
THE COLD WAR
IN EUROPE

*Era of a
Divided Continent*

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greatest success between the wars in maintaining democratic government; it was least ravaged by the war itself; and it was the most successful in combating postwar inflation. It gave the greatest promise of being able to preserve friendly relations with Moscow and a pluralist regime at home. Thus its communization in early 1948 especially dismayed Westerners, convincing them of the gravity of the Cold War much as the fall of France had pressed home the earnestness of the Second World War. But the account instructively highlights the burdens placed upon Czech democracy from its own internal problems. And it also suggests that failures of will and resolve also played a crucial role—in short, Czechoslovaks made history as well as suffered from it.

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The Government of the National Front

The fate of postwar Czechoslovakia, like that of other small nations of East Central Europe, did not depend on the will and actions of her people alone. It was also affected by the actions of the great powers and their postwar relations.

In the winter of 1944–45, while the Red Army was fighting its way to Prague, Vienna, and Berlin, the Soviet Union, the United States, and Britain were making final preparations for the meeting of their leaders at Yalta. They were aware that the presence of the Soviet military might in Poland, Rumania, Bulgaria, Hungary and Czechoslovakia meant a basic shift of power in Europe. Nonetheless, both East and West still clung to the concept of postwar coalition and were exploring the basis for a series of agreements on European and Far Eastern problems.

The policy of President Edvard Beneš, developed while he was in exile in London, had been to restore Czechoslovakia to her pre-Munich territorial integrity and reinstitute her democratic institutions. The success of this policy depended on the continued cooperation of the Allied Powers, not only until the end of the war but afterward. Only in these circumstances could Czechoslovakia hope to recover her independence and territorial integrity and restore her traditional parliamentary-democratic system. Throughout the war, therefore, Beneš had tried to promote a cooperative effort of the anti-Nazi alliance to find a permanent settlement in Europe. Alone among the exiled leaders of East

Central European countries he sought both the support of the Western powers and an accommodation with the Soviet Union. The signing of the Soviet-Czechoslovak alliance treaty in Moscow in December, 1943, was conclusive proof of his determination to come to terms with Moscow, and appeared to be a guarantee of the success of his policy.

Beneš was, therefore, deeply disappointed and even shocked when reports reached him late in 1944 that Soviet authorities were promoting a movement in Ruthenia (Carpathian Ukraine)—which had been the first Czechoslovak province liberated by the Red Army—for its secession from Czechoslovakia and its attachment to the Soviet Ukraine. As early as 1939, in conversations with Ivan Maisky, the Soviet ambassador in London, Beneš had voiced his willingness to solve the question of Ruthenia in full agreement with the Soviet Union,¹ and had reiterated this view in his last talk with Stalin in Moscow in December, 1943. At the time the Soviet leaders did not regard the question as pressing, but they now apparently were determined to force a solution favorable to the Soviet Union. Czechoslovak complaints lodged with the Soviet government against Soviet activity in Ruthenia during December, 1944, proved to be of no avail.

At the same time Beneš became alarmed about the ultimate fate of Slovakia, which had been partially liberated by the Soviet army. Although the Communist Party of Slovakia (KSS) had abandoned its earlier agitation for a "Soviet Slovakia," it continued to press—with the approval of the leadership of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSC) in Moscow—for a loose federation between Slovakia on one hand and Bohemia and Moravia on the other.

Beneš's tense concern was ended by a personal letter from Joseph Stalin on January 23, 1945, assuring the Czechoslovak government of his full support. The Soviet leader suggested, however, that the problem of Ruthenia should be solved by negotiations between the two countries that would take into account the desire of the province's Ukrainian population to join the Soviet Union. The underlying concern of Beneš, that the Soviet Union would use its control of Czechoslovak territory in disregard of its commitments, was thus relieved.² Soviet-Czechoslovak relations had for some time been regarded as an index of Soviet-Western relations. Undoubtedly, Stalin's decision to ease Beneš's fears on the eve of the Yalta conference was motivated, in part, by a desire to dissipate the suspicions of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston S. Churchill, already aroused over Soviet designs in Poland and the other countries of East Central Europe occupied by the Soviet army.

Just before writing his letter to Beneš, Stalin discussed with Klement Gottwald, the exiled Czech communist leader in Moscow, the policy the KSC should follow during and after the liberation of Czechoslovakia.

Stalin advised Gottwald to accept Beneš as president, and to come to an understanding with him and his government.³ This flexible Soviet policy essentially reflected the line set forth in the Comintern declaration of 1943, which asserted that "the great differences in the historical development of individual countries determine the differences of the various problems that the workers' class of every country has to cope with." Until the next reexamination of communist strategy in the summer of 1947, Stalin set the stamp of his approval on this thesis of national roads to socialism: "In private he even expressed the . . . view that in certain instances it was possible to achieve socialism without the dictatorship of the proletariat."⁴

During its Moscow exile the top echelon of the KSČ (Gottwald, Rudolf Slánský, Jan Šverma, and Václav Kopecký) worked out a policy line in terms of a special Czechoslovak road to socialism.⁵ After broadening their reexamination to include a review of past mistakes, they determined that the party should lead and organize the national liberation struggle of the Czech and Slovak people against Nazism. In thus assuming the role of a responsible mass movement, the party acted upon the belief that after the end of the occupation it could win popular confidence under the banner of national independence.⁶ In short, the communist leadership in Moscow envisioned liberation as a means of winning a predominant share of power. The irony of such an approach was that it visualized economic and social reform as being subordinate to the achievement of the primary political task: becoming the leading political force in the country. In conformity with this aim, the party tended to move cautiously. It set up broad national and democratic—instead of narrow socialist—demands. In fact, the program of the Czech home resistance—nationalization of industry, banks, and insurance companies—was much more far-reaching than the initial communist platform, which merely involved confiscation of the property of Czech and Slovak traitors and hostile Germans and Magyars.⁷

During the war the principal Czech and Slovak political forces at home and abroad held lively discussions on the future form of the country. In the winter of 1944–45, as the Soviet army overran a large part of Czechoslovakia, the balance of the pendulum between the democratic parties represented by Beneš in London and the communists led by Gottwald in Moscow swung in favor of the communists. It was a foregone conclusion that, at the end of the war, the London cabinet would be replaced by a new government with strong communist participation.⁸ In 1945, with the Soviet armies advancing across Czechoslovakia, it became urgent for Beneš to implement this agreement and to return to the liberated part of the country with a newly constituted cabinet. To determine the composition of the new government and adopt a program, it was decided to hold a conference of Czech and

Slovak political parties in Moscow. The choice of Moscow rather than London for the conference was undoubtedly motivated by the fact that the Czechoslovak government needed the consent and assistance of the Soviet government to return to its homeland. It also gave the communists a considerable advantage in the ensuing negotiations.

After taking leave of Churchill and Anthony Eden on February 24,⁹ Beneš, accompanied by some members of his cabinet, left London for Moscow, where he arrived on March 17. A delegation of the Slovak National Council (SNR), composed equally of Slovak Democrats and Communists, also arrived in Moscow from the liberated parts of Slovakia. However, since Bohemia and Moravia were still firmly in the grip of the Germans, the Czech home resistance was unable to send representatives. Altogether, the Czech Communist (KSC), National Socialist, Social Democratic, and People's parties and the Slovak Democratic and Communist (KSS) parties were represented. All other prewar political movements were excluded from the conference, primarily because of their past anticommunist attitude.

Gottwald assumed the initiative at the conference, which opened on March 22 and lasted eight days, with the presentation of a draft program as the basis of the negotiations.¹⁰ Beneš did not take part in the meetings, on the ground that as a constitutional president he stood above parties.¹¹ This left the London democratic exiles leaderless, since they were used to deferring to him in London, even in minor matters. It also weakened their position, because Beneš enjoyed tremendous prestige, particularly in the Czech provinces. Out of fear of arousing "suspicion on the part of the communists,"¹² they discarded any joint political platform to counter the communist program. To the bewilderment of the disunited democratic camp, it soon became apparent that the negotiations were a controversy between two political groups, one based in London and the other in Moscow: "Here for the first time there was joined the battle of two political worlds."¹³ What started out as negotiations for a governmental blueprint broadened into a survey of a program of action that would change almost every aspect of Czechoslovak life.

The democratic leaders received some satisfaction from the fact that the communist draft, to some extent, incorporated points agreed upon during previous exchanges of opinion between the parties. In the main, it reflected Gottwald's conception of the necessity for agreement with the democratic parties and articulated some of the aspirations of the Czech and Slovak people. Although the democratic and communist leaders clashed on many points, in the end their common interests proved strong enough to produce a final text that was not very different from the original draft.

The sharpest controversy during the negotiations occurred between

the London group and the Slovak delegation, in which Gottwald assumed the role of benevolent arbiter.¹⁴ The Slovaks brought to Moscow a resolution passed by the SNR on March 2, which demanded what amounted to attributes of sovereignty for Slovakia: a Slovak government, parliament, and distinct army units. The London group rejected this demand. It based itself on Beneš's speech of February 23, 1945, in which the president had recognized the special needs of the Slovaks but had insisted that the definition of Slovakia's place in the Czechoslovak state—like, indeed, all constitutional questions—should be left to the elected representatives of the people at home to decide after the war.¹⁵ In the end the Slovaks yielded and accepted as a compromise a somewhat ambiguously worded statement proposed by Gottwald, which he later called grandly the "*Magna Carta* of the Slovak Nation."

In the negotiations to form a new government, the communists likewise imposed their will, but managed skillfully to camouflage their victory in a seeming compromise. They did not claim the premiership or a majority of posts in the cabinet. Instead, Gottwald proposed, and the other party leaders agreed, that the government should represent a "broad National Front of the Czechs and Slovaks." In strict conformance with the rules of parliamentary arithmetic, this decision was implemented by awarding three posts in the cabinet to each of the six parties participating in the conference. The prime minister and five vice-premiers, who were the heads of the six parties, were to form an inner cabinet to direct and coordinate the government's activities. It was further decided to give posts to four non-partisan experts and to create three state-secretaryships, thus bringing the total membership of the cabinet to twenty-five.

Upon the conclusion of the Moscow conference, President Beneš and the party leaders departed for Košice, a modest eastern Slovak town recently liberated by the Red Army. They arrived there on April 3 and stayed until after the liberation of Prague on May 9. On April 4 the new government was formally installed and the next day it announced its program, which, despite its origin in Moscow, came to be known as the "program of Košice."¹⁶

The Košice program proposed no radical transformation of Czechoslovak society along socialist lines. It was quite free of characteristic Marxist language. On the other hand, unlike the Czechoslovak declarations of independence issued in Washington and Prague in 1918, which had been idealistic professions of faith in democracy, it said little about freedom. Its tone was sober. It threatened more than it promised.

The program opened with a government tribute to the Soviet Union and a pledge to support the Red Army until final victory. For this purpose the government announced the formation of a new Czechoslovak army, trained, organized, and equipped on the model of the Red

Army, with Czech and Slovak units under a unified command, and educational officers introduced into all units to extirpate fascist influences. Czechoslovak foreign policy, it said, would be based on the closest alliance with the Soviet Union on the basis of the 1943 treaty and on practical cooperation in the military, political, economic, and cultural fields, as well as in questions concerning the punishment of Germany, reparations, frontier settlements, and the organization of peace. It promised to maintain friendly relations with Poland, Yugoslavia, and Bulgaria on the "basis of Slavic brotherhood," to seek reconciliation with a democratic Hungary (after correction of injustices), and to promote a rapprochement between Hungary and Austria and their Slavic neighbors. Finally, almost as an afterthought, it thanked Britain for the aid extended during the war and promised to consolidate relations with her and the United States and promote close relations with France.

In the field of domestic policy the government pledged to hold elections at the earliest possible time for a national constituent assembly that would determine the precise form of the Czechoslovak government. In the meantime, the government guaranteed the people their political rights and set up new administrative machinery, in the form of popularly elected national committees, to administer public affairs at the local, district, and provincial levels.

The Slovaks were recognized as a distinct (*samobytný*) nation and the SNR as their legal representative and "carrier of state power in Slovak territory." The question of Ruthenia was to be settled as soon as possible according to the democratically expressed will of its people. The German and Magyar minorities were given the right of option for Czechoslovakia, with the understanding that disloyal German and Magyar citizens would be removed. The property of those who had "actively helped in the disruption and occupation of Czechoslovakia" was to be placed under national control pending a final disposal by the legislative authorities. Their land would be placed in a National Land Fund and distributed to deserving Czechs and Slovaks.

Czech and Slovak collaborators were to be deprived of voting rights and barred from all political organizations. The former agrarian party and all prewar parties not represented in the new National Front were accused of collaboration and proscribed. War criminals, traitors, and "other active, conscious helpers of the German oppressors" were to be punished without exception. President Emil Hácha and all members of the Protectorate government, as well as Jozef Tiso and all members of the Slovak government and parliament, were to be charged with high treason and brought before a "National Court." Finally, the Košice program provided for a broad system of social welfare.

In the new cabinet, according to a communist participant at the

Moscow conference, the communists captured "positions which were a starting point for the assault on the actual fortress of capitalism. . . . The balance of power was such . . . from the beginning of the liberation, that the influence and weight of . . . KSC was predominant and decisive."¹⁷ At the Moscow conference, the communists had successfully promoted Zdenek Fierlinger, a left-wing Social Democrat, as prime minister. From their point of view, the choice proved an excellent one. As wartime ambassador to Moscow, Fierlinger had won the confidence of the Soviet government by his display of an uncritically pro-Soviet and anti-Western attitude. As premier, he collaborated with the communists so closely that he won the popular epithet of "Quislinger."

Thanks to separate representation, the combined KSC and KSS held eight seats in the cabinet and controlled the ministries of interior, information, education, agriculture, and social welfare.¹⁸ The police, security, and intelligence services were in their hands. The Ministry of Defense was entrusted to Gen. Ludvik Svoboda, commander of the Czechoslovak army in Russia, as a nonparty expert. (Although a non-communist at that time, Svoboda was a loyal friend of the Soviets.) As a concession to the democratic parties, the communists agreed to the reappointment of Jan Masaryk as minister of foreign affairs. A genuinely nonpartisan personality, dedicated only to the defense of his country's interests, the son of the first president of Czechoslovakia was by family tradition, education, and experience a thoroughly Western man. Therefore, as Masaryk's assistant and watchdog the communists insisted on appointing Vlado Clementis, a Slovak communist, to the newly created post of state-secretary of foreign affairs.

Thus far the "circumspect and purposeful course of the KSC"¹⁹ proved to be of particular advantage to the Communist party, whose chairman, Klement Gottwald, had given proof of his political maturity and craftsmanship. The less colorful democratic leaders let themselves be outmaneuvered. Since the central issue was one of power, it is surprising that neither Beneš nor his colleagues found it advisable to prevent the communists from assuming control of the police and security organs. A reasonable compromise on this question would have helped those forces in both camps who were willing to face up to problems affecting their common commitment to a democratic Czechoslovakia. Despite some apprehensions, however, the democratic leaders had no reason to contradict Fierlinger's observations before their departure from Moscow that "It is an immense achievement that we can return home united. . . . The ideological borderline between Moscow and London has been removed. I am aware of the fact that not a few would criticize the composition of the new cabinet . . . but I consider it an immense success that unlike other emigrations . . . we are the first to be able to put order into our affairs abroad."²⁰ Neither side regarded

the Moscow agreement as a final settlement; both were aware that the final battle was yet to come—at home after the war.

In the Czech provinces the approaching end of the war coincided with a rising tide of guerrilla activities. Early in 1945 the largest resistance group—the Council of the Three—the illegal trade unions, and the underground KSC established the Czech National Council as the center of Czech resistance. The council was strengthened during the first days of May by a spontaneous popular uprising that spread through those parts of the country still occupied by the Germans. The movement reached Prague on May 5, where a fierce battle broke out with German army and SS units that raged even after the official dates of German surrender at Theims and Berlin (May 7 and 8, respectively). In the early morning hours of May 9 the first Soviet tanks arrived in Prague. On May 10 the government returned to Prague. It was followed by President Beneš amid frenetic acclamation on May 16.

The Nazi occupation was terminated. The war was over.

Between Democracy and Cominform, 1945–1947

On its return to Prague, the Czechoslovak government took quick and firm hold of the levers of command. Under the Moscow agreement President Beneš had been given emergency powers to issue decrees with the validity of laws, at the request of the government, until the convocation of the National Assembly. These powers were first used to assert government authority throughout the country. The Czech National Council was dissolved.²¹ The Slovak National Council, on the other hand, continued to function at Bratislava.²² It soon became apparent, however, that it was necessary to define its jurisdiction and the basis of its relationship to the central government at Prague, a matter that the Košice program had noted only in very general terms. The SNR took the initiative in the matter. On May 26 it adopted a proposal for the fundamental organization of the republic, in the drafting of which both Slovak communist and democratic leaders shared. The proposal envisaged a dualistic, symmetrical organization of Czechoslovakia into two federated states—Slovakia and Bohemia-Moravia—each with a government and diet of its own. A federal government and parliament were to be centered in Prague.

The previous Czechoslovak experiment in federalism—the ill-fated Second Republic in 1938–39—had not been a happy one. The proposal of the SNR therefore encountered opposition from the Czech parties, both communist and democratic. On May 31, just before the government at Prague began a discussion of the SNR proposal, the leaders of the KSC invited the KSS leaders to a meeting at which the KSS submitted to the “unified leadership” of the KSC and agreed to aban-

don the SNR plan.²³ At the cabinet meeting on May 31 and June 1, only the Slovak Democrats defended the proposal for federalization, while the Czech National Socialists and Populists pressed for the restoration of the republic's pre-Munich centralist organization; the KSC and KSS adopted a halfway course. The discussions ended in a compromise. Federalism was discarded, but Slovakia's autonomy was assured. The resulting "First Prague Agreement" both defined and circumscribed the jurisdiction of the SNR.²⁴

The government delayed a full year before implementing its pledge, given in the Košice program, to hold general elections for a constituent assembly at the earliest possible time. Meanwhile it covered the naked strength of its power in a temporary constitutional garb. On August 25, 1945, a presidential decree provided for the formation of a single-chamber, 300-member provisional national assembly. It was to be chosen not by general elections but by a complicated system of three-stage elections through the local, district, and provincial national committees—thus allowing the parties of the National Front to determine its composition.²⁵ The Provisional National Assembly met for the first time on October 28, 1945, the national holiday, and confirmed President Beneš in his office. In the next few days the cabinet was formally reorganized, but no significant changes were effected in its composition.

The Provisional National Assembly's initiative remained limited. Usually, it approved unanimously and without discussion the decisions made by the party leaders at meetings of the National Front. Thus on February 28, 1946, it approved, also unanimously and without discussion, the ninety-eight presidential decrees issued from May to October, 1945, many of which affected the fundamental structure of the Czechoslovak state and society.

The delay in holding elections, however, did not indicate indifference on the part of the party leaders to public opinion. Quite the contrary. After the overthrow of Nazism all of Europe was swept by an intense popular demand for immediate reform and a certain disillusionment, or impatience, with constitutional procedures when they threatened to delay reform. Under these circumstances, to defer the pressing tasks of reconstruction and reform in order to engage in an electoral contest appeared almost frivolous to the Czech and Slovak party leaders. Their decision to preserve the interparty truce offered by the National Front and "get to work" had full public approval.

Air attacks, military operations, and the German occupation had made World War II more destructive for the Czechs and Slovaks than any previous conflict. According to an official government estimate 250,000 persons had died. In Bohemia, 3,014 houses were destroyed and over 10,000 were badly damaged; in Moravia the respective figures

were 11,862 and over 19,000. In Silesia 34,986 buildings were ruined. Slovakia, because of the prolonged fighting in 1944–45, was the most seriously hit.²⁶ In the Czech provinces the total war damage per person was estimated at 17,000 Czechoslovak crowns (about \$2,400), but in Slovakia it amounted to 35,000 crowns (about \$4,900).²⁷ In eastern Slovakia alone 169 villages were razed and 300 damaged; 24,000 buildings were ruined or heavily damaged. The transportation system was seriously dislocated. Almost all the large factories had been badly bombed.²⁸ Livestock suffered heavily. Nevertheless, a large amount of food and raw materials stockpiled by the Germans during the occupation remained in the country.

The end of the war closed a struggle for the Czech nation's very existence. Since 1938 the Czechs had been humiliated and persecuted. They had also suffered from Nazi cruelties and the bloody fighting of the last days of the war. The radical mood of the country transformed resentment against the Nazis into demands for the permanent removal of all Germans. Popular support for the idea of expelling the Sudeten Germans caught even the Communist party by surprise. However, it swiftly went beyond the Košice program and espoused popular demands. A presidential decree on June 21, 1945, provided for the expropriation without compensation of the property of the Germans and Magyars as well as that of Czech and Slovak collaborators and traitors. The land that came within the scope of the decree involved about 270,000 farms covering 6,240,000 acres, which provided the communist minister of agriculture with a rich pork barrel from which to reward those who were willing to serve the party. By the spring of 1948 some 1,500,000 people had moved to the Czech borderlands left vacant by the Sudeten Germans, who had been removed to the American and Soviet zones of occupation in Germany in accordance with the mandate given Czechoslovakia by the Allied powers at Potsdam. After June 15, 1949, only 177,000 Germans were left in the Czech provinces.²⁹ This national adjustment wrought a profound change in the economic and social structure of the country. There was much disorder and violence—yet this is present in every revolutionary process. In the final analysis, the expulsion of the Sudeten Germans was a Czech national response—neither communist nor Soviet inspired—to a situation created by Nazi war policy and the Sudeten Germans themselves.

The Slovaks, led by the KSS, pressed for a similar removal of the Magyar minority from Slovakia. But it was one thing to press a claim against the Germans, who at that time were regarded as outlaws in all of Europe, and quite another to press one against the Hungarians, who were regarded as minor culprits. The Soviet Union tended to regard Hungary as a future satellite, like Czechoslovakia, and was not anxious

to complicate its tasks by contributing to dissension between two of its prospective clients. At the Potsdam conference it failed to back the Czechoslovak demand for the removal of the Magyar minority. The matter was left to bilateral Czechoslovak-Hungarian negotiations. Under a mutual exchange agreement concluded between the two countries on February 27, 1946, 68,407 Magyars out of some 500,000 did leave for Hungary and a somewhat smaller number of Slovaks returned to Slovakia.³⁰ No large fund of land comparable to that in the Czech borderlands became available in Slovakia, a factor that had important repercussions in Czechoslovak politics.

Partly for this reason, the Czechoslovak delegation at the Paris Peace Conference in 1946 raised the demand for authorization to remove 200,000 Magyars from Slovakia. But by then, the Western powers were adamantly opposed to any further population transfer, and the matter was dropped.³¹ They did, however, accede to the Czechoslovak demand for a small enlargement of the Bratislava bridgehead on the south bank of the Danube River at the expense of Hungary.³²

Meanwhile, in June, 1945, the Poles suddenly reopened the Těšín (Teschen) question. On June 19 Polish troops under General Rola-Zymierski moved up to the city of Těšín. Possibly the Poles were encouraged to revive this old thorn in Polish-Czechoslovak relations by the Soviet government, which was anxious to prod Czechoslovakia into settling the Ruthenian question. In any event, on the same day the Soviet government invited Czechoslovakia and Poland to send delegations to Moscow to discuss outstanding questions affecting their relations. On June 29, after a week of discussions, the Czechoslovak and Soviet governments signed an agreement formally transferring Ruthenia to the Soviet Union.³³ When the Czechoslovak delegation returned to Prague, Prime Minister Fierlinger announced that the Polish-Czechoslovak discussions had been indefinitely adjourned. Apart from the loss of Ruthenia and the enlargement of the Bratislava bridgehead, the pre-Munich boundaries of Czechoslovakia remained intact.

The internal position of Czechoslovakia appeared to be fully consolidated. The withdrawal of Soviet and United States troops from Czechoslovakia as early as November and December of 1945 heralded a return to normalcy. By the fall of 1945 the country had also made considerable progress in economic reconstruction. Almost everyone agreed that it had bright prospects, provided that the wartime grand alliance and the internal balance between the communist and democratic forces could be maintained.

Since it had to compete with the democratic parties, the Communist party sought to be a mass party. The KSČ readily admitted members of former parties, drawing a line only at admitting former fascists and

collaborators who, in Czech opinion, stood beyond the pale. The KSS, on the other hand, readily admitted even members of the former Hlinka People's party—indeed, it strenuously courted them. It posed as a Slovak nationalist party and did not hesitate to exploit religious prejudice by pointing out to the Slovak Catholic majority that the leadership of its competitor, the Slovak Democratic party, was largely Protestant. At the end of 1945 the KSS claimed a membership of 197,000, while in March, 1946, the KSČ claimed to have over 1,000,000 members.³⁴

The growing strength of the Communist Party was reflected in its high moral and internal consolidation. Between 1945 and 1948 the leadership of the KSČ (with Klement Gottwald as chairman and Rudolf Slánský as secretary-general) remained remarkably stable, and the party was unusually free of factional strife. The KSS experienced some internal stress, however, as its nationalist posture came into conflict with the strategy of the parent party, the KSČ. At a joint meeting of the central committees of the KSČ and KSS in Prague on July 17–18, 1945, the Czech communists sharply criticized their Slovak comrades for viewing the development from a “nationalist,” instead of a “class,” point of view and for allying themselves with the “reaction” in the SNR, that is, the Slovak Democrats. A resolution, passed at the meeting, demanded that the “policy of the KSS must not be to separate but to orient the party towards the progressive forces in the Czech provinces and in the central government” and delegated Viliam Široký, a dour internationalist communist, to take charge of the KSS.³⁵ The separation of the two parties, which was maintained for tactical reasons, thereafter became nominal.

While the Communist party was united, the Czechoslovak Social Democratic party (chairman: Zdeněk Fierlinger; secretary-general: Blažej Vilím), which had a long and distinguished history of defending the cause of the Czech working class, was increasingly rent by a tug-of-war between its right and left wings, representing its liberal-democratic and Marxian-socialist traditions, respectively. The Czech National Socialist party (chairman: Petr Zenkl; secretary-general: Vladimír Krajina), which claimed to be a socialist but non-Marxist party, suffered from no such dilemma. It came increasingly to the fore as the most resolute adversary of the communists among the Czech parties. The Czech Populist party, under the leadership of Msgr. Jan Šrámek, the wartime premier in London, was a progressive Catholic party that before the war had received its greatest support among Czech peasants, especially in Moravia. After the war it had difficulty in finding its bearings in the radical atmosphere, which affected even the countryside. The Slovak Democratic party (chairman: Josef Lettrich; secretary: Fedor Hodža), which was largely a continuation of the Slovak branch of the proscribed agrarian party, suffered from the polarization

of Slovak opinion after the war between the radical revolutionary movement and the conservative Catholic anticommunist movement. It could not compete with the communists in appealing to the former and found it distasteful and dangerous to appeal to the latter, for fear of exposing itself to the charge of catering to cryptofascists.

In retrospect it is clear that the prolongation of the provisional regime benefited the Communist party more than the democratic parties, by allowing an unusual measure of influence in public affairs to various extraconstitutional mass organizations, such as worker, peasant, youth, resistance, and other nationwide associations, that sprang up after the liberation of the country. The general European "swing to the left" immediately after the war undoubtedly helped the Communist party gain a preponderant influence in these organizations. No instrument was more important to it than the united Revolutionary Trade Union Movement (ROH) and workers' factory councils (*závodní rady*). This was true at least in the Czech provinces. In Slovakia, where the working class did not have the same importance,³⁶ the Communist party relied more on its influence in the resistance organizations, especially the association of former partisans.

The communist plans had emphasized the necessity of gaining leadership of the working class, a traditional domain of the Social Democratic movement. In the first postwar days the communists occupied positions of power in the ROH and the workers' councils in all large factories. In this situation, the predominant influence of the Communist party with the working class,³⁷ combined with its control of important levers of the state apparatus, became the central fact of politics.

After the party consolidated its grip on the political structure in the early summer of 1945, its initial moderation in economic affairs began to fade. President Beneš and the two socialist parties viewed the nationalization of the principal industries, banks, and insurance companies as inevitable. Moreover, the corresponding pressure exerted by the workers found widespread popular support. Under these circumstances the expropriation of German capital evolved into a wider trend that reflected a consensus of all responsible political forces. Thus, the first postwar measure of large nationalization in Europe³⁸ became a demonstration of a common resolve to establish collective ownership and direct state control over the chief means of production. The presidential decrees of October 24, which were mainly prepared by the Social Democratic controlled Ministry of Industry, resulted in the creation of a nationalized sector containing 61.2 percent of the industrial labor force.³⁹

The nationalization decrees were the last great measures adopted without parliament's authorization. After the convocation of the Provisional National Assembly four days later, the democratic parties sought

to limit the influence of the ROH and other extraconstitutional mass organizations and to confine policy-making to parliament. This encountered the opposition of the communists, who had found it advantageous to promote their aims through these organizations. They lent themselves more easily to manipulation than did the parliament, which had an orderly procedure and in which, moreover, they were a minority. The National Front began to experience increasing strains, and early in 1946 it was decided to hold general elections for the constituent assembly. May 26 was set as the date for the elections.

All parties committed themselves to maintain the National Front and the Košice program. This seemingly left no divisive issues. The electoral contest was nevertheless lively, though orderly. The difference between the parties lay in the accent they placed on specific aspects of the common program. The communists and Social Democrats stressed its social aspects and hinted that there were more to come. The democratic parties, on the other hand, maintained that the social goals of the program had largely been attained and placed a greater accent on freedom and democracy.

In Slovakia two new parties came into existence. Some of the old Slovak Social Democrats regarded the fusion of their party with the Communist party during the Slovak uprising in 1944 as a shotgun marriage, and now wished to go it alone. In January, 1946, with the assistance of the Czech Social Democrats, they formed the Labor party.⁴⁰ The other new party, the Freedom party, came into existence as a byproduct of electoral strategy by the Slovak Democratic party (DS). On March 30 Lettrich, the chairman of the DS, concluded an agreement (incorrectly known as the "April Agreement") with the Catholic leaders under which the Catholics were promised representation in all organs of the DS in a ratio of 7:3 in their favor.⁴¹ The April Agreement promised to bolster the electoral strength in the DS, because the Catholic clergy had a powerful influence in Slovakia, especially in the rural areas, but it was fraught with dangers for the party. Many Catholic politicians were unreconstructed l'udáks. Their entry pulled the party sharply to the right and proved more than some of its leaders could stomach. The dissidents, among whom was notably Vavro Šrobár, formed the Freedom party on April 1.⁴² Even more important was the communists' reaction to the April Agreement. In direct retaliation for its conclusion, the KSC, with the concurrence of the Czech parties and the KSS, pressed through a further limitation of SNR prerogatives. Under the "Second Prague Agreement" on April 11, 1946, the SNR was deprived of the important power of making personal appointments without the approval of the Prague government.⁴³

While the United States remained studiously aloof during the electoral campaign, the Soviet Union gave a pointed reminder of its interest. On

May 22, almost the eve of the elections, it was announced the Soviet troops would be moved across Czechoslovak territory from Austria and Hungary to the Soviet zone of occupation in Germany. At the outcry of the democratic leaders over this crude attempt at intimidation, the troop movement was postponed, but its psychological purpose had already been attained—it reminded the Czechs and Slovaks that the Soviet army was close by and could return on short notice.⁴⁴

The communists approached the elections with confidence. They hoped to win an absolute majority, but were not worried if they did not. On February 4, at the outset of the campaign, Gottwald assured the party workers: "Even if it should happen, which is improbable, that we should not gain a favorable result . . . the working class, the party, and the working people will still have sufficient means, arms, and a method to correct simple mechanical voting, which might be affected by reactionary and saboteur elements."⁴⁵ In other words, if the results of the election were favorable to the communists, they would be accepted; if not, they would be "corrected."

The elections on May 26, which proved to be the last free Czechoslovak elections, passed without incident and, according to foreign observers, without any attempt at intimidation or manipulation. The ballot was secret. All citizens over eighteen years of age, except political offenders, were not only allowed, but were obliged to vote, thus assuring a heavy turnout. The results did not basically alter the existing party balance. In the Czech provinces the KSĊ obtained 40.1, the National Socialists 23.5, the Populists 20.2, and the Social Democrats 15.6 percent of the vote. In Slovakia the DS obtained 62, the KSS 30.3, the Freedom party 3.7, and the Labor party 3.1 percent.⁴⁶ In the whole country the communists (the combined KSĊ and KSS) secured 37.9 percent of the vote. This fell short of their hopes but was still impressive. The most surprising development was the failure of the Social Democratic party, which had at one time been the largest party in Czechoslovakia but was now the smallest. Its Slovak branch, the Labor party, likewise made a poor showing. During the electoral postmortem the democratic wing blamed the defeat on the campaign strategy of the party leadership, which had adopted an almost identical position on many issues as the communists, and demanded that in the future the party follow an independent course of action.

The most impressive gains were made by the Slovak Democrats. There is no doubt, however, that the large vote cast for the DS represented less a show of confidence by the Slovak electorate in the DS than a rebuke to the KSS. Several factors accounted for the communists' modest showing in Slovakia compared with their good record in the Czech provinces: the relative importance of the Slovak working class; the absence of a large reserve of confiscated land with which to entice

the land-hungry peasantry, such as existed in the Czech borderlands; the greater war damages in Slovakia and consequently greater problems of reconstruction (in the winter of 1945–46 there were acute food shortages in the province); the influence of the conservative Catholic clergy, who did not hesitate to warn in their sermons against the perils of “godless” communism; and the bitter memory of the many excesses committed against the civilian population by the Red Army during its operations in Slovakia in 1944–45, for which the injured took revenge by voting against the “Russian party,” that is, the communists.⁴⁷

The communists did not mistake the fact that the large vote for the DS was really a vote against them, and at once took steps to correct the situation. “We have not won yet, the struggle continues,” said Gottwald in reporting the results of the election to the central committee of the KSC on May 30,⁴⁸ and he made it clear that the first target in the continuing struggle must be the DS. In order to limit its influence, Gottwald proposed to abolish what was left of Slovak autonomy—“even if we thereby violate formal national rights or promises or guarantees. . . . The Slovak comrades will no doubt understand.”⁴⁹

For the assault against the DS, Gottwald proposed four concrete steps: to limit further the prerogatives of the SNR, to launch a drive against the *ľudáks* camouflaged in the DS, to punish Jozef Tiso, and to take steps against the Slovak Catholic clergy, for the adoption of which the KSC secured the concurrence of the National Front of the Czech parties on June 12 and the National Front of the Czech and Slovak parties two days later.⁵⁰ The first step was implemented in the “Third Prague Agreement” on June 27–28, 1946, which placed the legislative powers of the SNR under government control and the Slovak commissioners under the appropriate ministers in Prague.⁵¹ In practice, Slovakia reverted to the position that it had held before the Munich agreement in 1938: that of a simple administrative unit, like Bohemia and Moravia. This latest advance of centralism placed added strains not only on the relations between the KSS and DS but also—since it was supported by all Czech parties—between the Czechs and Slovaks as a whole.

The National Front had been somewhat shaken by the electoral contest. However, all parties still professed loyalty to it and it was continued. The Eighth Congress of the KSC in March, 1946, had endorsed the strengthening of the National Front and had directed the party to implement further the national and democratic revolution.⁵² (The KSC never failed to stress that whatever the future model of the republic, it would correspond closely to special Czech and Slovak conditions.⁵³) On July 2 the cabinet was reshuffled to conform with the results of the elections. Fierlinger yielded the premiership to Gottwald, as the representative of the largest party. Of the twenty-five cabinet

posts, the KSČ received seven, the KSS one and one state secretaryship, the National Socialists four, the DS three and one state secretaryship, and the Czech Populists and Social Democrats three posts each.⁵⁴

The parties were impelled to maintain a solid front by, among other things, the opening of the Paris Peace Conference on July 29. Three days earlier Gottwald and a delegation had returned from Moscow with the good news that the Soviet government had not only promised to support Czechoslovak claims at the conference but had also waived the provision of the Potsdam agreement that entitled it to claim German "external assets" in Czechoslovakia. Moreover, Gottwald revealed that the Soviet government had promised to support Czechoslovak economic plans by concluding a long-term trade treaty. On the other hand, the United States government had granted Czechoslovakia a credit of \$50 million in June to buy American surplus war supplies in Europe. However, in September, before the credit was exhausted, the United States abruptly suspended it because the Czechoslovak delegates at the peace conference had applauded the Soviet delegate when he inveighed against American "economic imperialism."⁵⁵

Czechoslovakia had been caught in the first cross fire of the cold war. On July 10, Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov fired the first shot in the East-West struggle for Germany, by calling for the formation of a German national government and questioning the French right to the Saar. United States Secretary of State James F. Byrnes replied in his famous Stuttgart speech on September 6, by also calling for a German national government and by repudiating—in effect—the Potsdam agreement on the Oder-Neisse boundary and thus, by implication, reopening the whole question of the eastern settlement. Czechoslovak isolation from the West and dependence on the East had increased.

This development boded ill for the first important measure of the Gottwald government—the Two-Year Economic Plan for 1947–48, which the National Assembly approved on October 24.⁵⁶ The plan, which proposed to raise the standard of living ten percent above the prewar level, was oriented toward the long-range coexistence of the private and nationalized sectors of the economy and was predicated on the assumption that Czechoslovakia's traditional trade ties with the West would continue. At that time the Soviet Union faced gigantic problems of reconstruction and was in no position to provide economic aid to Czechoslovakia or to furnish, in exchange for Czechoslovak exports, the kind of goods and services she needed to realize her economic plans. The promised Soviet-Czechoslovak trade pact did not materialize until December, 1947.

The next important measure of the Gottwald government was political: it staged the trial of Monsignor Tiso as a deterrent to Slovak

separatists. The trial, which opened in Bratislava on December 3, 1946, ended in March of the following year with Tiso's conviction of treason and a sentence of death. As calculated by the communists, the sentence placed the DS in a difficult position. The leaders of the party, chairman of the SNR Lettrich and Vice-Premier Ján Ursíny, were Protestants and former agrarians. They had led the Slovak resistance against Tiso's government during the war and had little sympathy for him, but they were put under pressure by the party's Catholic wing to save him. When the government considered Tiso's appeal for mercy on April 16, the DS ministers moved to commute the sentence to life imprisonment. They were seconded by the Czech Populist ministers, who demurred at hanging a fellow priest. However, the other ministers held firm for execution.⁵⁷ On the recommendation of the cabinet, President Beneš declined the appeal for mercy, and on April 18 Tiso was hanged.

Since the removal of the Sudeten German minority the "Slovak question," that is, the problem of satisfactorily adjusting relations between the Czechs and Slovaks, had become the foremost internal question in the country. The trial of Tiso, by deeply offending conservative Catholic opinion in Slovakia, aggravated this concern. It was to trouble the Third Czechoslovak Republic until its end—and, indeed, continued in a different form afterward.

In the spring of 1947 the Communist party adopted the goal of winning at least fifty-one percent of the votes in the next elections and thus gaining a majority in the National Assembly. This angered the other parties, but it did indicate that the communist leadership did not yet wish to take over all power, but was committed to the maintenance of the National Front. There were radical elements in the party that criticized the leadership for not following the Bolshevik way. Simultaneously, there were anticommunist groups in the country, biding their time. Both segments, however, represented politically insignificant forces. The predominant majority of the people wholeheartedly endorsed the objectives of the National Front to liberate men from economic and social domination within a democratic society.

These hopeful expectations, predicated on the belief that Czechoslovakia could eventually become the show window of a new, more humane system and the bridge between East and West were shattered in the summer of 1947 by Stalin's new policy line,⁵⁸ which called for consolidating the Soviet hold on Eastern Europe and drawing clear lines of combat with the West. On June 5, at Harvard University, U.S. Secretary of State George C. Marshall made his historic offer of American aid to Europe. Czechoslovakia was eager to share in the American aid, which it needed to complete the Two-Year Economic Plan successfully. On July 4 and 7 the cabinet and inner cabinet, respectively, voted unanimously to accept an invitation to send a delegation to a

preliminary conference of European states in Paris to discuss the Marshall Plan.⁵⁹ Immediately after the cabinet made its intention known, a government delegation led by Premier Gottwald left for Moscow where it was scheduled to negotiate mutual trade problems and to discuss the possibility of concluding a Franco-Czechoslovak treaty. When the delegation arrived in Moscow on July 9, it was given an ultimatum by Stalin to choose between East and West. On the following day the Prague government reversed its decision to send a delegation to Paris.⁶⁰ It had chosen the Soviet alliance.

At the end of September, the Information Bureau of the Communist parties (Cominform), including the KSC, was founded at Szklarska Poreba in Poland as the institutional device of the communist international control system.⁶¹ The delegates aimed "to apply the final touches to a general plan for easing the 'National Front' allies out of power and establishing a Communist dictatorship" in Eastern Europe.⁶² The Cominform, then, was founded at the moment when "the Soviet Union had finally decided to take under her direct control a number of East European states," particularly Czechoslovakia.⁶³ The secretary general of the KSC, Rudolf Slánský, informed the conference that the first task of the party was "to deal a death blow to reaction in Slovakia,"⁶⁴ and added ominously: "It will be necessary to throw reactionary forces out of the National Front."⁶⁵ The road was opened for the Stalinist take-over in Czechoslovakia.

From the Cominform to the Prague Coup

By the fall of 1947 the struggle for power in East Central Europe was almost decided. Czechoslovakia remained the sole exception. It still had a coalition government. During the summer her hitherto favorable economic development suddenly ceased. A severe drought caused the harvest to fall to one-half of its normal level. As the leading party in the government, the communists received the major blame for the deteriorating economic situation. Feeling that the tide of public opinion was turning against them, they sought to postpone the elections that they had proposed in the spring. The democratic parties, on the other hand, aware that their chances in an electoral contest had improved, pressed for holding them at an early date. After much bickering it was decided to hold them in May, 1948.

As the parties girded for another electoral struggle, the communists displayed a wide arsenal of political and psychological weapons. In August they proposed that the owners of property in excess of one million Czechoslovak crowns pay a "millionaires' tax" to provide aid to the ailing rural districts. Millionaires had never been numerous in Czechoslovakia and their ranks had been further reduced by the war