Czechoslovakia/18
22 December 1987

SITUATION REPORT

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1. The New Secretary General of the CPCS

Milos Jakes was unanimously elected Secretary General of the CPCS at a meeting of the Central Committee on 17 December 1987. Gustav Husak remains President of the Republic and a full member of the party Presidium.

A party spokesman said that Husak, who will be 75 in January, was leaving the post of Secretary General at his own request because of his age; the tasks facing the party were said to be so overwhelming that he would have been unable to provide all the energy needed to oversee their fulfillment. The spokesman told journalists that the change had already been discussed earlier in the year. Husak himself recommended Jakes as his successor, and the party spokesman said that Jakes had been the only candidate for the job.

Jakes was born on 12 August 1922 in Ceske Chalupy (District of Cesky Krumlov). He was apprenticed as an electrician at the Bata shoe factory in Zlin (later Gottwaldov), where he worked until 1950 before he entered politics full time.

His political career progressed slowly but effectively. After joining the party in 1945, he worked his way up in the Czechoslovak Youth Union and at the same time held executive posts in local and regional National Committees. He was sent to Moscow in 1955 to study at the Party College of the Central Committee of the CPSU, and after his return in 1958 he started to work for the Central Committee of the CPCS. He steadily built up his position until he became Deputy Minister of the Interior in charge of local administration in 1966. In a much more important career move, Jakes was made Chairman of the Central Control and Auditing Commission of the CPCS in March 1968.

True to his image as a rather faceless apparatchik, Jakes did not distinguish himself during the Prague Spring, either as a reformer or as an opponent of Alexander Dubcek. He was severely attacked in the Czechoslovak media, when they were still relatively free, as one of those who had allegedly known about preparations for the Warsaw Pact invasion and who had in fact invited the Soviets to intervene militarily. At a press conference in December 1968 Jakes explicitly denied these charges. A commission set up by the party Presidium found that allegations against Jakes had been based on unproven rumors and assertions. Not much later Jakes began vehemently denouncing the so-called "rightist opportunism."

After the Prague Spring some 500,000 CPCS members were either expelled from the party or left it voluntarily, a process that Jakes commended, saying that "It is the right and the duty of the party to rid itself permanently of those who do not belong to it." As Chairman of the Central Control and Auditing Commission, Jakes played a decisive role in this "purification
process." He was not the only one to make policy, but he implemented it ruthlessly.

On 1 December 1977 Jakes became a candidate member of the Presidium and a CC Secretary; in 1981, at the 16th Congress of the CPCS, he was elected a full member of the Presidium with overall responsibility for the country's economy. His work in this area has most certainly not helped stem the nation's economic problems, which require a return to precisely the kind of reforms that Jakes assisted in suppressing after the Prague Spring.

Jakes could hardly be considered a reformer or even a "liberal." His political career has been marked by constancy, with practically no major disturbances; and considering that he has been active in highly powerful and sensitive party positions for years, his nomination is logical rather than surprising. What is not quite logical is the appointment of a man who has never articulated any strong ideas of his own about the reforms that are so badly needed. Jakes is a supporter of the Gorbachev course—all the Czechoslovak leaders are—but he is certainly a cautious if not a downright reluctant one.

Jakes' first speech in his new position amounted to a strong reaffirmation of Czechoslovakia's policies, which he explicitly said would not change. In fact, at the same meeting the Central Committee approved a resolution on "restructuring" that looked exactly like several earlier statements on the subject; it failed to promulgate the long-awaited "comprehensive document" on the reforms that is to be amended once again and presented by the government to the Federal Assembly in the spring of 1988. Jakes also expressly condemned the Prague Spring and said that the party would vigorously counter inimical propaganda connected with next year's 20th anniversary of the event. _Rude Pravo_, he said, would be in the van of this effort. There was, in short, no new accent that could be identified as Jakes' own input into Czechoslovak party politics.

Husak's retirement could have been a chance to demonstrate a new beginning for Czechoslovakia by the installation of a leader less closely connected than Jakes with the "era of normalization" and dogmatic attitudes. Instead, the party only went halfway. Jakes is admittedly not a Husak in the sense of what the former leader's name stands for; nor is he, however, a Czechoslovak Gorbachev. It is doubtful whether the political will for radical reforms that Czechoslovakia needs has been strengthened much by the new appointment.

J. O. and VVK
22 December 1987

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2. The End of the Husak Era?

Summary: The new Secretary General of the CPCS, Milos Jakes, has been closely associated with the policies pursued by the Husak leadership since the Prague Spring. There is no indication that a radically new reformist solution to Czechoslovakia's ills will now be forthcoming. And yet, can things be the same without Husak at the helm?

* * *

The end of the Husak era may be long overdue, but the appointment of Milos Jakes does not seem to accelerate it much. The new CPCS Secretary General was part of the Husak leadership when it purged the Prague Spring reformers, when it committed the colossal economic blunders of the 1970s, and when it dragged its feet in accepting Gorbachev's reformist precepts. Gustav Husak has not relinquished the leader's office in disgrace in order to become a scapegoat for the mistaken policies of the past; he remains Czechoslovakia's President and a full member of the party's Presidium. There seems to be much more continuity than discontinuity in the change.

Nevertheless, one cannot easily dismiss the symbolic importance of Husak's semideparture. His name has become associated in the public mind with the dismantling of the immensely popular Prague Spring and with the unequivocally dogmatic principles on which he based his leadership from the very moment of his appointment as party leader in April 1969. Many people in Czechoslovakia and abroad have long concluded that a truly reformist change in the country was conditional on Husak's retirement. In terms of political psychology, reform should be easier now that Husak is no longer the leader, especially if his stepping down opens the door to the departure of others who, like him, made an imprint on the "Husak era."

It was rumored after the CMEA summit meeting in Moscow in November 1986, at which Mikhail Gorbachev told the other leaders about the impending radicalization of reforms in the USSR and his desire that they should also introduce reforms, that Husak returned home and told his comrades that they could all become reformers now or they all could resign, one after another. (Josef Korcak was the only one who retired not much later, but he was genuinely ill.) It may be that Husak has now elected to lead off the retirement process because of the increasingly evident failure of his government's economic policy and the painful extent for him of Soviet reformism.

A measure of disharmony with the Soviet leadership might also have been a contributory factor. The entire Czechoslovak delegation absented itself unexpectedly and conspicuously from the latter part of the October Revolution anniversary ceremonies.
in Moscow at the beginning of November. Husak was the only East European leader not to grace the top of Lenin's mausoleum during the parade. Observers surmised that there had been an altercation in connection with the hint by Soviet historians of a re-evaluation of the Prague Spring and its suppression and with the fact that the Soviets had publicly acknowledged the receipt of a letter from Alexander Dubcek. Ten days after the Moscow episode, Lubomir Strougal, the reputed reformer, went to Moscow at the Soviets' invitation and spoke to Gorbachev at length. It is just possible that under the slightly disturbed surface there was a more profound lack of understanding between Gorbachev and Husak about the extent and pace of reforms. The Soviet reform plans are on most counts distinctly more radical than the Czechoslovak plans.

The debate about the Prague Spring—that hardy perennial of Czechoslovak politics and, since the advent of Gorbachev, of Soviet ideological posturings—could well have played a role. A modus vivendi between hard-line and soft-line approaches was obviously sought but not quite found. On the 20th anniversary of the Prague Spring and the Soviet invasion next year, everybody, both in the West and the East, will be talking about the Prague Spring reforms' similarities to and differences from the current ones, its lessons for the future, and about whether the Soviets should or should not apologize for the invasion. It might have been considered less embarrassing to start the process of leadership changes now rather than wait for next year's spotlight.

Incidentally, Antonin Novotny's resignation as First Secretary of the CPCS was sealed in mid-December 1967—20 years almost to the day before Husak's—when Leonid Brezhnev went to Prague to settle the disputes in the CPCS Presidium and allowed Novotny to fall. "It's your business," he is reputed to have said. Brezhnev did not like Novotny because he had sought to remonstrate with the Soviet leader after Khrushchev's ouster. On the other hand, Husak and Brezhnev positively relished each other.

The demotion of Husak also raises practical questions: he is a Slovak and Jakes is a Czech. In the unwritten agreement on parity representation, the four posts considered most important should be divided between Czechs and Slovaks evenly: the party leader, the President, the federal Prime Minister, and the Chairman of the Federal Assembly. Husak held two of these posts jointly, while the two others are held by Czechs, Lubomir Strougal and Alois Indra. Now the ratio is three Czechs to one Slovak: room for a further shuffle, one might say. Agency reports have already mentioned a rumor circulating in Prague to the effect that Indra will retire, Strougal will get the ceremonial post of Chairman of the Federal Assembly, and a new Slovak federal Prime Minister will be named.
Lubomir Strougal's future may well provide the key to the significance of Jakes's appointment. All evidence suggests that Strougal has advocated a more radical approach to reformism and a more decisive break with the dogmatic past than the party is now promoting and than the new Secretary General is explicitly endorsing. Unless Strougal admits defeat or is relegated to a less influential position or unless Jakes changes his spots, the coexistence between the two can hardly be easy.

On balance, only a small step was taken, and the vast shadow of the Husak era still hangs over Czechoslovakia. Gorbachev is most certainly not interested in rocking the boat excessively and too many radical changes should therefore not be expected. The communist parties do not change their leaders lightly, and when they have to, they try to insure themselves against upheavals that the change may cause. The USSR needed two interim General Secretaries between Brezhnev and Gorbachev, and it would probably have needed them even if the two had not died while in office. For Czechoslovakia, a transition from the Husak to the post-Husak era is also likely to require interim solutions; gradualism will prevail, even if so many people would wish for immediate decisions and a more vigorous approach.

VVK
3. A Profile of Gustav Husak

Gustav Husak was born on 10 January 1913 in Dubravka (now part of Bratislava) in Slovakia. At the age of 16, while still a student, he worked for the Communist Youth League (Komsomol). In 1933 he joined the CPCS, after having begun to study law at Comenius University (Bratislava). Among the several posts he held in party and social organizations during those years was that of Secretary of the Slovak Society for Economic and Cultural Relations with the USSR.

I. The War Years. During World War II Husak played a significant role in CPCS underground organizations. As a member of the fifth Slovak Communist Party Underground Committee, he joined the struggle to unite Slovak antifascist forces. He contributed to the establishment of the top national resistance center, the Slovak National Council, and participated as an organizer in the Slovak National Uprising (1944), though not as an active fighter.¹ According to private sources, Husak lived quite well in the wartime "Slovak Republic." He was not persecuted as a Communist thanks to his friendship with the Slovak Interior Minister Sano Mach, a relationship that may also account for the fact that after the war Mach was not sentenced to death, but only to 30 years in prison.²

II. The Postwar Period. After the war Husak's star rose rapidly. He acquired important party and government functions in Slovakia. In the latter he masterminded the communist takeover even before the party seized power in Prague (February 1948).³ Through various stratagems he outmaneuvered the Slovak democratic majority. In 1945 he became a member of the CPCS Central Committee, the Slovak National Council, and the National Assembly. Between 1946 and 1950 he also held at various times the following posts: Commissioner of Agriculture, head of the Slovak Office for Church Affairs, and, most important, Chairman of the Board of Commissioners.⁴

In February 1951, however, Husak found himself in prison for having sided with the "national" group within the Slovak Communist Party, instead of the victorious "international" one. Sentenced to life imprisonment in 1954 for "bourgeois nationalism," he was amnestied in 1960 and fully rehabilitated three years later. Between 1963 and 1968 he worked as a scientist in the Institute of State and Law of the Academy of Sciences (Bratislava). He joined the reformist wave in the mid-1960s, becoming Deputy Prime Minister during the Prague Spring (1968). Husak appeared to win much sympathy in Slovakia with his demand for the federalization of the state and populist appeals for democratic rights. At that time he appeared to assume that political rights could only be guaranteed by a reconstruction of the entire political system.

III. August 1968 and Thereafter. Husak got his big opportunity following the Warsaw Pact military intervention in
Czechoslovakia in August 1968. He became First Secretary of the Slovak party Central Committee and a member of the Slovak party Secretariat and Presidium, the Central Committee of the CPCS, and the CPCS Presidium. In September 1968 he was made a member of the Slovak National Council, in November 1968 a member of the CPCS Executive Presidium, and in December 1968 a member of the Czechoslovak Federal Assembly.

As late as September 1968, at the Extraordinary Congress of the Slovak party in Bratislava, Husak said that the Warsaw Pact military intervention had been a tragic and unnecessary misunderstanding. His political credo at that time was that "I am fully behind Dubcek's concept. I will fully support him. I will either stand with him, or leave." In December 1968 he denied rumors that he would replace Alexander Dubcek as First Secretary. Nevertheless, he did just that on 17 April 1969, after Dubcek at a Central Committee plenary session asked to be released from his post.

With Husak's election the era of "normalization" began, characterized by the fight against "antiparty, revanchist, right-wing opportunistic forces." He publicly insisted that the basic platform would continue to be the post-January politics—that is, the process of democratic reforms. He gave assurance that there would be no mass purges and no political trials. At the same time he stressed the danger that the crisis in Czechoslovak society and the Prague Spring represented for socialism at home and for the Soviet alliance. The Soviet-led military intervention was then for him no longer a misunderstanding but a guarantee of Czechoslovak freedoms. In the course of the party purge of 1970, about 25% of its members and candidates, more than 400,000, were dismissed, as well as about 40% of the journalists and many others in different spheres of social life. In 1971, at the 14th CPCS Congress, Husak informed the public that the process of party "purification" had ended and the era of "consolidation" begun. At that congress his party title of CPCS First Secretary was renamed CPCS Secretary General. The following three CPCS congresses (1976, 1981, and 1986) took place under his leadership.

Husak's political career culminated in May 1975 with his election as Czechoslovak President (he was re-elected in 1980 and 1985), which carries with it the role of Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces. Similarly, the party function of Secretary General also includes the titles of National Front Chairman and Commander-in-Chief of the People's Militia. Thus, as President and party leader, Husak held the two highest leadership positions, though these had been separated by the Central Committee in January 1968.

Under Husak the persecution and purges of "normalization" started. The federal structure of the state (with separate Czech and Slovak republics) was deprived of all but bureaucratic
significance. The original goal of federalizing the party was abandoned and centralized decision making reintroduced.

Husak's economic pragmatism, which had little sympathy for basic reforms, was acceptable to party hard-liners. The result was considerable delay in implementing much needed structural changes in the economy and severe deterioration of the environment. Husak placed his dependence on the Soviet Union, both politically and economically, and on ever tighter economic integration. The military sector was strengthened and relations with other East-bloc countries intensified. Dissident movements, represented by Charter 77, were strongly suppressed; and the regime maintained its hard-line attitude toward the Catholic Church and religion in general. In short, the name of Gustav Husak became associated with a die-hard policy of total rigidity and subservience to the Soviet Union.

In a series of maneuvers, which observers saw as somersaults, Husak sought to adapt himself to the precepts of Mikhail Gorbachev's leadership and to lead his entire conservative team into the era of new reformism. The resulting tension between Moscow and Prague, as much as the continuing pressure of a deteriorating economic situation, finally caused Husak to step down just two weeks before the start of the year that will mark the 20th anniversary of the Prague Spring, which he helped to dismantle so vigorously, and just three weeks before his own 75th birthday. Observers say that Husak's health is not good, but neither is Czechoslovakia's. A cure and a change have been urgently needed for both the man and the country.

F. P.

1 Praca, 18 April 1969, p. 2.


3 In Slovakia, however, the Communists' share in the 1946 election was only 30%.

4 In this period two infamous campaigns took place: the liquidation of religious orders and the collectivization of agriculture. In April 1950, without legal basis or warning, monasteries were taken over by the police and People's Militia (the party's private army) and their possessions plundered. Religious believers were herded into concentration camps or drafted into penal battalions. The show trials of religious leaders duly followed. In 1949 the huge collectivization of agriculture began, which caused suffering throughout the country for years. See Czechoslovak Situation Report/4, Radio Free Europe Research, 4 March 1985, item 4.

5 Rolnicke Noviny, 17 September 1968, p. 3.

4. Initial Western Press Comment on Husak's Resignation

Many observers see Milos Jakes, 10 years Husaks junior, as a party "centrist" presiding over an uneasy balance between dogmatic and more reform-minded forces and perhaps only as an interim leader. Initial Western press comment nonetheless asked whether the door was now at last open to real reform in Czechoslovakia. (All the quotations below are from newspapers dated 18 December 1987.)

Die Presse was not very optimistic on this score, finding that the change in Prague all too strongly recalled the situation after Brezhnev's death. The Vienna daily said of the new Czechoslovak party leader:

Since 1968 Jakes has been stigmatized by the post-Prague Spring ice age and has in no way acquired the profile of a functionary who is disposed to change, even less so than Vasil Bilak, who at least wants to pursue a slow "Czechoslovak road" excluding the critics. Jakes is a compromise between those who fear any movement at all and those who foresee retrogression if reform is not started. He is an interim solution like Chernenko. A Prague Gorbachev who will bring the spring is not yet in sight.

Richard Davy, commenting in The Independent, was a little more hopeful. He wrote in the London paper:

Mr. Jakes is no reformer by background or inclination. He is a pragmatic opportunist whose concern has been primarily with law and order and party discipline. Perhaps, since loyalty to Moscow has been the most consistent theme of his life, it can be assumed that if Moscow tells him to introduce reforms he will obey, while bringing his long experience to bear on the problem of keeping them under control. There will be no rejoicing in Prague, but perhaps the people of Czechoslovakia will permit themselves the cautious hope that any change may be better than none.

Attributing Husak's retirement to general weariness (among other things, he "was getting tired of having his nose rubbed into the Gorbachev perestroika by the Kremlin boss and by his own Prime Minister"), the Wall Street Journal viewed Jakes as at best a compromise Chernenko-type selection. The US newspaper went on:

The Jakes appointment only put off the inevitable. The economy is contracting. More than half the export earnings comes from fuels and raw materials, and chronic under-investment makes industrial modernization and technological innovation on a meaningful scale unthinkable. Except for theoretical talk, economic liberalization has been almost entirely limited to agriculture. The year 1988--marking the 20th anniversary of the Prague Spring,
the 40th of Soviet occupation, the 50th of Munich, and the 70th of the country's creation--is ripe for a new landmark, but the record suggests that those who will save Czechoslovakia have yet to step forward.

Le Soir found Husak's departure far less surprising than the choice of Jakes as the new party leader. The Belgian daily said that Jakes could in no way be identified with the Gorbachev line; and it claimed that it had generally been assumed that Prime Minister Strougal would be the choice. The comment added:

If official sources are now trying to depict Jakes as a convinced supporter of perestroika, really nothing seems to link him with the Kremlin leader. This creates a new point of departure, whose repercussions are difficult to assess. The rise of the new Prague party leader also comes as a surprise in other Eastern bloc countries, where it is attributed to the influence of the Ligachev group in Moscow.

The Frankfurter Rundschau maintained that there had been no caesura in Prague, for Husak had relinquished only his job as party leader and Jakes hardly had the reputation of a man who wanted to do everything differently. The West German paper said that a strong group in Prague felt that Gorbachev might suffer the same fate as Dubcek and argued against running the risks of reform but also against unnecessarily irritating Moscow. The comment added:

Under these circumstances, Jakes seems a good choice; he symbolizes indecisiveness. On the one hand, his role in the party purges after 1968 is well-remembered; on the other, he too would like a little more modern economy, without this degenerating into any restructuring. And at the age of 65, he is hardly likely to develop the kind of charisma that could carry people away. The apparat can feel safe with him, and he could even serve as a kind of fire wall against any spread of Soviet innovations.

The Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung considered that differences with Moscow might well have been the reason for Husak's resignation. Noting his premature departure from the October Revolution festivities in Moscow, the West German paper commented that this had been an affront to the Soviet Union could not simply countenance, and so it might well be that Husak had lost his party post because he was no longer acceptable to Moscow. The comment pointed out that speculation about a successor had long centered on the dogmatist Bilak and the moderate-reformer Strougal; it then asked questions about Jakes:

The picture is contradictory. Jakes was considered a man in the Brezhnev mold, but he also seems to have played a role in fathering the Prague economic reform. Is Jakes
acceptable to both dogmatists and those who tend to favor reform? Or does he have the strongest will to power? Could it be that the Soviet leadership insisted on him?

The Sueddeutsche Zeitung said that Husak had clearly heard and correctly read the signals from Moscow that Czechoslovakia's fortress of anxious dogmatists had to open its gates to glasnost' and perestroika. Though he had hastened to adopt the "new thinking" by becoming a herald of an economic reform that had to overcome bureaucracy and conservatism, Husak's transformation from brakeman to reformer had come too late and was not credible. The Munich daily's comment concluded:

Jakes is an economic expert and conservatively minded. The economic reform that was launched in the summer and follows the Moscow model will now presumably get more steam. But Prague's reform enthusiasm is restricted to the economy; nothing of it can be seen in the political and cultural sectors. Gorbachev has now come out against this delimitation.

Le Matin wrote that in getting the head of Husak, the incarnation of the Brezhnev era, Gorbachev had clearly shown that he intends to extend his reform policy to all the East European countries. Observing that Jakes's personality would hardly arouse enthusiasm, the Paris paper stressed that in the East the past of a political figure was of no great significance and went on:

If he is to restore the authority of the party and the state, Jakes cannot satisfy himself with economic reform alone. He is taking charge of a country that has been demoralized for 20 years. No initiative can shake off the torpor paralyzing Czechoslovakia if it is not accompanied by a change in the political customs. In a word, Jakes will have to open up more areas of freedom if he does not want to wake up one fine day and find himself without any power. He will have to face powerful conservative forces in the state apparatus. And Prague not being Moscow, it will be difficult to practice the great Gorbachevian art of controlled liberties.

Herbert Reed

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