THE 1968 CZECHOSLOVAK EXPERIMENT TO DEMOCRATIZE SOCIALISM

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by

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ABBREVIATIONS

CC	Central Committee
CCP	Czechoslovak Communist Party; also CPCS, KSC
CEMA	Council for Mutual Economic Aid
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CPCS	Communist Party of Czechoslovakia
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
CSR	Ceskoslovenska socialisticka republika (Czechoslovak Socialist Republic)
CSSR	" " "
CTK	Czechoslovak News Agency
FRG	Federal Republic of Germany
GDR	Deutsche Demokratische Republik (German Democratic Republic -- East Germany)
KSC	Komunisticka strana Cekoslovenska (Communist Party of Czechoslovakia)
KSS	Komunisticka strana Slovenska (Communist Party of Slovakia)
MFR	Mutual Force Reduction
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
USSR	Soyuz Sovetskikh Sotsialisticheskikh Respublik (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics)
WPO	Warsaw Pact Organization

INTRODUCTION

During the period 1948-1956, Czechoslovakia generally functioned in a homeostatic manner in its dealings with the Soviet Union. When Moscow directed that the satellite nations accept the Soviet economic system, Czechoslovakia transformed her economy into a "controlled" economy. When purges were demanded, the Czechoslovak Communist party followed suit by initiating the most severe purges in East Europe. The party assumed almost total control of the Czechoslovak society in line with the pattern that had been established in the Soviet Union by its ruling Communist party. Czechoslovakia performed according to the Soviet political model and created few problems for the Soviet political system, the dominating force in East Europe.

The Czechoslovak Communist party became the largest per capita Communist party in the world. Almost one out of every six persons in Czechoslovakia was affiliated with the party, while in the USSR only one in every thirty-five persons was a party affiliate.[1]

Again following the Soviet example, by the early 1950's some 170,000 members were purged from the party. Among the purged were ranking party functionaries, members of the intelligentsia, as well as ordinary workers. A person could be removed from the party for deviating from the official ideology; by violating the party discipline; by violating civil laws or through public scandal. The greatest sin was to espouse nationalistic tendencies. These tendencies threatened the party in two ways. One was a general Czechoslovak nationalism which was directed against the centralization of Moscow. The other was a more specific Slovak form of nationalism which opposed the centralizing tendencies of Prague.[2]

Other political sins included the espousal of the right or "bourgeois ideology". Thus, the party was able to pear itself down by some 8.4% by

March of 1952.[3]

Unfortunately for the Czechoslovaks, Stalin was convinced that the socio-economic principles and command strategy he employed in the USSR would work equally well in all socialist societies. He failed to differentiate among social conditions which were brought about by different stages of economic development. He failed to realized that the Soviet socio-economic plans could paralyze and grind to a halt the advanced industrial complex economies of the more developed nations. This is precisely what happened in Czechoslovakia.[4] Prior to World War II, she was a relatively modern advanced industrial state with a high standard of living, functioning in a market economy, with a healthy 8.6 percent economic growth pattern. Yet by 1964 the Czechoslovak economic rate of growth had diminished to a mere 2.1 percent per annum.[5]

> The stagnating antagonism between the superimposed centrally planned methods of managing the economy for the sake of the alliance system, on the one hand, and the demands of a complex modern industrialized society, on the other, could not be reconciled over time even by the most determined Stalinist leadership in Czechoslovakia; neglected and undercapitalized agriculture, costly but moribund plants employing excessive manpower, a price system with no rational relation to economic reality, and the growing menace of severe inflation could not be argued away.[6]

The country limped on under the Soviet model by implementing one unrealistic economic plan after another. These plans were often not achieved due to a distorted industrial structure, an adverse trade situation, low labor productivity, an aging or obsolete production base, and a wasteful utilization of production resources. By the mid 1960's the party elite finally recognized that something had to be done to save the economy.[7] By 1966 an outline of a "New Economic Model" was accepted by the 13th Party Congress. This program of goals and action professed the need to free the economy from the exaggerated centralization, the inflexibility of artificial price-fixing and administrative rigidity. The principal target of the

plan was the human motivation to work more and better because of higher real wages and an improved standard of living. The party elites reluctantly admitted that the harsh Soviet-system production demands were far beyond the nation's capacities. The "New Economic Model", implemented on January 1, 1967, was unfortunately only a half-hearted compromise, which resembled little of the initial proposed reforms. The conservative party elite, under the leadership of Antonin Novotny, continued to view the economic reform with great suspicion. Novotny, at the March 1967 party Central Committee plenum, stated: "As long as economic measures are not in harmony with our political aims and our political program, these measures cannot be accepted by us, no matter how effective they may be.[8] But the fact the party had recognized that the economy was in trouble and that the Soviet model had failed helped open the door for possible reform.

Another aspect of the Czechoslovak situation that led to the demand for reforms was that of de-Stalinization. Novotny refused to de-Stalinize the party after Khrushchev's secret speech during the 20th Party Congress of the CPSU. He resisted all pressures to relax his grip on the people, and it was not until the 1963 admission that the economy needed revision that he even indicated any reform was possible. His popularity among the people was despicable; he was considered to be less than capable, a poor speaker and not very intelligent.

> He was always the embodiment of mediocrity, half-educated and without imagination, but through unlimited devotion and obedience he gained support from Big Brother in Moscow...The enormous personal power concentrated in his hands was applied in a manner that made enemies of his bosom friends. The atmosphere among those in the top posts of government and party grew heavier until, to his great surprise, Novotny learned that his closest collaborators had conspired against him, and he lived to see a palace revolution sweep him from power.[9]

Novotny further aroused public displeasure by strongly supporting the Soviet pro-Arab position in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. He encouraged publication of anti-Zionist and anti-Semitic material in party publications which infuriated the Czechoslovak intellectuals. Additionally, Novotny stirred up the population by personally inflaming the Slovak nationalism issue. For many years Slovakia had attempted to be recognized as a separate entity with at least federation status.. A sense of Slovak nationalism was even present inside the Communist party and Slovak leaders often found themselves in conflict with the centralist regime in Prague. Novotny, by his coarseness, exacerbated the situation during his visits to Slovakia in 1967. One such event occurred when he was questioned by his hosts concerning why certain funds that had been sent to support the "Matica Slovenska Institute" by Slovaks in the USA had never been received. He replied that the money had been sent from the CIA for support of anti-Communist activities. He then stormed out of a reception leaving all in a state of bewilderment. News of this incident soon spread through Slovakia causing further disenchantment with the bureaucrats from Prague.[10]

By late 1967 the stage was set for a fundamental change in the political system of Czechoslovakia. After twenty years of relying on the Soviet political model, the country was ready for a new course. During the first eight months of 1968 the Communist party attempted to restructure Czechoslovakia's political system from a state of political vassalage to one of clientage in which the party leaders would continue to determine the political objectives and goals of their country in a more democratic manner. The August invasion and the subsequent forced "normalization" curbed the experiment and reverted the Czechoslovak political system back to its former state of subjugation by the Soviet Union. The report attempts to explain the changes in

Czechoslovakia and their perception in the USSR, by means of a political model of socialism portrayed by Gustav Husak, the present First Secretary of the Czechoslovak Communist party. The report refers to this model as "the Soviet political model". Husak asserts that socialism develops according to four common laws:

1. The Communist party plays the leading role in all areas of social life.
2. The socialist state is the vehicle of the power of the working class and people.
3. Socialist economic development is based on planned guidance.
4. All around cooperation with the USSR and other countries of the socialist system is required.[11]

This report attempts to demonstrate that the experiment to democratize socialism in Czechoslovakia was an attempt to update socialism by changing the four common laws. The Soviet invasion and forced "normalization" of Czechoslovakia were used to deny unauthorized changes and to insure the maintenance of internal stability and conformity to the Soviet political model.

Chapter 1 outlines the changes in the political system of Czechoslovakia, attempting to transform it into "socialism with a human face."

Chapter 2 discusses the importance of the Czechoslovak experiment to the Soviet political system including the fears of the Soviet political elite that it could result in a strategic weakness, a loss of control over East Europe, and a blow to Soviet prestige as the center of world socialism.

Chapter 3 evaluates the impact of the Soviet military invasion of Czechoslovakia, and the 'normalization' of the Czechoslovak political system.

This paper concludes with some observations of the importance of the Czechoslovak experiment.

CHAPTER 1. THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF SOCIALISM

The political difficulties facing the Novotny regime in Czechoslovakia became so serious in 1967 that they forced him to step down as the leader of the Czechoslovak Communist party. The subsequent leadership developed an Action Program which became the official blueprint for the democratization of socialism. The experiment was carefully developed by the party elites, the intelligentsia, the students, and eventually became a mass movement. This transformation was not designed to turn away from the Marxian principles, or to revert to the undesirable capitalistic methods. It was hoped that the new political system would improve the economy, raise the standard of living and improve the political process with the support and participation of the masses. Independent contacts with West Germany were envisioned to help close the economic and technological gaps with the West. The Czechoslovak leaders emphasized that they would continue to remain loyal to the wishes of the Soviet Union in international affairs, be good members of the Warsaw Pact and CEMA, and continue to participate in the common fight against Western imperialism. They had no intention of alienating themselves from the Soviet trust and support.

The Intellectuals

The intellectuals were among the first to advocate substantial change in the Czechoslovak political system. They demanded the removal of restrictions imposed on them by the Novotny regime.

> The Czechoslovak reform was gradual; it was not the result of an explosion and its manifestation did not have the form of sudden spasmodic eruptions. It was theoretically prepared by the Czechoslovak intelligentsia on the basis of its own experience and way of thought. It corresponded to the dispostion of the union. It included both the democratic and the national element in the Czech and the Slovak sense. It reflected a desire for Europeanism both in the traditional and modern sense, in the humanities, in science and in technology. Even though it was born amist the infrastructure and non-insti-

> tutionalized thinking, it found supporters inside the existing power structure. The fusion of reformist thought inside and outside the political structure produced a feeling of national unity as an aggregative political force. The objective of the reform was a new model of socialism, not a non-socialist system.[12]

The idiocy of censorship and the intellectual poverty of most of the official pronouncements continually irritated the cultural community.[13] The writers were most dissatisfied with availability of information from foreign press sources. It was extremely difficult to obtain factual information from official government sources, in spite of the 1966 Press Laws approved by the Novotny regime to appease the writers. Many book manuscripts were not published and censorship of contemporary movies provided further irritation. An area of major significance was the regime's anti-Semitism strongly opposed by most intellectuals.[14]

These issues came to a head during the Fourth Writers Congress which met for two days in June 1967. The Congress approved a resolution which characterized the role of socialist culture as a stimulus in the process of democratization and the acquisition of greater human freedom. The resolution stated that as a body the Congress of Czechoslovak Writers did not agree with the existing practice of press supression and it urged a reform of the law which would limit such censorship to only matters of national defense. Further, the resolution demanded that individual writers be granted the right to defend themselves when accused of violating the law.[15] Ludvik Vaculik, also a prominent Czech novelist, presented an outspoken speech denouncing the monopoly of power in the hands of the Communist party. He went so far as to ask the Writer's Union to take action to seek a new constitution which would eliminate the monopoly of power granted to the party. He attacked power as being negative, self-perpetuating feature of totalitarianism and called upon the artists to resist this power. He pleaded

for the Writer's Union to seize the initiative. He stated:

> If we all agree that none of us was born to be easily controlled, I propose that the Union of Writers... take the initiative of requesting that the Czechoslovak Academy of Science make a study of the Constitution and, if necessary, suggest changes...Do the ruling circles themselves, the government and its individual members, enjoy any guarantee of their civil liberties? Without that, no creative work is thinkable, not even the creation of government policies....It must be admitted that not one human problem has been solved in the last twenty years--from such elementary needs as housing, schools, and economic prosperity to more subtle needs which undemocratic systems of the world cannot provide: a feeling of one's full worth in society, a feeling that politics is subordinate to ethics, a belief in the meaning of humble work, the need for confidence among people, the advancement of education for the people. And I'm afraid we have not taken our proper place in the world arena. I have the feeling that our republic has lost its good name.[16]

This pronouncement brought immediate criticism from Jiri Hendrych, the regime's spokesman, who denounced Vaculik by name and prompted expulsion from the party for Vaculik and two others. The Writer's Union weekly paper "Literarni Noviny" was taken over by the Minister of Culture and Information, the editorial board of the paper was dismissed, and the Union's publishing house "Ceskoslovensky Spisovatel" was forbidden from publishing works of domestic authors.

The repressive moves by the Novotny regime, designed to weaken the Union, demonstrated its fear of the threat posed by the Writer's Union.[17] The result of the repression was a general boycott by creative artists, writers, journalists, and social scientists in support of the reform movement.[18]

The Rise of Dubcek

In late December 1967, the Central Committee of the Communist party decided to remove Novotny as First Party Secretary, but, by the time the Committee adjourned for the Christmas holiday it did not decide on his

successor. A commission was appointed to submit candidates for approval in early 1968. According to reports the two main candidates were: Oldrich Cernik -- at the time the Deputy Premier in charge of economic affairs, and Jozef Lenart -- Novotny's Prime Minister. The liberals supported the former and the Novotnyites the latter. The commission proposed Alexander Dubcek as a compromise candidate. The liberals eventually accepted Dubcek because of his record, while the Slovaks favored him since he was one of them. The conservatives, on the other hand, believed that as a relative newcomer without a faction, Dubcek appeared to represent no major threat to them and thus seemed manageable. What to the power seekers was his weakness, in fact, turned out to be his strength.[19]

Novotny had managed to weather many storms during his political career including 1956 and Barak's threat to his leadership. But once he agreed to begin de-Stalinization activities he was almost fated to fail. Reforms have a tendency to sweep away the old leaders along with the old institutions particularly if these leaders do not believe in or grasp the necessity for the reforms.[20]

The change in political leadership was announced to the citizens of Czechoslovakia on January 5, 1968 by Radio Prague which stated that Novotny had resigned as First Secretary of the party and had been replaced by Alexander Dubcek. This pronouncement surprised the nation. Few Czechoslovaks had realized the extent of Novotny's weakness or had ever heard of his successor. Even in Slovakia Dubcek was hardly a public figure since most of his manipulations had been behind the scenes.[21]

In spite of his lack of visibility as a national political figure, Dubcek had all of the qualifications to make him acceptable to almost the entire cross section of the society. He was a Slovak who had spent his political

life as a dedicated "apparatchik", rising up the political ladder rung by rung. He was educated in the Soviet Union, became head of the Slovak Communist organization, and was a member of the Presidium of Czechoslovak Communist party. In 1955 he was sent to the Soviet Communist party's prestigious college in Moscow for further political training.[22] As a result of this background, he was considered by the Kremlin as a leader possessing an almost perfect pedigree.

Dubcek became to the party and the people everything that Novotny was not. He realized the need for an improvement in the economic situation. But he also had the insight to determine that little could be done economically until a political change was also initiated.

On February 1, 1968 Dubcek made his first public comment to party and social reforms as the new First Secretary. In this speech he set forth a platform of political participation involving all strata of society:

> We are proceeding from our historical experience and from everything which has proven its worth in past practice. We are not changing the general line of internal and foreign policy. But we must give serious thought to ways of contributing to faster socialist development in our country.... The importance of this political and social change today stems from the principle that the bearer of socialism and its further development does and must include the widest possible strata of working people, and that the leading political force -- the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, its organs and representatives -- wishes to do all it can to promote social development as the vanguard -- the organizational forces -- of the growth of the public's commitment to social progress....We are preparing an action program to implement the great wealth of ideas which have emerged recently and were discussed at the latest plenums of the party Central Committee.[23]

At the 20th anniversary of the Communist takeover in Czechoslovakia, Dubcek stated in the presence of Leonid Brezhnev: "Everything must be really and thoroughly changed."[24] He expanded his views concerning the leading role of the party in a radio speech on March 2, 1968:

> The party's leading role can only stem from, originate, and be maintained to the extent to which it (the party) is regarded by our people as their political leader. It is impossible for us to achieve this by a resolution. This position of our party is not established or maintained on the basis of power but on the basis of correct policy. The policy which creates the party's leading role must not lead to the citizens standing outside the party -- and of these there is a majority in our society -- getting the feeling that they are restricted in their rights and freedoms by the party's leading role; on the contrary, they must see the role of the party as the guarantee of their rights, freedoms, and interests.[25]

Dubcek stood committed to a democratization of the political system which included the right of increased public participation in party activities. In order to maintain the critical support of the intelligentsia, he had to prove that he would tolerate responsible criticisms, an act Novotny could never permit. He also had to demonstrate his commitment to economic reforms and convince the experts that his concessions to Slovakia would not adversely affect the new economic model. He further had to reassure those who feared that Slovak rule was about to replace Czech rule by demonstrating that he was an all-national leader.[26] He hoped to lead a reform movement that would give socialism a human face.

Other prominent political figures soon followed Dubcek's lead and took up the call for reform. For example, on February 13, 1968 Zdenek Mlynar, Secretary of the Legal Commission of the Central Committee, published an article in "Rude Pravo" entitled "Our Political System and the Division of Power," in which he said:

> The basic problem of our present political system lies in the fact that it was established as an instrument for the solution of other problems than these which our society is facing today...for many years the political system in this country was deliberately adjusted to conform to the demand that a single interest, embodied in the form of directives to be carried out rather than on demand for decisions to be made in a democratic manner. For many years, the slogan 'participation of the people in governing' merely meant participation in the execution of directives (instead of democratic participation in the process of decision-making), and

> therefore control chiefly meant a control which was to ensure that directives were executed in every detail (and not a control designed to examine whether the directives themselves were correct).[27]

He went on to advocate for rights of individuals and groups to struggle against the existing centralization of power. He proposed a system that would be oriented toward making decisions which expressed the objective requirements of the entire socialist society not just executing the directives that are, a priori, regarded as correct. He hoped for a political process in which groups acted as a guarantee against the harmful concentration of power in the land of a few party elites.[28]

On March 14, 1968 the Czechoslovak News Agency reported the extraordinary event in which the censors called for the end of censorship. During a reappraisal of the practical activities of censorship in Czechoslovakia the censors concluded that preventative political censorship should be abolished. They blamed Jiri Hendrych, Secretary of the Communist party Central Committee for the existence of censorship in Czechoslovakia. They stated that the Central Publication Board and the office which preceeded it had instigated censorship in 1953 by a mere governmental decree and without any legal basis. They concluded that his revelation created an atmosphere that was unbreathable even to censors.[29]

Of all of the important discussions of late 1967 and early 1968 none were as important to the future of the country as the demands for initiating political reforms. The major political issues raised by the reformers included: the role of the party's inner party life, the separation of the party from the state, the possibility of an organized opposition, the requirements for improving the legal and security system, the future status of Slovakia, and future role to be played by Czechoslovakia in the international arena.[30]

The Action Program

These issues were spelled out in the Action Program approved at the plenary session of the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist party on April 5, 1968. This 24,000 word document defined the right of the minority to maintain its views while at the same time sustaining the leading role of the party. It attempted to institutionalize a division of power within a Communist system. An economic reform was projected but without specifically defining the painful economic reallocations that were necessary for change. In foreign affairs it recognized the existence of two German states, but stressed assurances to the Soviet Union that fraternal alliance within the Warsaw Pact was a fundamental part of the Czechoslovak road to socialism. As a political document it epitomized the art of the possible.[31]

The document began with a description of the historical development of the socialist system in Czechoslovakia and stipulated that the ills of the society were directly attributable to the misuse of political power during the era of the cult of the individual. It contended that much good work had been accomplished since 1948, but the political system needed to be changed in order to improve the economy and ready the nation to become a part of the world scientific and technological revolution. Thus, a new and more democratic system was deemed necessary in order for Czechoslovakia to compete in international markets. The program called for unity among the people, with the injustices that had gone on between the Czech and Slovak sections of the country to be resolved. It stressed a need for social unification, since "all social classes, strata, groups, both people and all nationalities of the society agree with the fundamental interests and aim of socialism."[32]

It advocated a new model of socialist democracy, which would link the democratic principles of the socialist system with expert and scientific management for decision-making. The program hoped to replace the ills of equalitarianism, which had often led to careless, idle, and irresponsible managers leading the workers, with a principle of appraising actual achievement. It argued that the change would not form a new privilege strata, instead it would improve the qualifications of managers at all levels and still allow the needy worker to achieve his just reward based on achievement.

One of the most important aspects of the document was the section dealing with the leading role of the party in the proposed new political system. It stated that the party had proven itself and had shown its ability to lead the society. In fact it was the party that had determined the need for the reform. However, in the past the party was often conceived to be a mere monopolistic concentration of power in the hands of a few party bodies. It had become the sole representative of the entire scale of social interest of the society, a role which should have rightfully been reserved for the National Front. The program stated that the "proper role of the party is to seek a way of satisfying the various interests which does not jeopardize the interests of the society as a whole, but promotes them and creates new progressive ones."[33] The program asserted that the impact of the party must be made by persuasion and that discussions within the party must be free and no repressive measures should be taken against dissenting minorities. These minorities were expected nevertheless to comply with the majority decisions.[34]

The party was directed to compete with other social organizations for the support of the people. It was required to mobilize the working class and fight for their demands and rights. It was instructed to allow

members more access to the vital information in order to strengthen the decision-making process. Also, the life of party members was to change. For the first time, members were given the right to resign from the party or any of its organizations without penality. Further, persons accused of wrongdoing were to be afforded the right to be present at all proceedings that concerned their case. Additionally, members were afforded the right not only to criticize the party's views, but were further permitted to express their views on a given subject.

Together with the rights of dissent and criticism, the Action Program provided limitations on the party organs and its officials. Party decisions at all levels were to be based on scientific analysis, under the guidance of competent experts who were to be consulted prior to completion of the decision-making process. All party organs were to be elected by secret ballot, insuring uniform voting procedures for all. Leaders for these organizations were to be chosen based on their political, professional, and moral qualifications. Also, experience in the party and public service were to be considered. They were required to receive the personal authority and confidence of the workers. The party's top leaders were to be selected on the basis of quality. The practice of combining important party positions in one man was forbidden, and the terms of office were to be limited.[35] The program stated that the practices and effects of personality cult were still around. The new political system was to contain a basic structure that would provide firm guarantees against returning to the old methods of subjectivism and high handedness from a position of power. All organizations belonging to the National Front would be permitted to take part in the creation of state policy. Freedom of assembly was to be guaranteed by law. Prelimi-