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CZECHOSLOVAK PARTY TEST ON SUPPRESSING LIMITS OF CULTURAL FREEDOM

Summary: In an attempt to stem the tide of cultural revisionism, the Party leadership suppressed two literary monthlies and issued a stern warning to Literární Boyer and Bálsamový život. At the time when reforms are being introduced in economy, the Party seems to be afraid of further liberalization in culture. Conservative and progressive forces are now in a process of polarization.

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Recent developments in the cultural sphere indicate that the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia is undertaking another effort at curbing the freedom of expression. At the end of last year, it arbitrarily suppressed two literary journals noted for their independent attitude, the monthlies Knihni Kultura (Book Culture) and Prag (Face). Thus ended a controversy between these two periodicals on the one side, and the Party apparatchiks on the other, which has been going on almost since the periodicals began publication two years ago.

What brought the axe down on Knihni Kultura was probably its editorial policy. It was a journal notorious for opening its columns to writers and poets who had incurred regime disfavors. Not even the fact that Deputy Minister of Education Josef Greben was chairman of its editorial board could save it from suppression. (1)

More dramatic was the dispatch of the monthly Prag, a literary journal of the youngest generation. The attacks on this magazine had been progressively mounting, especially in the latter half of last year. What the authorities particularly objected to was the obviously non-Marxist posture of the editorial board. Since the Writers' Union did not exercise the kind of control over it,

(1) The discontinuation of Knihni Kultura was announced in the monthly's last issue, No. 12, December 1963.

desired by the Party, the intention was to transfer Prav from the union's jurisdiction to that of the publishing house "Centralnyy Episkopatel," from which better results were evidently expected. The conditions stipulated by the Ideological Department of the Party Central Committee included a change of the editorial board and were of such a nature that the editor-in-chief, supported by his editorial staff, rejected them. Thereupon, further publication of this journal was administratively prohibited as of 1 January 1966. (2)

Behind both these moves stands the Ideological Department of the Party's Central Committee which, as has been now revealed, has the authority to approve or reject the composition of editorial boards of all cultural journals. For a year now, the head of this department has been Pavel Anasberg, a close associate of First Party Secretary Antonin Novotny. (3)

Warnings from Sivot Strany

Hard on the heels of the suspension of these literary journals, came articles in the Party press addressing clear warnings to other cultural periodicals, and to the intellectuals in general. The most articulate and the most weighty of them was an editorial which appeared in the Party Central Committee fortnightly, Sivot Strany (No. 1, January 1966) under the headline "Disturbing Tendencies." In it, it was noted that the shortcomings in the work of "certain cultural periodicals," criticized in the Central Committee document of March 1964, (4) still continue or are reappearing in a different form. After a cautionary remark that the current situation can leave no one indifferent, the editorial cites Literarny Noviny and Kulturny Sivot as having a mass circulation and, therefore, considerable influence on the intelligentsia and youth. These, therefore, are the two journals to which Sivot Strany was mainly referring.

Following a brief recapitulation of the conclusions of the March 1964 Central Committee document, according to which the negative aspects

- (2) For background, cf. Literarny Noviny No. 1, 1 January 1966.
- (3) Until his present appointment, Dr. Pavel Anasberg was head of the secretariat of the First Party Secretary, i.e. of Antonin Novotny, at the Prague Party Headquarters.
- (4) The document entitled "On the Mission and State of Cultural Periodicals" was prepared by the CC in March and published in Pravda on 3 April 1964.

in the work of cultural journals were the result of a narrow and one-sided conception of the struggle against dogmatism on the one hand, and liberal tendencies on the other. Rivost Strany comes up with specific charges. These are:

- one-sidedly conceived relations between human values and the class struggle, resulting in a loss of class criteria;
- lack of a clear Marxist concept of culture;
- tendencies to remove art from the influence of the Party and its ideology;
- declining attention devoted to socialist culture of other countries, in particular to Soviet culture and art;
- insufficient attention paid to the integration of Czech and Slovak cultures into a single Czechoslovak socialist culture.

The alleged lack of ideological firmness is demonstrated with concrete examples. Thus, for instance, economist Bedeslav Selucky, often in the past a regime target, is attacked for his conclusion that socialism is not an absolute antithesis to capitalism. This, says Rivost Strany, is a serious political error not only by Selucky himself, but also by Literarni Hoviny which published the article. (5)

Rivost Strany deplores the fact that cultural periodicals in their treatment of the economic reforms, condemned previous development entirely and, while accepting the principles of NER, stressed only some parts of the reform. Thus, for example, they interpreted the importance and influence of the commodity-money relations as being absolute, and silently passed over the principles of planning. A similar inclination, to take certain occurrences out of their proper context, is noted also in the treatment by Literarni Hoviny and Kulturny Rivost of the liberation struggle, the role of the first government of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, the non-Communist resistance, the London emigration, etc. Allegedly equally biased is the treatment of prominent personalities.

The roots of all these negative manifestations, according to the editorial, lie in the underrating of the existence of an ideological struggle, and of succumbing too often to illusions about the possibility of peaceful coexistence between antagonistic ideologies. The playing of the importance of a consistent revolutionary international posture, and substituting it by a so-called "worldliness,"

(5) Cf. "Economic Theory on the Rise," Literarni Hoviny No. 13, 27 March 1963.

breeds efforts to smuggle peaceful coexistence into ideology, as shown by attempts to replace the concept of ideological struggle with terms like "international dialogue," "international confrontation of views," or "mutual exchange of values." Such ideas are completely devoid of class criteria and revolutionary responsibility.

The concluding paragraphs of the First Strategy editorial clearly indicate what the Party is afraid of, and why it considers the current tendencies to be "disturbing." The editorial emphatically draws attention to the circumstance that the "imperialists are considerably stepping up their activity and flexibility" in the propaganda field, and that the main strata to which they address themselves are the intelligentsia and the youth. First Strategy deplores what it terms the destructive work of cultural periodicals; this it holds responsible for the biased views about socialism which can now be observed among part of the youth. The editorial ends with the statement that this hostile propaganda can only be destroyed if cultural journals, too, will present an objective image of contemporary developments.

Preparing for the Congress

Other articles appearing in the last two weeks have been in a similar vein, though in more general terms. (4) This may well be taken as a confirmation of the fact that what is going on is a concerted Party effort designed to straighten out the cultural deviations well in time for the 13th Party Congress. The beginnings of this action may be traced back to the replacement of Oestair Clear by Jiri Hajek (not to be confused with the editor-in-chief of Plamen of some name!) as Minister of Education and Culture in November 1965, and Clear's removal from the country altogether. (7)

The developments sketched out above bear a close similarity to the situation in the GDR at and after the (December 1965) 11th SED plenum. The underlying motive may well be the same in both countries, namely the fear of the Party leadership that a concurrent liberalization in economy and culture could jeopardize the Party's predominance. Consequently, if there have to be economic reforms --

- (4) E.g. editor-in-chief Josef Valenta in First Strategy, No. 1 January 1966; editorial in Slovak CC weekly Pravda, No. 1 6 January 1966; Party presidium member and CC secretary Jiri Bendrych in Reda Press, 9 January 1966.
- (7) On the replacement of the strong Clear by more pliable Hajek, cf. Background Report "Oestair Clear - the New Czechoslovak Ambassador to Bucharest" of 5 January 1966.

to which the Party sees no alternative -- they must be restricted to that field only. Hence the stiffening attitude in cultural and ideological affairs.

The Party's apprehension is, indeed, understandable. There exist now in Czechoslovakia quite considerable forces trying to curb the Party's control and influence in all fields of human endeavor. The Party leadership is very worried as it is over a growing skepticism within the membership, over the dissatisfaction of the intellectuals, and the indifference of the youth. If this erosion of belief were to be augmented by an active opposition, the impact of these two converging forces could compel the Party to concessions which, in their final effect, would be tantamount to capitulation.

It is too soon yet to say whether this latest move of the Party leadership amounts to a full-scale counter-offensive, comparable to that of 1958-1959. There is, of course, a distinct similarity as regards Party measures in the two phases: now as then, literary journals have been liquidated by administrative acts. (8) But the position of the Party now is much less advantageous than it was in the late fifties. Since 1963, cultural liberalization has made very significant progress, the ranks of the "oppositionists" are better in quality and stronger in numbers. While it would still be possible for the Party to abolish periodicals of lesser importance and circulation, the leadership simply cannot afford to suppress the weeklies of the two writers' unions, i.e. Literární Noviny and Kulturný život. A reshuffle of their editorial boards which is about the limit to which the Party could go at the moment, could stem the tide or bring about a temporary retreat, but could hardly achieve a complete turn-about desired by the Party. For that, the front of the reformers seems to be too broad nowadays.

Revisionism in literary journals is still on the march. (9) It remains to be seen, whether Party control can be re-established to any significant extent by current exhortations, warnings and intimidation.

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(8) Suppressed in 1959 was the youth magazine Evropa (May), the predecessor of now suspended Titus.

(9) See, e.g., the articles by Eugen Loethl and Roman Kalisky in Kulturný život, No.2, 7 January 1966.