CZECHOSLOVAKIA
and
EUROCOMMUNISM
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Ten years ago the term Eurocommunism had yet to be invented, but in the spring of 1968 an attempt was being made in Czechoslovakia to apply many of the ideas about the political, economic and social qualities of a pluralist, democratic socialist society which have since been labelled as ‘Eurocommunist’. The term Prague Spring then became, as Eurocommunism is today, a convenient and popular way of referring to a particular trend in the search for a form of socialism suited to the needs of a modern industrialised society.

The points of departure are, of course, different. For the Czechslovsaks it was a matter of reforming and restructuring the ‘existing socialism’ which had been built up on the Soviet model, into a type of society adapted to the needs and aspirations of the people of Czechoslovakia — ‘socialism with a human face’. That phrase caught the popular imagination because, for the Czechs and Slovaks, it meant rejection of the inhuman stalinism they had experienced, and for the people in the capitalist world it offered the hope that socialism could, after all, provide a better future. The fact that the attempt was being made in the only country of Eastern Europe where an advanced political and industrial structure had already existed under capitalism was of particular significance in that connection.

As Santiago Carrillo has written in his book *Eurocommunism and the State*, “The case of Czechoslovakia presented itself so sharply precisely because Czechoslovakia had reached the level of France, for instance, and what emerged in 1968 was the contradiction between a society with a more developed cultural, economic and political infrastructure than the political and social system which was administering it.” (1) In those words Carrillo has summed up what the Prague Spring was really about. And if we are to understand the full significance of the events of 1968, both for Czechoslovakia and for the international working class movement, we need to examine how the contradiction to which he refers arose, what were its effects and how the 1968 movement intended to tackle it. This requires a brief excursion into history.

Czechoslovakia, at its formation in 1918, already possessed a strong industrial base, and a tradition of working class organisation. It emerged as a bourgeois democracy, dominated by Czech finance capital, which relied on the West. For the Czechs and Slovaks, the two main nationalities in this small country, the idea of independent nationhood was all-important after centuries of foreign domination, although the Slovaks, in the economically under-developed part of the
Republic, suffered both national and social oppression at the hands of the Czech bourgeoisie, and tensions also existed with the various national minorities.

Karel Bartosek, one of the marxist historians who, in the 1960s, were taking a new, undogmatic look at the modern history of the country, has written that the pre-war Czechoslovak Republic represented the bourgeois solution of the national question and that the Czech bourgeoisie held a 'spiritual hegemony' in the new state, founded on the agreement of the majority of the people. The Communist Party with its internationalist tradition never succeeded in breaking that hegemony, although in the social field it could muster mass support against the ills of capitalism. It was only when the country was faced with the threat of German fascism that the revolutionary movement was able to appear convincingly as the champion of the national interest and of a new, democratic form of state.

By then, however, it was too late. The bourgeois national state was destroyed not by the progressive forces, but by Hitler and internal reaction. The struggle between the bourgeois and the revolutionary solutions had not been resolved. During the German occupation from 1939-1945, however, national combined with social oppression unified the resistance movement, extending its demands beyond the main objective of liberation from the Nazis to include the demand for a new democratic order when victory was won. The resistance brought together workers, peasants, urban petty bourgeoisie, 'ordinary people' everywhere, whereas open support for the Nazi occupiers came from sections of the former ruling class — the top civil servants, large landowners and finance capitalists — bringing about a new polarisation of the population. The people were determined that the catastrophe of Munich and the German occupation should never be repeated, and given the geographical position of the country, the entry of the Soviet Union into the war was a strong influence in deciding the national outlook and the nature of the anti-fascist movement. There was, as one writer has put it, a 'popular anti-fascism', not explicitly socialist in all cases, but comparable to the 'popular radicalism' existing in war-time Britain.

The communists were the main force leading the anti-fascist resistance on the home front in the latter stages of the war. The bourgeois-democratic, nationalistic opposition to fascism, on the other hand, although it operated mainly from abroad, commanded considerable support within the country and was still a force to be reckoned with. But when the military situation left no doubt that Soviet, not Western forces would liberate the greater part of the country, the leaders of the 'national bourgeoisie', President Benes, and his government in London, had to abandon the idea of simply transferring themselves back to Prague to install some kind of improved version of the pre-war order. So they went to Moscow early in 1945 to negotiate with the communist leadership.

The struggle to decide the character of the new Czechoslovakia now entered its decisive phase. Previous accounts of the period leading up to the formation of the 1945 coalition government and the establishment of 'People's Democracy' have either seen it all as dominated by orders from Stalin and the decisions taken by the war-time alliance at Yalta, backed by the presence of the Soviet Army (socialism brought in on bayonets being the crudest version); or at the other extreme there is the orthodox communist version that magnifies the strength of the communists in the resistance and insists that by their wise policies the Moscow leadership was able to impose its will on the bourgeois politicians.

These versions reduce everything to a fight for power, with little reference to past history or the balance of forces as it developed among the people of the country during the war. When, however, we view Czechoslovakia's post-war revolution as Bartosek and like-minded historians do, that is, as a process in which the bourgeois and revolutionary forces are still contending for 'spiritual hegemony' of the nation, we can begin to understand the significance not only of Czechoslovakia's 'special road to socialism' from 1945-48, but also the reasons for the great popular upsurge of the Prague Spring. Moreover, there are, as we shall see, aspects of this post-war development which have considerable relevance to the problems of 'Eurocommunism'.

Whatever the differences in the specific circumstances, Czechoslovakia in 1945 was,
as are Italy, Spain, Portugal today, a country in crisis — political, social, economic and moral — where the issue of bourgeois or working class hegemony was still to be decide, where large sections of the population were aware of the need for structural change, and alongside the revolutionary vanguard there was a mass desire for radical, if not outright socialist policies; at the same time, the forces of the right, nationalistic, capitalist and religious, maintained some hold within the country and could receive support from abroad.

How, then, did the left movement, primarily the Communist Party, handle the situation? First, it should be borne in mind that the presence of the Soviet Army was a very powerful factor, not only in terms of power politics, but also in influencing public opinion. Bartosek notes that there was really very little interference by the Soviet forces in the internal affairs of the country, and for the "interference" in fighting and driving out the Nazis the people were infinitely grateful. And this had been done by a socialist power.

The situation at the end of the war was, then, very favorable for the working class movement to play a leading part in deciding the future. At the negotiations in Moscow, and later in Slovakia, between representatives of the national bourgeoisie and the socialists and communists, the only coherent program for a post-war government was put forward by the Communist Party. By providing for a multi-party coalition and being restricted to short-term measures, the program offered the basis for agreement. The unifying objective was to defeat the Nazis — it was an anti-fascist program. The new regime would not be the pre-Munich regime, it would be a people's democracy relying on new democratic institutions. The property of Nazis and their collaborators would be confiscated, thereby encroaching on the capitalist structure. A new approach to the national question recognised Slovakia's equal status. The mainstay of foreign policy would be alliance with the Soviet Union. Pending elections to a Constituent Assembly, the political parties had equal representation in the government. The key posts in this interim government were given to communists and non-party specialists.

Bartosek describes the solution as a compromise between the communist and the Benes positions — it was both anti-fascist and nationalist, with the emphasis on the first. The balance of forces inclined to the side of the working class; the basis for an anti-capitalist revolution existed, but it would be a new type of revolution, differing from the Russian. "The newness", he writes, "was not, however, in the temporary cooperation with a section of the bourgeoisie which the balance of forces imposed, it was in the structure of the revolutionary front of workers, born in the fight against fascism, in which there were not only workers and a section of the farmers, but also the urban middle classes, members of the administrative and industrial apparatus and of the creative intelligentsia". This anti-fascist unity offered a great historic opportunity to carry out socialist change by peaceful democratic means with the support of the majority of society.

So, as long ago as 1944-45, long before the ideas of 'Eurocommunism' or the Prague
Spring had emerged, Czechoslovakia was poised to put into practice what appear to be very similar ideas.

The international situation played a big part here. The policy of a national and democratic revolution supported by the national bourgeoisie, on which the communist approach was based at the time, was in accordance with Stalin's belief that it would be possible to continue the anti-Hitler coalition into the post-war period of reconstruction. And agreement could be reached with the national bourgeoisie because Benes and his Czech Socialist Party, while adhering firmly to the system of parliamentary democracy, had already spoken during the war years about the nationalising of the key industries and introducing some measure of economic planning. On foreign policy all the negotiating parties were aware of the inevitability of accepting the Soviet power 'umbrella'.

The coalition program was not a socialist program, and the communists were the most cautious about speaking of socialism as an explicit aim. Their leader, Klement Gottwald, defined the relationship within the coalition as follows: "We cannot rule ourselves and they cannot rule alone. They cannot rule without us and we cannot rule without them. At the same time they less without us than we without them. What remains is to co-operate with the other political group which is forced to co-operate with us." (2) After the liberation in 1945, however, there was strong popular demand for radical policies, particularly for nationalisation measures going beyond the provisions of the program for taking over all companies owned by Germans and collaborators, or where such people had sat on the boards of management (which, in fact, took in the key industrial concerns, mines, finance and banking). Similarly, the land reform started with the confiscation of land belonging to enemies and traitors, thereby breaking up the big estates and increasing the numbers of small and middle farmers. The Communist Party was careful to present these measures, as well as the democratisation of public life through local councils, works councils and workers' representation on the management boards of nationalised concerns, as part of the national and democratic revolution, not as socialism but as 'people's democracy'. Economic planning, embodied in the Two Year Plan for Postwar Reconstruction, was also part of this concept.

In 1946 the communists emerged from free elections with 38 per cent of the vote, making them the largest single party. In this period, by their cautious policy, they won a commanding position as the party most determinedly working for the national interest. And a socio-economic formation had been established which could, potentially, have developed into a new, democratic and non-Soviet type of socialist society. There was a three-sector economy, nationalised, co-operative and private, managed by a combination of planning and the market, a multi-party coalition government, strong, united and independent trade unions, industrial democracy through works councils, a farming community favorably inclined to the agricultural policies, a high degree of civil rights and freedoms, and, in foreign relations, no conflict with the Soviet Union which had withdrawn its troops from the country by the end of 1945. The society was strongly non-capitalist in character, with only 5.8 per cent of the national income going to the capitalists and estate owners at the close of 1947.

The question whether or not this was a 'special road to socialism', especially whether it was genuinely viewed as such by the Communist Party of the day, has been much discussed. The dogmatic thinking which dominated Czechoslovak work on the period after 1948 clouded the issue for some time, but in the 1960s during the run up to the Prague Spring many writers took a new look at the experience. The term special road was certainly used at the time, even by Stalin (for instance, in an interview with British Labor MPs in 1946), and Klement Gottwald used it, too, as a road not via "the dictatorship of the proletariat and soviets"; it would be a "longer and more complicated road .... ", but without bloodshed. But did the communists of the day envisage a type of socialism at the end of the road differing from the Soviet model? The answer to this is not clear and, in any event, the crisis of 1948 decided the matter otherwise.

This is not the place to discuss the nature of the events of February 1948 which put a stop
to Czechoslovakia's first venture towards democratic socialism, except perhaps to say that, as so often in the country's history, international factors, in the shape of the cold war, played a large part. The stalinist regime was imposed and, with tragic consequences, held the country in its grip until 1968.

The experience of 1945-48 was not lost, however. As Michal Reiman, one of the younger generation of marxist historians has written, despite all the shortcomings and conflicts, and the incompleteness, this alternative road can be seen "as a distant prototype for some of the considerations about the nature of a socialist order growing out of a peaceful revolution which now find a developed form in many of the conclusions of fraternal parties in the West".

For those in Czechoslovakia who were seeking a way out of the stultifying conditions of Novotny's neo-stalinist regime, the days of the 'special road' also served as a source. For the people at large those days tended to appear as 'the good old days', rather glorified in retrospect as, even more so for many, were the years of the pre-war bourgeois Republic. Important, however, in this respect was the element of continuity in the national history of the Czechs and Slovaks which had been broken by the imposition of an alien system of society. The struggle for 'spiritual hegemony' remained to be resolved, but, as the Prague Spring was to demonstrate amazingly, despite all that had happened, the forces of genuine socialism were triumphant and would have remained so if the Soviet Union had not intervened.

The Czechoslovak marxists who prepared, at least to some extent, the theoretical basis for 1968 were able to assess in a more sober way than the public at large the experience of the first post-war years, and they were also to pick up the threads of a trend existing in their own party from its foundation. Carrillo has pointed out that 'Eurocommunism' has its roots far back in the history of the communist movement, and the Czechoslovak Party can claim its part in this. A leading figure from 1921, when the Communist Party won over the majority of the Social Democratic Party, was the experienced Austro-Marxist Bohumil Smeral, whose concept of a democratic workers' government was an attempt to find
a road to socialism suited to a West European type of society. Although 'Smeralism' was anathematised after Lenin's death as a rightwing deviation, the trend was not entirely suppressed. It cropped up again in 1934 in opposition to the sectarian policy of the Comintern, only to be rejected, although in face of the fascist threat the Popular Front policy was adopted soon after, in 1935. Smeral was the first of the Czechoslovak communists to formulate in 1939 to 1941 (he died in Moscow in 1941) the concept of a democratic anti-fascist revolution and an anti-fascist national front as a possible starting point for democratic socialist advance after the war. In the resistance movement, too, there were groups and individuals who visualised post-war development along similar lines. In brief, one may say that although in its pre-war history the CPC was as subordinated as any other communist party to the dictates of the Comintern, it carried within it the germs of a more independent national trend which was never quite extinguished.

When, after the election of Alexander Dubcek to the leadership of the Communist Party in January 1968, the need for a program was urgently posed, there was, as we have seen, valuable experience to draw upon. Those who were studying these matters during the 1960s were, of course, also familiar with the works of Gramsci, Togliatti and other creative marxist thinkers, and they produced some original works which provided a theoretical basis for the Action Program of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, published in April 1968. We may mention particularly the work of an 'interdisciplinary team' headed by Radovan Richta and published under the title Civilisation at the Crossroads (3) which was, in its day, a unique attempt to tackle the problems of 'post-industrial society' from a marxist standpoint, with special attention to the changes in the political, economic and social spheres which the scientific and technological revolution could and should bring about in a socialist Czechoslovakia.

Another team headed by Zdenek Mlynar, studied the political system of socialism, and its book, The State and Society, inspired many of the proposals for changing the political system in the direction of socialist democracy that are contained in the Action Program. The stifling of these and other critical and exploratory undertakings by Czechoslovak marxists which took place from 1969 onwards is a sad loss for creative marxism.

Essentially the Action Program was concerned with the first steps towards resolving the contradiction between the type of society and the political and social system which was administering it, to which Carrillo referred. It was, as its name implies, a short-term program designed primarily to free the political and economic system from the worst aspects of the old regime — to end censorship, to make the ruling party earn its 'leading role' by reason not coercion, to make the trade unions and other organisations of the people independent of party control, to introduce industrial democracy and to free the economy from the system of rigid command planning. The program was not, therefore, a blueprint for the future democratic socialist order, and questions such as the formation of opposition parties (which has been the subject of criticism from some quarters) had still to be resolved. Nevertheless, Czechoslovakia's Action Program was studied with lively interest by the socialist and communist parties in many countries because, in its underlying assumptions, it was in line with the thinking of those in the international communist movement who were, particularly since 1956, seeking an image of socialism differing from the distorted Soviet model. Many of these aims are summed up in a sentence from the program: "Socialism cannot mean only liberation of the working people from the domination of exploiting class relations, but must make more provisions for a fuller life of the personality than any bourgeois democracy."

For the other countries of Eastern Europe this approach and the events of the Prague Spring were of revolutionary significance — for thinking people in all walks of life, workers and intellectuals alike, they accorded with their own experience and aspirations (for instance, the experiences of Poland and Hungary in 1956 and later), for the leaders they represented a threat to the monopoly of power. And it was, of course, essentially that sense of danger that led to the invasion of August 1968 which was carefully timed to prevent the holding of the Czechoslovak Party Congress at which the provisions of the Action Program would
have been further developed in the direction of socialist democracy.

For communist parties in the capitalist world, insofar as they were not so hide-bound by dogma as to support the 'fraternal aid' afforded to Czechoslovakia by the invading forces, the Prague Spring was, and remains, a source of inspiration, while the shock of its crushing provided a stimulus for those seeking, or already starting to tread, their own roads to socialism. For the Spanish Party, writes Santiago Carrillo, "the culminating point in winning our independence (from Moscow — M.S.) was the occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968". (4) An Italian view is given by Giorgi Napolitano: "Other facts arose (above all the events of Czechoslovakia) which dramatically forced on the PCI leadership the need to deepen and develop even further their own vision of socialism, of the relationship between democracy and socialism, of the problems of the socialist world and of the world-wide revolutionary workers' movement." (5)

In the ten years since August 1968 much has happened to advance the trends loosely described as 'Eurocommunist' — we have seen progress and setbacks in various countries of the capitalist West, while in Eastern Europe, too, there have been stirrings (e.g. Poland 1970, etc.). Czechoslovakia has been 'normalised', that is, an even more repressive system than existed in the 1960s has been imposed upon her in the name of 'saving socialism'. But the unresolved conflict remains, the tensions and frustrations are even greater and socialism is in even greater crisis than before. Yet the regime refuses to listen to the warnings issued by the signatories of Charter 77 that their course can only lead to catastrophe.

One lesson to be learnt from the history of Czechoslovakia is that any attempt to force a society into a mould that is alien to it is bound to fail sooner or later, even when that mould is socialist in name. The experience of the 'special road' in 1945-48 and again, in a new form, of the Prague Spring, also refutes the argument that although there may be peaceful roads to socialism, the ultimate goal can only be one kind of socialism, the Soviet type — an argument used today by those who insist that 'Eurocommunism' is merely a tactic for arriving at the same goal.

And finally, the lesson for the countries of the Eastern bloc is, as has been proved over and over again in Poland, Hungary and elsewhere, that one country cannot go it alone in breaking with the old order. Though their paths may differ in some respects and the solutions they seek will be adapted to the special needs of their countries, the progressive movements will have to act in some way in concert. At present we can expect no more than exchanges of ideas among the 'dissident' groups, and reports of a meeting between Czechoslovak spokes­persons for Charter 77 and members of the Polish Committee for Social Self Defence on the tenth anniversary of August 1968 are an indication of what may be happening.

As far as Czechoslovakia is concerned, one thing is certain — a movement of the Prague Spring type can never be repeated. After the purging of the Communist Party, the deeds carried out in its name against the Czechoslovak people, and the disillusionment among many sections of the population with anything termed communist, or even socialist, an advance cannot come from within the party again. Although in its crude sense a 'return to capitalism' is unlikely to be envisaged by any but the most rabid anti-socialists (to return the means of production to capitalist ownership does not come into consideration), it must be said that the old struggle for 'spiritual hegemony' will have to be fought out anew. In that process people will undoubtedly turn again for inspiration to 1968. And socialists and communists in other countries can help enormously both by studying and developing the ideas of 1968 and, above all, by showing their solidarity with the groups in Eastern Europe which are seeking a new socialist solution for their countries.

References