

RADIO FREE EUROPE *Research*

RAD Background Report/204
(World Communist Movement)
31 August 1983

PCI-CZECHOSLOVAK POLEMICS OVER "NORMALIZATION"

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Summary: The Czechoslovak regime has made a polemical attack on the Italian CP because of the latter's condemnation of the Warsaw Pact invasion of 1968 and its criticism of the "normalization" that followed. Rude Pravo accuses l'Unità of having "placed itself on the side of the enemies of socialism." This attack was the reply to an anniversary article in which a leading Italian communist authority on Eastern Europe described the political failure of normalization as a policy intended primarily to block reform. The writer, however, saw some signs of hope for the future.

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Polemics between communist parties are nothing new, although they have generally become less frequent and less ferocious since the lively days of the mid-1960s, when the Chinese and the Soviets were exchanging what amounted to reciprocal excommunications. Nevertheless, the latest Czechoslovak attack upon the fraternal Italian party deserves attention, because it deals with an enduring rift between the two parties. For a decade and a half, the Italian PCI has maintained its principled criticism of both the Warsaw Pact invasion of August 1968 and of the repressive "normalization" that followed. This position has been reaffirmed in an anniversary article (1) by one of the party's leading spokesmen on Eastern Europe.

An angry reply in the Czechoslovak party newspaper (2) charged, in effect, that the Italian CP had joined the enemy camp:

It is not surprising that anti-Czechoslovak slander and invention should come from declared enemies of communism, but what makes one stop in one's tracks is the fact that the Italian Communist Party newspaper l'Unità evaluates the 1968 events and post-August developments in our country in the same style and spirit. Indeed, l'Unità has even developed and enriched the scenario worked out by our enemies . . .

- (1) Adriano Guerra, "Prague: 15 Years of 'Normalization,'" l'Unità, 21 August 1983.
- (2) In an article by Zdenek Porybeny, Rude Pravo, 24 August 1983.

Objectively speaking, by the attitude it has adopted toward developments in Czechoslovakia, L'Unità has placed itself on the side of the enemies of socialism. It may even merit a rewarding pat on the back from the bourgeois mass media and from bourgeois politicians for its "independence" and "autonomy." With an attitude of this kind, however, the leadership of the Italian CP will definitely not progress a single step closer to its desired goal of being accepted into the bourgeois government, even if it is led by the Socialist Mr. Craxi.

The anniversary article that provoked this outburst was much more measured in tone but uncompromising in judgment. The judgment, however, concerned not the invasion itself but the subsequent "normalization." The writer, Adriano Guerra, director of the PCI's research center, wrote that he had been moved to take a new look at this phenomenon by developments in the Polish crisis and also by "an imprecise extension of the term to Hungarian events after 1956." It would, he went on, be misleading to view the policies followed in Hungary merely as a model of normalization. "In fact, after two years of repressive policies (culminating in the execution of Nagy), for a time strengthened by Soviet support (from Khrushchev) and then by that of the people, the Hungarian party gave up the policy of normalization, meaning the restoration of the old order, to follow, instead, the path of gradual, continual reform, to be pursued in the first place by gaining the active consensus of the masses."

Normalization a Failure. Guerra was not, however, concerned in this article with evaluating the "Hungarian model" or the possibility that it might help to provide "positive solutions to the crisis of socialism of the Soviet type in other countries." It was the contrast between the Hungarian and Czechoslovak experience that he found significant:

One can only say that, 15 years after 1956, that is, in 1971, one could no longer talk of Hungary in terms of 1956-1958. On the other hand, 15 years after 1956, Czechoslovakia is still tied to the entry of the Warsaw Pact troops, as though frozen in the images of the days following the military intervention, when everything came to a halt. Here, normalization seems really to have blocked not only all processes of reform but even time itself. Can the Prague leaders truly boast of this normalization of theirs as a success?

On the surface, Guerra went on, Czechoslovakia seemed to be among the most tranquil of the East European countries, with a relatively good economic situation, an absence of social conflicts

and the highest average income in Eastern Europe. Observers agreed that, in some ways, life in Czechoslovakia was better now than it had been in the days of the Prague Spring. This, indeed, was an important aspect of the process of normalization, since it consisted, in fact, of the replacement of the former "social pact" by a new one, "based upon -- in exchange for the abandonment by the workers of every memory of 1968 -- the entry of the country into a particular 'society of socialist consumption.'" Reforms in the structure of needs were substituted for reforms in the political system; the message for the citizen was that, if he did not concern himself with politics, he could have all the benefits that the system could offer. (3) But, there was a price to pay for those benefits:

To clarify still more that politics and benefits were the object of the proposed exchange, the offer of high consumption was accompanied . . . by a vast campaign of repression of all that the Prague Spring had produced. So all the political and cultural organizations were dissolved, as were the workers' councils. Invited to subscribe to a declaration of loyalty based on straightforward approval of the Soviet intervention, citizens were faced with choosing between participation in the benefits of the new course or marginalization.

The first victim of this process was the Czechoslovak party itself: "From being an organism of debate, struggle, and political initiative, the CPCS became ever more a structure of bureaucratic management, docile and obedient." At the same time, normalization also meant:

The pure and simple negation of political life, understood as the search for solutions through confrontation, as the organization of consensus, as the creation of structures of mediation between the regime and society.

As the Italian communist leader Luigi Longo had predicted at the time, the military intervention and the normalization had not solved any of the problems that emerged with the 1968 crisis: instead, the process had added new contradictions to the old ones, as "the break between society and the regime has become ever more serious."

Chances of Change. On the other hand, the need for reforms that would affect the political system itself had emerged from the economic and social results of normalization itself and was

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- (3) Rude Pravo's account of this argument seems open to criticism, to say the least: "As l'Unità says literally, the state guarantees prosperity and the people give obedience in return. They don't fight for 'freedom' -- or, in other words, for the interests of those who in 1968, and still today, wished to drag Czechoslovakia into the sphere of imperialism and under its control."

strengthened by the obstacles that the structures of normalization put in the way of further development, especially now that economic conditions had worsened; and there was official talk of a policy of austerity:

But is it possible to modify so markedly an economic policy, by passing from the line of increased consumption to that of sacrifice, without the conscious consensus of at least a part of society? It is thus certainly not by chance that there is again talk, even in official journals, of reforms, if only limited to the economy, while with regard to society elements of a new dynamism can be discerned according to various observers, especially among the young (see the recent demonstrations for peace) and in certain sectors affected by the activists of Charter 77, who with admirable tenacity continue to appeal to the regime and to society for a resumption of the dialogue.

In this connection, Guerra noted a reported development of significance:

An interesting signal has also come from Moscow, with the news of the exchange of letters said to have taken place recently between the "pensioner" Dubcek and Andropov. (4) The latter is evidently aware of the burden that the Czechoslovak wound still represents for the Soviet Union. Some pre-conditions for the resumption of the dialogue have thus been created.

Despite these possible signs of change, however, it would not be easy to find solutions to the Czechoslovak problem, he went on. Apart from the still unsettled question of the military intervention, it would be necessary to abandon the policy of normalization, understood as blocking the very idea of reform. Moreover, at a time when the Polish crisis showed the outcome of the entire historical process of "real socialism," it was clear that the problem did not concern Czechoslovakia alone. Guerra concluded:

One can only add that an aid and stimulus toward finding, in today's world, socialist answers to the problems posed by the inadequacies and crises of the Eastern countries come from what was said

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- (4) In an Italian television program on the Czechoslovak crisis of 1968, the Czechoslovak exile and European deputy Jiri Pelikan said that Dubcek had sent Andropov a letter of congratulations on his becoming leader of the CPSU and received a brief reply, adding that this could be interpreted as a "sign that the new Soviet leadership does not exclude an evolution of the regime in Czechoslovakia, if only in the long term" (*l'Unità*, 13 August 1983). In an anniversary article in *Avanti!* (21-22 August 1983) Pelikan said: "There is no lack of positive signs: Dubcek sent his best wishes to Andropov, and the latter found a way of answering him."

and done, or even only projected, in Prague [in 1968]. . . . This is one reason why the solidarity that Italian Communists -- for whom socialism is clearly something different from the policies and techniques of "normalization" -- have always maintained toward the Czechoslovak people has had and still has a very special significance.

After Rude Pravo's attack, the latest in a decade and half of intermittent polemics, it need hardly be said that this solidarity does not extend at present to relations between the communist parties of Italy and Czechoslovakia. Yet, while the position of the PCI on the invasion and subsequent "normalization" remains unchanged, the polemics have come mainly from the Czechoslovak side. It was characteristic that the Italian party daily responded to the Rude Pravo diatribe only with a brief, coldly dismissive editorial noting "a type of polemic that distinguishes itself for its crudeness and its total misinformation (to put it euphemistically). Only invective and no argument." (5)

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