Jiri Pelikan

Czech. party congress and after

APART FROM the oddity that it was really a second performance — the first having been held on August 22, 1968 — the 14th Congress of the Czechoslovak Communist Party in May was chiefly notable for its attempt to lend some semblance of legality to the “normalization” so laboriously achieved by the Husak leadership. Having won power in April 1969 by an inner-party putsch, and being entirely dependent on Brezhnev’s backing, Husak and his team felt they needed some kind of “mandate” from the home front. And Brezhnev wanted to be present when thanks were given for “salvation” by his tanks, in Prague, the city that three years ago had been as rebellious as the Hussites against the Pope.

As far as the aims of the Soviet intervention were concerned, both Brezhnev and Husak could view the Congress proceedings with justifiable satisfaction: the movement of 1968 to revitalize socialism was declared to have harboured “the danger of counter-revolution”, the idea of “socialism with a human face” was damned as revisionism, and the military occupation of the country was

Jiri Pelikan was formerly a member of Parliament in Czechoslovakia, and Director-General of Television. An interview giving his background was published in ALR No. 29. In that interview, due to a misunderstanding of the translation, it was stated that Pelikan had spent five years in gaol from 1940. In fact about one year was spent in prison, and later, after escaping, a further four years in the underground until liberation in 1945.
hailed as “an expression of international solidarity”. With Brezhnev's blessing, Husak was confirmed in his post, at least for the time being. And after three years of in-fighting, purges, self-criticism and rescinding of resolutions, the Communist Party has emerged so emasculated that in all probability it will, for a long time to come, be immune to any new ideas; moreover, its leaders know that they owe their positions not to the people of their own country but to the good offices of the occupying power.

**Is Novotny responsible for Dubcek?**

Some political observers find a measure of confirmation for their theory about Husak's “centrism” in the fact that, in his speech to congress, beside condemning Dubcek, he criticised Novotny. But what faults did Husak ascribe to Novotny? His share in the Party leadership during the political trials, the years spent in delaying the rehabilitation of the innocent victims, the alienation of the youth and the intellectuals, the exclusion of the working class from politics, the blocking of economic reform, or the habit of seeing the hand of bourgeois ideology in every new idea, etc., etc.? Not a bit of it! Novotny was blamed for being too liberal, and thereby paving the way for Dubcek and his revisionism! In an attempt to undermine Dubcek's popularity, Husak presented him as a product of the hated Novotny. Only in the land of Kafka is it possible to dream of putting over such an absurdity. As matters stand, the Husak leadership is resorting to the Novotny methods, but with a difference. There are none of the compromises that Novotny had to make in face of mounting opposition.

**Caution in the economic field**

The only relatively bright spot in the Husak record is that the economic break-down of 1969-70 has been halted. The trouble, however, was not caused by “Sik's wild theories”, as Husak has tried to suggest, but by the invasion and the confusion it wrought on all sides. And in place of proper treatment for the severely afflicted economy we have what amounts to alleviation of pain by the stop-gap measures of price freezing, boosting imports and a return to the discipline of the central plan. (Incidentally, talk about economic break-down caused by Sik is another of the Kafkaesque themes. For one thing, the private sector was not revived in Czechoslovakia in 1968, in contrast to Poland, Hungary and the GDR; and the only time Prof. Sik was able to work on the practical implementation of his reforms was between April and August, when he was vice-chairman of the Government Economic Commission, and the chairman of the Commission was, all the time, Dr. Strougal, now Prime Minister and one of Husak's team!)
A more cautious and realistic approach is evident in the economy than in political and ideological affairs. The targets set are not over-ambitious and the limitations of the traditional sources of growth are known. The policy is, therefore, to restrict investment and get more out of existing production capacities, to develop modern technology and scientific management, to rationalize the industrial structure by cooperation in Comecon, to pay more attention to the service sector, the consumer market and housing construction. But these are aims already proclaimed by Novotny, while under Dubcek a start was made in carrying them out. Now there will be three main obstacles: the return to central planning; the impossibility of improving productivity without initiative by the workforce, which would presuppose democratization; the unilateral dependence on the Soviet economy, accompanied by political subjection. Husak will find, as did Novotny, that neither workers nor technicians will give of their best if they see no prospect of adequate reward, if their money will not buy the things they need, and if they feel that the fruits of their labours are being squandered by the bureaucrats, while they are denied any say in the management of affairs.

True, following the shock of events in Poland, there has been talk about “attention to workers’ complaints”, and about the trade unions, but neither in Husak’s speech nor in the congress documents do we find any suggestion that the unions might be accorded the role of defending the workers’ interests or that industry should look for new forms of self-management. On the contrary, Husak speaks of a return to the “well-tried methods” of production conferences and strict discipline. Evidently the Party leaders will be faced with continued passivity among the workforce and the prospect that a fresh economic crisis may set in at any time.

A new party

Although Husak was able to report to congress that the Communist Party had been purged and yet remained a mass party, the question arises whether it is not in fact a new party in everything but name. For that is the measure of the difference compared with the CPC as we have known it, above all in 1968, but also in the prewar years, and in 1945 and 1948, when it could command considerable support in the country, especially among workers, intellectuals and young people. In the interests of truth it must be said that there have always been sectarian and Stalinist trends in the CPC, and also hysterical intolerance, but counter-balanced by the democratic, progressive trend which predominated in 1968 and determined the character of the Party.
The trouble is not only the loss of half a million of the most active members, the wiping out of entire committees in regions and districts, the disbanding of hundreds of branches, decimation of the Central Committee, or that tens of thousands of communists have been sacked from official posts and their jobs and many arrested. On top of all this, by describing its country's loss of sovereignty as "the triumph of class consciousness", and by making this the chief plank in its platform, the Party has become wholly alien to the people and their traditions. Having broken with all the positive aspects of the communist past, it is following the road that has always led the Czechoslovak Party towards catastrophe— the road of political trials and Stalinism.

True, the Party in its present guise is held together by its discipline and by the fear of change, but there are grave problems ahead. The social composition of the membership shows a sharp deterioration (as of January 1, 1971, only 26 per cent workers) and the average age has already risen to fifty. It would, of course, be wrong to suppose that all who have remained in the Party agree with the present course. Apart from a relatively small group comprising, for the most part, the personnel of the party and government machines, many have stayed in for fear of losing their jobs, or from opportunism, from lack of other perspectives, and some in the belief that improvement can only come from within. But at present internal regeneration on the lines of 1963-67 seems highly improbable. For a long time yet recurrent purges, Stalinists in key posts, and also the fear that the tragedy of August 1968 could be repeated will stand in the way. At this stage the urge for change will emanate primarily from outside the Party, mainly from its former members and from the youth. Nevertheless, one cannot entirely reject the hypothesis that this external pressure may at some point be projected within the organisation, despite its present mummified state, and create a situation similar to that of 1967-68.

**Same old people on the same old line**

While there was no question about the political outcome of the congress, the elections to the Central Committee and the Presidium were awaited with some interest, if only as a barometer of Husak's standing and of the influence exerted by the ultra-conservatives. Of course, it had been clear ever since the December meeting of the Central Committee that Husak had gone over unreservedly to the political platform of the "internationalists", that is of Indra, Jakes and Kapek, and that any differences among them were merely tactical or due to manoeuvring for positions.
With Brezhnev’s hand strengthened by the 24th Congress of the Soviet Party, under the shadow of events in Poland and with Husak having duly given thanks for “fraternal aid”, the circumstances were such that the Soviet leadership backed Husak and his team, being scared of the political vacuum and upheavals that change could bring. Another man who emerged with his position strengthened was the second in the hierarchy, Alois Indra, who evidently still aspires to the role of “chairman of the workers and peasants government” for which he was cast in August 1968 — that is, unless he should step one day into Husak’s shoes. Indra’s rise has unexpectedly brought Husak and Bilak together; these two former rivals were lavish in their praise of one another, both before and at the congress. For one thing, as Moscow’s man Bilak took his cue, and moreover, having realised he has no hope of being first man in the Party, he sees that in alliance with Husak he can be number two. In the Presidium, however, the hard-liners made some gains; the moderate Erban and Hanes were replaced by the active supporters of and participators in the invasion, Hoffman and Hruskovic.

In the Central Committee the changes were far more drastic; about half the membership was dropped, and that not counting the ninety members expelled or forced to resign during the purge. A symbolic feature of the retention of almost all the “internationalists” named in December 1970 as having invited the Soviet troops (although they still lack the courage to make a public admission of this), which confirms that the December exercise was a manoeuvre designed to save the former Novotny men whom Husak would otherwise have tried to drop after the congress — as “invitees” they were immunized. Despite the shadow-boxing in Husak’s speech, many of Novotny’s faithful servants remain in key posts; for instance, Lenart, for eight years Prime Minister under Novotny and a Politburo member, now on the Presidium and Slovak Party Secretary; Strougal, Novotny’s faithful Minister of the Interior, now Prime Minister and on the Presidium; Lastovicka, once Politburo member and Chairman of Parliament; David, for ten years Minister of Foreign Affairs; Auersperg, Novotny’s secretary and later ideological chief; Novotny’s proteges Kapek, Svestka, Zupka, Rytir, Karjcir and so on — not to mention Stoll, who for twenty years figured as the official ideologist.

The other half of the Central Committee is made up of “new people”, mostly men from the aparat, from public organisations and the regions, with a few workers thrown in. Husak’s intention was to have a pliable committee, impervious to heretical ideas. Yet it is noticeable that he failed to get any of the leading figures from the academic or cultural world elected and that even the
handful of intellectuals who have committed themselves to “normalization” were left out.

With the new Party committees and with the elections to be held in the autumn, Husak hopes to step from the purgatory of normalization to the paradise of legality. Yet his lack of faith in the stability of this achievement has led him to have the Party Rules amended to allow for coopting up to ten per cent of the membership of all committees. An undemocratic provision for an undemocratic and uncertain state of affairs.

The crowning paradox of normalization was the refusal by congress to allow the establishment of a Czech Central Committee and other appropriate bodies to match the existing Slovak institutions. So we have a situation where the Federal Government of the Czechoslovak Republic is directed by the CC in the Czechoslovak CP, the Slovak Government is controlled by the Slovak Party, but the Czech Government comes under the Czechoslovak Party CC where there is strong Slovak representation. Husak and his Slovak friends, in their day, criticized what they called the asymmetrical arrangement in the country and demanded equality for the two constituent nations in party and government affairs. Now the tables have been turned and it is the Czechs who are denied the right to their own leadership.

International normalization

The Prague gathering also had the job of trying to extract agreement for the 1968 invasion from all communist parties, including those which have persisted in condemning it. Much effort has been expended to this end over the past two years, economic pressure and threats of splitting parties have been used, and of course time has done its bit, too.

Nevertheless, despite the fanfares of official propaganda, the congress demonstrated that the wound is still open. Of twelve socialist countries, only six spoke in favour of the military intervention, while the other six delegates directly or indirectly expressed their disapproval — the Romanian, Yugoslav, Korean and Vietnamese delegates pointedly avoided mentioning the events of 1968; China and Albania simply failed to attend.

Of the western communist parties, some were not invited (Australia), others refused the invitation (Spain), others declined to reconcile themselves to not being able to say what they wanted (Britain). In countries where there are two parties, notably Greece, Israel, Venezuela, Argentine, India, the pro-Soviet parties alone were invited, even where they represented the minority side.
Spokesmen for the important parties of France, Finland, Japan and others also avoided direct comment on the 1968 events, confining themselves to enunciating the general principles of mutual relations and to noting that differences of opinion exist. Unfortunately, statements of this kind can be easily misused, as demonstrated by the Czechoslovak press. More valuable, and in accordance with comradely relationships among communists, would have been to speak frankly on the spot rather than publishing one’s views for home consumption after the event.

A truly scandalous episode was the refusal by the congress organizers (undoubtedly after consultation with Brezhnev) to allow the Italian delegate to read his Party’s message — a statement reaffirming condemnation of the military intervention, expressing support for the “new course” of 1968 and doubts about the present “normalization” in Czechoslovakia, and underlining that each country must decide its own socialist policy. This muzzling of one of the world’s biggest communist parties calls to mind the paradox that only in the capitalist countries can communists express these views, and that if they voiced them in Czechoslovakia, Longo, Berlinguer, Ingrao and other members of the Italian CP would be expelled, sacked from their jobs and, maybe, brought to trial!

All this demonstrates that despite the efforts and the pressures, global normalization of the communist movement has not been achieved, and that the rift caused by the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 has not been closed. It may be covered up for a time, but any future upheaval will certainly widen it, perhaps to breaking point. The only possible remedy would be for the Soviet leaders to return to the line set by the 20th Congress of the CPSU and to the conclusions of international meetings about the equality of parties, non-interference and the right to individual development, that is, to the unity in diversity proposed by Togliatti in his famous testament.

The vicious circle — the way out

Czechoslovakia will probably disappear for a time from the columns of the press. And silence is equally desired by the Stalinists and some western governments who are impatient to reach agreement with the Soviet Union on perpetuating the status quo before China is in a position to have a say. It is also possible that the active opposition in Czechoslovakia will be driven deeper underground and that, for a time, a considerable section of the population will relapse into apathy. Indeed, some, in weary resignation or from a natural desire to find some outlet, will very
likely join in the attempt to stabilize things. The young generation, especially, although the experience of 1968 will be with them for the rest of their lives, will not be able to stand aside for ever; some will certainly take advantage of opportunities to fill the jobs of men who have been dismissed, pensioned off and so on.

None of these things, however, can alter the fact that the "Czechoslovak crisis" is something new in Central and Eastern Europe, and that it can never be extinguished. We have here, for the first time, a socialist opposition in a country professing socialism; an opposition that is not anti-communist, and has no intention of changing the social system, but wants to restore the original ideals and aims.

The more sensational forms of action, strikes, demonstrations, kidnappings and assassinations, are not at home in Czechoslovakia. This may have led the press in the West to infer that people are resigned. In reality, however, resistance is the deeper, more lasting, and in the native tradition. The hounding of thousands of intellectuals into industry simply helps to reinforce the bond between the workers and the intellectuals who, together with the youth, form the backbone of the opposition. From the temporary defeat of 1968 the workers, intellectuals and the young people have gained not only the hope that the Stalinist image of socialism can be changed, but also the bitter lesson that any attempt by a single nation to escape from Soviet hegemony is doomed to failure. From the knowledge that a common fear of change unites the Stalinist bureaucracy everywhere, there is growing a consciousness of genuine international solidarity with the working people of Poland, Hungary and the other countries, including the USSR, and a determination to fight side by side, in a coordinated manner, for genuine socialism. And therefore any future explosions in Eastern Europe will certainly assume an increasingly international character.

The onus is on the Soviet leaders to awake before it is too late to the dangers of their policies and to allow the peoples of the countries concerned freedom to carry out the necessary reforms; only by taking this course can they forestall spontaneous outbursts which may be fraught with the direst consequences.

In this respect Czechoslovakia is the touchstone for the ability of Soviet policy to emerge from the vicious circle of great-power hegemony to understand what is happening in Eastern Europe — not holding back developments, but encouraging them. Far from weakening the USSR or the cause of socialism, they could only be strengthened.