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EAST GERMAN COVERAGE OF CZECHOSLOVAK AFFAIRS
AFTER JAN PALACH'S SUICIDE

Summary: With a delay longer than that in any other East European Communist country, East Germany's press finally referred on 22 January to Jan Palach's death. While this reference was given, significantly, in the context of a report on the appeal of the Slovak Party Presidium to the population, an earlier broadcast by the East Berlin Deutschlandsender treated the tragic gesture in a manner highly similar to the cynical and counter-productive style of Radio Vlatava.

It took Neues Deutschland six days to decide even to print the name of the Prague protest suicide Jan Palach. The paper ignored the self-immolation on 16 January, the death of the victim on 19 January, the resulting massive demonstrations and resolutions, until 22 January.

Finally, the paper front-paged a report on the appeals of the Czechoslovak and primarily the Slovak Parties to the population to help with the consolidation of the country since "various methods had been used to exploit the self-immolation attempt of Jan Palach for provocatory purposes." The article mentioned that before his death, Jan Palach had stated that "the lot had fallen on him to die first." As a result, the paper continued, "various forces organized excesses in Prague which had definite anti-socialist and anti-Soviet character." In the meantime,

the paper said, numerous Czechoslovak citizens had suggested that the young man had been driven to his death by secret organizations which are not unrelated to West German counter-intelligence. The paper further wrote:

It will also be recalled that a few days ago, a pamphlet by the ideologist of the counterrevolutionary "Club of Engaged Non-Party Members," Ivan Svitak, had been posted at the Philosophical Faculty of Prague's Charles University. Svitak is currently in the USA and is active at the institute of the infamous anti-Communist Brzezinski.

On the inside pages of the same issue, Neues Deutschland included a special report dealing with the appeal of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the Slovak Party, the result of a Bratislava meeting which was headed by Gustav Husak. The report included the following passage:

The Presidium of the Central Committee of the Slovak Party noted that the internal development in the country has reached a new crisis due to the tragic and regrettable act of the Prague student Jan Palach which various extremist groups are attempting to exploit by trying to cause actions which endanger peace and order.

[emphasis supplied]

The remainder of the brief article summed up the Presidium's enjoiner to the population to remain calm and to adhere to the resolutions of the January Plenum.

The same issue of Neues Deutschland featured another longer article on the Czechoslovak situation dealing with the session of the Czechoslovak Central Committee Politburo held under the chairmanship of L. Strougal, who is quoted as counting on the cooperation of the cadres and the population and on their political maturity. The articles mentioned a few of the newly appointed state secretaries, but did not devote even one word to the major Prague event.

On the other hand, Neues Deutschland managed to quote from the central organ of the Swiss Party of Labor (Communist), Vorwaerts, which had featured an article critical of Ota Sik's "reformist ideas." The East German paper quoted Vorwaerts:

It seems to be certain that if the CSSR as a socialist country wishes to develop its economy according to socialist principles, it can do so only within the community of socialist states, according to a plan which is valid for all...It seems that Professor Sik does not recognize these prerequisites.

The disproportionate emphasis devoted by the main SED daily to this variety of events quite clearly shows East German bias and false reporting, not to mention interpreting.

A better -- or rather worse -- illustration of this sort of journalism was provided by a commentary broadcast by East Berlin's "Deutschlandsender."* The subject of the broadcast was the Plenum of the Czechoslovak Central Committee on 18/19 January which, in the view of the speaker, showed "how complex the domestic situation in the country still remains." He stated:

For two days, the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Party had deliberated on the current situation and future tasks. The materials which have been issued thus far clearly indicate who is being addressed when there is mention of distorted interpretations. Repeatedly, the press, radio and television were asked to implement consistently the policy of the Party and government through their activities. The communique reveals that in the future sharp measures could be taken against such press organs which disregard Party resolutions. These are fairly clear and undoubtedly necessary words. One should remember that sober and clear-thinking observers in Prague stated as early as during the fall of last year: the political crisis of the country can be overcome only if the necessary ideological discussions with revisionist and anti-socialist forces are not only not avoided, but are carried out with determination and emphasis...

The commentator then quoted a passage from the resolution which referred to increased future ideological education, and said:

It was not only the insufficient ideological education so far which caused the suicide of a young Prague student last week-end, it was the very conscious incitement of nationalistic passions as well. Certain intellectual circles had said in November already -- not for publication of course: "If only someone were wounded or dead, then we could get people out in the streets again!"

The student Jan Palach who has been characterized by the American news agency UPI as particularly sensitive, must be considered the pitiful victim of those forces in the CSSR and in the West which today almost dream of new flaming human torches. They speak of human socialism; they feign the dignity of man and, at the same time, drive young people who believe in them to their death.

[emphasis supplied]

There seems no need to comment on this cynicism. Besides, the whole world knows and admires those people who have spoken and still speak of "socialism with a human face," a socialism certainly non-existent in the GDR!

Dorothy Miller

* In the series "International Politics," 20 January 1969, written by Arno Friedmann - broadcast at 1700 hours.