THE SOVIETIZATION OF CZECHOSLOVAKIA: 1968-1983
by Sonia A. Winter

Summary: Fifteen years of Soviet-style management have wasted and despoiled Czechoslovakia's material and human assets and brought the country to the brink of political, economic, and moral bankruptcy. The situation in the 1980s bears some resemblance to the conditions that led to the 1968 reforms, but important differences of mood and substance indicate that the state of crisis will linger on without radical change. The hallmark of the present leadership is its self-serving insistence on preserving the status quo, chiefly by means of coercive ideology. In face of increased oppression, religious and cultural dissent are gaining strength, while the Charter 77 human rights group has endured and matured. These movements alone are keeping alive the national tradition.

* * *

Fifteen years after the national exhilaration and Soviet devastation of the Prague Spring, Czechoslovakia stands in twilight. Its air and water have been clouded by the poison of ecological pollution. Its material resources have been dangerously depleted in all spheres of productive activity. Its spiritual well of creativity has dried to a trickle. Its government appears to have long since abdicated national political responsibility, and its citizenry to have retreated into a cocoon of consumerism. In the erosion of national will, both are now threatened by the lengthening shadow of creeping economic crisis.

With the exception of federalization, all the 1968 reformist elements had been viciously and vengefully stamped out of national life in the roughly two years of so-called "normalization"
following the August 1968 invasion. By May 1971 party chief Gustav Husak could tell assembled members at the second, and now officially sanctified, 14th party congress that the process of normalization had been more or less satisfactorily completed, its gains could now be consolidated, and the country would henceforth continue unimpeded on the road to higher forms of socialism.

A review of current political, economic, and social trends that were set in motion by the normalization policies of the 1970s suggests that in several major aspects Czechoslovakia in the 1980s bears a certain resemblance to Czechoslovakia in the 1960s. Many of the political and economic problems confronting the leadership today are much the same as those of 20 odd years ago that ultimately led to the 1968 reforms. There are, however, a number of important differences that rule out the possibility of history repeating itself in the foreseeable future. Czechoslovakia has not come full circle to the pre-1968 period. It has followed a largely descending spiral of progress in which its difficulties have multiplied and magnified and its ability to resolve them has sorely diminished.

Rulers of Repression. The composition of the present regime has undergone only minor change since 1971. Husak added the presidency to his top spot in the party in 1975, and a few ministers were shuffled around in the government, most recently this past June. The key posts in the decision-making components of party and government are still held by the same people that were judiciously hand-picked by Moscow and installed in power with the express purpose of restoring pre-1968 conditions in the country. In this they have more than succeeded.

The only surviving element of the 1968 concept of "socialism with a human face" is the federalization of the country into the Czech and Slovak Republics. The country divided almost immediately, duplicating and triplicating administrative and political bodies in complex arrangements that were later considerably modified. The federation, as it exists today, is anchored in the constitutional amendment that came into effect in 1969 and was once again amended in 1970. The latter amendment recentralized some functions while retaining a nominally independent Slovak Communist Party but no Czech counterpart. Nevertheless, many Slovaks hold senior positions in the larger Czechoslovak Communist Party, as well as in other federal bodies. The numerical parity in official organizations is uneven, existing in some and absent in others, but, in general, Slovak influence on decision-making has been greatly enhanced.

Both Czechs and Slovaks suffered equally in the traumatic return to communist orthodoxy, effected by massive purges conducted on a scale easily comparable to those of Stalinist times. Repressive action swept through all aspects of national life -- education, culture, the arts, economic management, party, and administration -- leaving in its wake a void where enthusiasm, creativity, and initiative had once been. It is these qualities of public commitment and participation that the regime is now urgently trying to rekindle on command, to stem the tide of economic deterioration. So far, a cynical, disillusioned population is showing little sign of response.
The normalization purges created a large group of disaffected second-class citizens. An estimated 1,000,000 people were affected, many of whom are still being discriminated against today, denied employment and career advancement, or education for their children. The economy was deprived of tens of thousands of able professionals, as were the arts, the mass media, and all other productive areas. Their replacements were qualified largely on political grounds, satisfying hard-line ideological criteria. Not all were incompetent at their jobs, but many of today's problems surely have their roots in the general lowering of professional standards resulting from the purges, as well as in the continuing politicization of mid-level and higher positions. The party today retains direct control over some 550,000 positions of responsibility. It approves appointments, generally favoring party members, and keeps a watchful eye on an even greater number of other posts.

Weakness in the Party Ranks. The CPCS reasserted its "leading role" in society with a vengeance after the events of 1968, becoming an instrument of control and coercion to a greater extent than almost at any time in the past. Its main goal in the 1970s was to rebuild its strength and restructure membership, drastically reduced by the purges and voluntary resignations following the Prague Spring. The leadership decided to retain the original mass character of the party the better to exercise tight control over every aspect of national life through the discipline it could impose on its members. While it has succeeded in the former, frequent criticism and constant exhortation suggest the latter leaves something to be desired.

High levels of recruitment have brought CPCS membership back up again to a total of about 1,600,000. With every seventh adult a card-carrying Communist, the party is now roughly the same size it was in 1960, but the quality of its ranks has changed considerably. Much of the post-1968 increase in members can be attributed to the resigned pragmatism of an intimidated population, tired of resisting the pressure and persuasion of party officials. Another inducement is the material benefits and career advantages to be gained from membership and that has increasingly become the main reason for joining. These attitudes are reflected in the general lassitude and passivity of the rank and file, particularly among the younger recruits, who now account for roughly one-third of the membership.

To shore up apparently waning party influence, the ideological screws have been tightening even more of late. The leadership demands still closer ties with the Soviet Union, emphasizes the need to consolidate the party's leading role, to vanquish the class enemy, to strengthen socialism, etc. The slogans have not changed since the Husak regime came to power, although the interpretations vary slightly according to the most urgent problem of the day. Current emphasis, reflecting the gravity of the economic situation, is on the need to economize, to work hard, to make personal sacrifices, to fight crime and corruption, and to trust the leadership. The public, which has developed a certain immunity to official propaganda and repetitive dogma over the years, seems largely unmoved by these exhortations. Fifteen years of normalization under orthodox communist rule have revealed all too well the barrenness of the ideology, while highlighting the inner structure of coercion which prevents its from collapsing.
The Tools of Coercion. Oppression and repression remain the hallmarks of the regime today. The police apparatus that was greatly expanded after 1968, with extra manpower, equipment, and facilities for all units to implement normalization, has never been cut back. The network of informers is as extensive as ever, possibly larger. The new Criminal Code introduced in 1973 facilitates persecution of political and ideological deviation and the police law enacted a year later gives the authorities greater power to harass citizens in their private lives. Brutal police tactics have now been elevated to a high science, with the award of doctorates to graduates of the Interrogation Faculty of the National Police Academy.

The only difference between the policy of repression practiced by the regime in the early 1970s and now in the 1980s is perhaps in official motivation. In the earlier period, one may surmise charitably that this course was ordered by the Brezhnev Politburo and that the Czechoslovak leadership felt it had little choice but to obey. Ten years later, however, the same policy seems to be willingly perpetuated, no doubt with Moscow's approval, but mainly to preserve the current government in power. If the Prague regime rules by fear, it also lives in fear, using repression self-servingly to prevent change that it sees as necessarily eroding its hold on power. The regime's selfish preoccupation with maintaining the status quo has drained the vitality of the nation, impairing its moral fabric and ruining the economy.

The Seeds of Decline. Most of the problems currently laying siege to Czechoslovakia's economy stem from the inherent deficiencies of the central command system, when applied to more sophisticated and complex economic tasks than industrialization or collectivization, but they have been multiplied and exacerbated by the mismanaged, short-sighted policies of the Czechoslovak leadership.

Before the Prague Spring, most Czechoslovak economists agreed that extensive growth had reached its productive limits in the country, that greater efficiency and qualitative improvements were urgently required and could be achieved only by modernization and structural economic change. Nevertheless, in the early 1970s the economy was returned to the orthodox command system, with heavy emphasis on central planning and continued extensive industrialization. In choosing continued expansion and promoting another round of industrialization, the government has widened the technology gap, wasted investment resources, increased the inefficiency of the obsolete industry, and dissipated productivity in a multitude of badly coordinated and unnecessarily broad production programs.

For a while it seemed to work. Re-establishment of the old economic policies was eased by holding back immediate investment expansion, temporarily slackening supplies to the Soviet bloc, and reorienting part of production to consumer goods.

In an attempt to pacify the public and make political oppression more palatable, the regime offered the carrot of consumption, which citizens accepted with a fervor that has backfired in the 1980s. In the early 1970s, the government deliberately created a
materialistic climate encouraging consumerism and leisure activities and tolerating a slack work ethic. Productivity demands were relaxed, job security provided without regard to performance, a generous package of social benefits added, even a second economy was permitted to thrive as an outlet for private enterprise— all in return for political obedience. The government appeared to have succeeded in buying a measure of acquiescent loyalty from the public. The economy performed well, the standard of living rose, the sun of prosperity seemed to shine at last, but the false warmth of well-being came to an abrupt end with the thundercloud of the oil crisis in 1974. Even without this catalyst, however, the good times could not have lasted much longer. None of the economic issues that had led to the 1968 reforms had been resolved by normalization. If anything, buried in a dark corner, they festered and grew.

The Road to Chaos. Modernization, intensification, rationalization have now finally become the catchwords of the regime, but they are 15 years too late. To achieve these goals in the 1980s will be far more costly and far more difficult, requiring a national strength of purpose that no longer appears to exist. Large chunks of investment that should have been allocated to renewal of Czechoslovakia’s own manufacturing base are now tied up in long-term Soviet and CMEA industrial projects. At home the cupboard is very nearly bare. Production, estimated to be 10 to 25 years behind comparable industries in the West, is stagnating, productivity is declining, and persistent failure to meet planned targets has caused the 1981–1985 economic plan to be abandoned for all practical purposes. The economy is running dangerously close to the margin, with new problems of scarcity and inefficiency breaking out almost daily.

In compensation for the growing weakness of the official economy, the shadow economy is becoming stronger, stretching tentacles into dealings among state enterprises, as well as among individuals. Bribery and corruption in pursuit of goods and services are so widespread that they have become the accepted norm. Nevertheless, they are hardly enough, and rising consumer expectations are giving way to rising consumer frustration. The semblance of the 1970s social contract is beginning to crumble as the living standard shows signs of falling.

The growing note of urgency in official communications suggests the leadership is beginning to be aware of the gravity of the situation, but it seems powerless to act constructively. Mired in the same kind of tired staleness that characterized the declining years of Novotny's administration, its only recourse is to hard-line ideology. Even under Novotny's unimaginative rule, there existed genuine political shadings among the decision-makers, ranging from conservative to moderate, who engaged in meaningful and sometimes heated debate of various policy options, at least behind the scenes, but sometimes even openly. In Husak's regime, no such willingness to consider alternative policies has ever been apparent in the uniform desire to prevent change. Under the pressures of the current economic crisis, one might at best distinguish between tough and less tough ideologues, the latter being more pragmatic, capable of switching allegiance, but not of presenting an alternative on their own initiative. As a result, the general deterioration continues without much hope of meaningful reversal.
The Spreading Poison. The most tragic consequences of this inertia, leaving a terrible legacy to future generations, are the widespread damage inflicted on the environment and, less tangibly but as harmful to the quality of life, the erosion of public morale and social values.

In the name of socialist achievement, air and water pollution have been permitted to fester almost unchecked across the land to a life-threatening degree in some parts of the country. Nearly 30% of the major rivers are seriously polluted, as well as the underground water table. In Slovakia, contaminated water mains and wells have caused outbreaks of dysentery, jaundice, and other diseases. In northern and western Bohemia, more than 2,000,000 tons of sulfur dioxide, raining down annually on the countryside, have withered once legendary forests to skeletal vegetation. Residents of these areas suffer the highest death rate in the country. There is a rising incidence of cancer, tuberculosis, of miscarriages, and birth defects, with more than 50% of pregnancies classified as "at risk." Children are sent away twice a year to counter the effects of pollution. At home they are trained to hold handkerchiefs to their mouths on the street, and their parents are instructed to ventilate homes as little as possible.

In the worst affected regions of northern Bohemia, a general sense of impending and inevitable ecological catastrophe has led to increased alcoholism, rising crime, and juvenile delinquency. Although more noticeable in that part of the country, the same negative social trends have been gaining strength nation-wide. As the difficulties of daily living multiply, people's attitudes toward one another have hardened. Rudeness, irritability, and sullen resentment seem to have largely replaced kindness, courtesy, and consideration in social intercourse. In large numbers, Czechs and Slovaks are turning to drink, drugs, and gluttony to relieve their oppressed existence. Officials complain of "antisocial behavior," vandalism, and crimes committed under the influence of alcohol, of an alarming rise in drug addiction, especially among teenagers. Obesity is becoming a national health problem with half the adult population described as excessively overweight.

The general decline in public morale and morality evident in a wealth of social indicators, including the rising crime statistics, the declining birth rate, growing absenteeism from work, and increased emigration. Sadly, it is also reflected in the creative life of the nation.

Cultural activity suffered badly from normalization. Observation of strict ideological criteria in all forms of the arts has largely stifled originality and inspiration, leaving only repetition, mediocrity, and superficiality. No truly great cultural figure has emerged on the cultural scene for the past 15 years. Many talented authors have been forced into exile, and many of those who stayed remain officially banned. Standards of language, style, and content in literature have fallen. There is a notable absence of serious contemporary themes in fiction, with most writers choosing safe historical subjects, writing for children, or concentrating on various forms of escapist literature more likely to pass rigid
censorship. While the number of new fiction titles has declined, the classics are frequently reprinted, and there has been a notable increase in the publishing of political works. Music, theater, and motion pictures have been similarly emasculated and are dominated today by light pieces designed to amuse and entertain.

Nonetheless, the regime may have devastated the landscape and distorted the national character, but it has not extinguished all sparks of vitality in the rich panorama of the human spirit. Starved by the bleakness of the ideology, in defiance of coercion, the hunger for freedom of expression and something more sustaining than bread alone has created a dissenting unofficial counterpart to nearly every aspect of spiritual life suppressed by the authorities.

Gleamings in the Twilight. Dissent from official policy now covers a broad spectrum of activity, varying in degree of organization and articulation. Intermingling and interacting with one another in the life of the nation, the several strands include nebulous spontaneous resistance to conformist pressures, more clearly defined cultural and religious underground movements, and finally a small nucleus of courageous, open, and articulate opposition.

The first type is characteristic of a growing number of young people, who resent the authorities for countless restrictions on education, travel, and culture, among other things. They demonstrate their alienation, without any clearly defined goal, in largely passive response to official exhortation and indifference to public issues, rebelling through their support of officially banned music and poetry. A new phenomenon in the 1980s is the spread of religion among young people, in spite of, or perhaps because of, the stridently militant atheism of the present regime.

Religious persecution, which has made Church-state ties in Czechoslovakia the worst in Eastern Europe after Albania, has escalated since the beginning of the decade, with continuous harassment and frequent imprisonment of believers. The regime's attempts to pressure priests into joining the officially sanctioned Pacem in Terris organization has had the opposite effect of strengthening the unofficial religious movement, while the spiritual emptiness of the ideology has provoked an unexpected growth of grassroots ecumenism among the young.

Cultural repression has similarly led to the emergence of a dual shadow movement, although the borderline between official and unofficial expression is gradually becoming less distinct. Continued creativity of banned authors at home has been encouraged by their many exiled colleagues writing and having their works published abroad, who have provided a supporting literary focus and outlet. The two-way flow of Czechoslovak samizdat and tamizdat (1) has succeeded in producing a total of more than 600 titles, preventing the total collapse of Czech and Slovak literature under the stifling weight of socialist realism. The handmade, surreptitiously circulated publications include religious literature and political tracts, as well as poetry and fiction.

(1) Tamizdat refers to works by émigré sources smuggled into the country and typed and circulated there, as opposed to the comparable samizdat process for banned works by domestic authors.
The Light of Dissent. The single most important development in the growth of dissent in the past 15 years has been the emergence of the Charter 77 group as a viable political entity, able to survive the best efforts of the regime to destroy it. The 242 signers of the original proclamation were joined within a year by another 800 or so brave men and women, and their numbers have remained fairly constant ever since. The impact of these self-appointed and mercilessly persecuted guardians of human rights cannot, however, be measured in numbers. With the clearly defined goal of "documenting grievances and suggesting remedies," the Charter members have systematically issued statements supported by documentary evidence on the regime's violations of individual and collective rights and freedoms. They have succeeded in focusing world attention on the true state of affairs in Czechoslovakia, presenting alternative factual, and thereby more credible concepts to the public. They have not noticeably prevented the regime from committing further gross infringements of human rights, but they have undoubtedly compelled the authorities to take civic initiative into account. Recent Charter statements on policies for peace and on ecological problems indicate a broadening of the protective guardian function. Perhaps, because Charter 77 members stand alone in trying to protect the national interest and maintain basic human values, despite the great personal sacrifice this entails, they have inspired a new generation of torchbearers. New people have always been found to take the place of those in prison, or those too tired or too ill to continue. Such perseverance alone is no small victory over oppression.

The regime has manifestly failed to extend its initial narrow brief of "normalization" into an effective concept of government, capable of meeting modern challenges. It has not achieved a balance between Soviet diktat and the national interest that could earn it a modicum of popular support. Instead, itself deriving all its political legitimacy from Moscow, the regime has become the willing tool of Sovietization, increasing Czechoslovakia's economic dependence on the Soviet Union to an enormous degree, slavishly following every political and cultural line issuing from the Kremlin, and subordinating national concerns in the interests of preserving an outmoded and ineffectual system. In the giant shadow of the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia has become a country of shadows, with a shadow unofficial counterpart to every major national function blocked by the authorities. The movements in culture, religion, and above all in human rights are distinguished more by perseverance than by mass participation, but while they endure, the sovietization of Czechoslovakia is not yet complete and perhaps not irreversible.

- end -