Ferdinand of Vienna won a battle near Prague and:

He determined to extirpate the Protestant religion in Bohemia, and ... (his success) has rarely been equalled in the history of persecution. By a system of widespread confiscation and ruthless repression the country was brought under the Austrian heel. A German ascendancy as intolerant as that of the English settlers in Ireland was imposed upon the Czechs, and not seriously shaken till the nineteenth century. German officials ruled ... Jesuit priests controlled education ... (and) the Bohemian peasantry was trodden down into servitude ... (So there resulted) the manufacture of a servile state in Europe.2

1848? The Year of Revolutions in Europe. The Czechs revolted too, like many a people demanding more freedom, more possibility of national and cultural development. But the Austrians had other ideas:

On June 17, 1848, Prince Windischgratz turned his guns upon the city of Prague ... (and) postponing for seventy years the realization of Czech liberties, crushed the Bohemian rebellion.3

1918? This year marked the end of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and its rule over the Czechs and Slovaks. Masaryk and Beneš were revered as founders of the First Czechoslovak Republic. After 300 years Czechs and Slovaks could use their own languages freely, set up their own institutions and control their own destinies without any overlords!

1938? The story of Munich and the Western betrayal of Czechoslovakia to Hitler is well-known. Less well-known is that Czechoslovakia was already a well-fortified and modern state with a strong army and air force and that its people responded in 1938 in such overwhelming numbers, revealing that amazing 'crisis unity' which astounded the world in 1968, that Hitler would have had great trouble breaking through the forts had not the Munich Agreement simply handed him the country. There is evidence to support the theory that nazism could in fact have been defeated in 1938. But what a bitter experience, those six years of nazi domination to a

3 op. cit., p. 922.
people who only twenty years before had been freed from three centuries of Austrian domination!!

1945? Once again a Liberation, a Soviet Liberation. It is true that the Americans were in a position to liberate embattled Prague and the country before the Red Army and bowed out under an international agreement, yet moral and historical justice saw the Soviet forces eulogised as the true destroyer of fascism. Especially as treaty links dated from pre-war days, there was widespread and genuine affection for the liberators.

1948? The year of decisive socialist change, the year which demanded that people decide which way to face, after Western style elections in 1946 had shown the Communist Party to be the major one and to be constitutionally the legitimate governing party.

1968? The year of the fall of Novotny, the period of the ‘Czech renaissance’ and the subsequent Warsaw Pact Invasion. Why all this turmoil in 1968? The simple answer is that it had become obvious to all but a few citizens that the Novotny people were then holding society back and that despite life having some good features almost every sector in society was suffering grave stagnation.

Perhaps economic failure destroyed Novotny’s power above all. In 1959-61 I witnessed a steady and uninterrupted rise in living standards in Czechoslovakia, and even though industry was carrying agriculture this seemed to reflect a basically sound economy. But in Autumn 1962 there occurred a serious economic, political and moral crisis. The leaders were unable to cope, their authority weakened rapidly and there was evidence of widespread economic and social dislocation, caused by power failures, food shortages, a sudden rise in the incidence of bribery, a nation-wide management breakdown and a general slump in public morale. People’s frustration became so acute that even communists cursed and said that if this was socialism then it wasn’t much good to them. Yet despite an unusually severe winter the Czechs and Slovaks rallied and their national feeling was shown at its best in the crisis as production was maintained in weather more typical of Siberia than of Czechoslovakia.\(^5\) I felt at the time that authority was relatively powerless. It looked for a few days as though socialism would

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\(^1\) The Slovaks were actually ruled by the Hungarians for 1,000 years.

\(^5\) I stress the perhaps unique importance of “national feeling” here because I do not know of a comparable example where certain individuals who were known to be bitterly opposed to the ruling ideology would nevertheless make such prodigious efforts during a national crisis: namely, some of those individuals whose property had been nationalised after 1948.
collapse from sheer inertia. I believe that had a significant number of people been in fact organising to destroy socialism then they certainly could never have chosen a moment when the system was more vulnerable.

However, sheer muscle and patriotism is no long-term substitute for necessary reforms, which was proved in 1963 when industrial production actually fell slightly — almost unheard of in a developed country in recent years. His regime weakened, Novotny responded by loosening the reins a little. He gave prominence to talk about the ideas of economic reform of people such at Ota Sik while attempting to rule in the old way. He also liberalised foreign travel and cultural freedoms generally, to placate the intellectuals above all, who were his main critics.6 By Christmas 1964 the atmosphere in Prague was intoxicating because of the tremendous intellectual and cultural energies released, energies that had been held in an ideological strait-jacket since the 1950's purges frightened thinking people into silence. But Novotny fell because economic and political problems were left unsolved. From 1964-8 the economy just dragged miserably along; the crisis simply deepened.

The case of the Czech writer Vladimir Skutina does much to reveal aspects of the quality of life under Novotny and of some of Stalinist socialism's worst features.7 On May 5, 1962, Skutina was arrested at his office in the capital. He was not charged, nor allowed to contact anyone, but taken immediately to a prison cell. He writes:

"Only when I returned home after having served my sentence did I find out that a second car was driven to our place and its crew behaved in precisely the same way that I had seen in war films about Gestapo raids on the homes of suspected anti-fascists." Skutina's wife was feeding their baby girl. They told her this could wait and: "... as she watched they ... seized all the writing they could find ... opened every book to look for espionage material ... (and) threw each book on the floor ... This abuse and occupation of my flat took eight hours ... They didn't even tell her why I'd been arrested."

Skutina was charged with: 'Lowering the dignity of the President of the Republic'. He writes: 'I was supposed to have said Pre-

6 Skutina charges that Novotny ignored the Constitution, which decreed he submit to re-election for the Presidency in 1962. But even in 1964 he had been widely expected to fall, and his re-election can largely be attributed to his one really independent act since 1957: He criticised the methods used in the sacking of Krushchov, who returned from Czechoslovakia not long before his fall and was popular there as the de-Staliniser who had saved people such as Edouard Goldstuker from execution.

President Novotny was an ass'. In fact in 1958 Skutina had been co-author of a scenario for a Czechoslovak-Yugoslav film. Novotny happened to be starting an 'anti-revisionist campaign' when it was released and he accused Skutina and co-author of 'succumbing to the cosmopolitan tendencies of the Yugoslav revisionists'. The film was banned. Skutina said at several public meetings that Novotny shouldn't pronounce judgement on matters he didn't understand, whether he was President of the Republic or not. This was the real reason for his imprisonment.

After long delays he was eventually tried and sentenced, the state producing 'two witnesses' who had been in prison themselves at the time he was supposed to have 'lowered the President's dignity'. He served sixteen months. In prison Skutina was interrogated by the Procurator General — the same man who in 1968 tried to silence him after he had published his book. He threatened that if the writer did not apologise publicly for what he had written, he would have him imprisoned for 'counter-revolutionary activity'. Skutina managed to obtain legal protection, the official was dismissed. And he writes: 'And so I was able to prove to my own eyes that January had been no mere formality — thank God even for those eight months of the "process of renewal and revival". We had sown the seeds'.

Very revealing is Skutina's description of prison life under Novotny, as late as 1962:

Sometimes I fancied that the organizers of the prison... delighted in the most cynical absurdities... A former nazi S.S. officer who had been given the task of putting out the eyes of Czech children in Terezín had the job of choosing those prisoners in our section who were allowed to watch TV, and he was also responsible for the supervision of prisoners in the TV room. For a long time I couldn't get used to eating food prepared by... (a man who) had murdered his own child... cooked it and eaten it.

Skutina writes that hardened criminals were treated much better than 'politics' and it was apparently policy to put them together to degrade and frighten the politics. He praises some humane guards, condemns those who were brutal.

We can compare Skutina's inside report on prison life under Novotny with a statement by a Mr. B. Chnoupek, now Editor-in-Chief of Prague Radio:

The phrases such as 'Prague Spring', 'new model socialism' and 'socialism with a human face' were attractive but false phrases coined to confuse the people.8

8 Terezín was a nazi concentration camp. From memory, I believe 15,000 children were sent there and only about 100 ever returned.

While Skutina himself writes in the 1969 Afterword to the second edition of his book:

And then came January 1968. We were all full of what was going on and above all full of hope... We lived with an unbreakable faith in our socialism with the human face.

And I believe that Skutina's courage and sincerity have been amply proved by his act of republishing his book in 1969 when many of the neo-Stalinists he had been attacking publicly already had their old jobs back. As he wrote:

'I did not stop believing in socialism or the correctness of the course we had taken even afterwards when things had stopped being so simple...'

As soon as Dubcek came to power in January 1968 and I read about his Action Programme and evidence came out about it in newspaper articles, citizens' private letters, etc., about the new situation in the country my reaction was one of great relief and excitement. There seemed hope that a Western country like Czechoslovakia (which it is culturally and historically) could create a sophisticated and healthy, organic society which at long last might solve the main problems of the twentieth century. The Soviet Union had pointed the way, but on such questions as freedom of speech and self-determination had become conservative and inflexible. Although 'The Soviet Union Our Model' had been a key slogan in Czechoslovakia for twenty years, as a leading Czech cultural figure said to me in 1964 in Prague, 'it long ago ceased to be true'. In other words, the Soviet Union could no longer serve as a political, cultural, economic or organisational model, except in a very general sense — unless by affronting national dignity and identity and by causing dangerous social distortions and stagnation.

Some form of 'Dubcekism' was demanded for the revival of the stagnating nation and the reform movement was not the product of its leaders' minds primarily but it arose out of the needs of the situation. Economic reform was desperately needed. The so-called 'command socialism' directed almost entirely from one centre after the Soviet model had ceased to work. Not only was decentralisation crucial however, but the wider political, cultural and social freedoms necessary to allow it to function:

Without the participation of the public, without the initiative of the people generally — whatever their relation to Party membership — there would be no real progress towards new policies, there would be no renaissance in our political life.  

The effect of the political changes carried through under Dubcek can be seen in the example of a North Bohemian firm. In 1963

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10 Dubcek's speech to the Special Congress of the Czechoslovak Union of Journalists, held 21-23 June 1968, reported in Novinar nos. 7-8, p.249.
its deputy director had complained to me about the unqualified and corrupt director he served under. The director was not an engineer, merely a political puppet who blackmailed employees with the help of secret dossiers on their past lives and activities, which was routine procedure. After January 1968 this firm's employees simply voted their director out of office and elected a specialist who had their confidence. This situation duplicated hundreds of times expressed the essential nature of the Dubcek regime. And it represented a process of the strengthening of socialism, not a weakening as some have said. A slogan in a magazine of the period: Initiative from Below, Not Planned from Above clearly implies the sort of changes that had been needed for a return to complete health of Czechoslovak society. Working in a Prague factory, I had proved to myself how workers' thinking was done for them on most issues; they were merely asked to approve decisions already taken, and that the only effective power in the country was wielded by the Central Committee of the C.P., which after twenty years of socialism was an insult to the integrity and maturity of the Czechoslovak people and a direct cause of inefficiency, bureaucracy and all sorts of social strains.

'Dubcekism' meant a return to creative and principled Marxism. The vulgarised Stalinist version in fact often pushed into public life those whose grasp of socialist and Marxist principles was weak. The best Marxists were destroyed or silenced in the 1950's. The Stalinist rulers evidently believed in the 'rulers and ruled' dichotomy of capitalism as an unchanging basis of government. But under Dubcek the 'little man' felt his words had weight at long last, that he was respected and trusted, and the Party and its leaders rapidly regained lost popularity and stature. Czechoslovakia has not had such a loved and accessible leader since Tomas Masaryk, Father of the First Republic. And for people to become active and involved in public life after those bleak years, certain freedoms were a must:

In the rapid development of political life in Czechoslovakia towards democracy a decisive role was played by the abolition of censorship...

It is interesting how Dr. Husak commented on the Novotny era press to an interviewer regarding the question of the autonomy of Slovakia, in the very same magazine:

It's true that for many years public opinion in the Czech lands has been not only underinformed, but even directly misinformed.

13 He means the lands of Bohemia and Moravia, as opposed to the territory of Slovakia.
Dr. Husak went on to discuss the problems of nationalism and internationalism in the post-1945 period when he and others had demanded autonomy:

The efforts to gain national equality were condemned as nationalism.14

And he characterised the feelings of mistrust sometimes occurring between Czechs and Slovaks thus:

These feelings had been deformed on both sides through the false glorification of Internationalism.

Husak of 1968 and Husak of 1970 are practically strangers to one another. We can compare this statement with another made in May 1970 during Mr. Brezhnev and Mr. Kosygin’s visit to Prague to sign a treaty spelling out the ‘Brezhnev Doctrine’ which allows the Soviet Union the right to interfere in the affairs of other socialist countries. Dr. Husak thanked the Russians for crushing the ‘reactionary forces that wanted to take Czechoslovakia out of the socialist camp’. The treaty gave as its main sanction ‘the common internationalist duty of socialist countries’. Does Dr. Husak still hold his original views on nationalism, or is he a man with as many faces as the lately-humbled ‘pragmatist’ Harold Wilson?

During the past two years not one expression of optimism out of Czechoslovakia has come to my notice, unless through the mouths of a Husak, a Chnoupek, a Bilak or a W. J. Brown. More typical is my Slovak engineer friend who writes from a Czech industrial city on July 7, 1969:

Now no one can easily change my opinion that politics is a dirty business even under socialism, that it’s a struggle for power and for the benefit for private interests. Just imagine that all of the Novotny people are once again back in their jobs. Only Novotny and Sejna15 are lacking. Under present circumstances I’m willing to demand Novotny’s rehabilitation.

This young man had been known to me as an ardent Soviet supporter. He was very bitter about his father being one of only three in their Slovak village of several hundred people who approved the invasion. He himself resigned from the CP, as did his brother, who was so shattered with everything he fled to Canada. His letter of 16.9.1966 reveals the depths of his new-found bitterness and cynicism:

Only the old mad people are with them. The young people hate them . . .

For five months they have been trying to prove to us that there was a counter-

14 We recall that Husak himself was imprisoned 1950-60 as a ‘bourgeois nationalist’.

15 Sejna was the General who defected to the West.
revolution here . . . The majority of people have lost interest in politics because they now definitely know it is a dirty and disgusting matter. The worst is that we can see no way out, they are not able to draw an at least slightly attractive picture of the future of our two nations. We are great pessimists.

This is how the invasion has changed a young Slovak I knew as an idealistic and faithful Party member, and we are asked to believe by some people that that invasion was a good thing!

So dear to them is their sovereignty, so precious their national identity, that to the Czechs August 1968 was 1620 all over again. Another Period of Darkness had begun. It may well be that there will be no terror, certainly no similar repression of language as by the Austrians — for it will be impossible to reproduce the same atmosphere of hysteria, fear and mistrust of the early 1950's — but foreign troops will remain on Czechoslovak soil indefinitely, the state of the economy and living standards decline steadily, and gradually also the buoyancy and controversiality is fading from creative culture. We heard the Czech Minister of Culture say recently: "It is the right of the state to decide what culture should reach the public".16

Strong national feeling expressed on a socialist basis was the main cultural, political and economic motor of Czechoslovak society in the recent period. They wanted to develop socialism in their own way in their own country. The invasion switched off this motor and that is the main reason that life is stagnating. Young people, most of whom became interested in and involved in political life for the very first time under Dubcek, have averted their eyes from the faceless and characterless men who are busy purging everyone who has been the least bit liberal and independent-minded, and who are settling down to an updated version of the pre-1968 corrupt, bureaucratic and monolithic style of rule. They are the new Jesuits, the new Prophets of anti-Thought, the new oppressors, the modern Inquisitors. And now these young people, like almost everyone else, have turned inward. They are prepared to wait even another 300 years, passing on a torch of hatred, of love for a man with a human face, and of fiercely smouldering national pride. Meanwhile they live for the present and seek comfort in cultural innuendo and Schweik-style political jibes. But whatever the individual does, history will bide her time. She will wait for a new 'Prague Spring' and a new Dubcek. And as Skutina wrote: 'We have sown the seeds'.

16 Newsweek, 6.4.1970, p.16.