

Reviews

SOCIALISM AND DEMOCRACY IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA, 1945-1948

Martin Myant

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The brief period of 1945-48 in Czechoslovakia has a significance far beyond the boundaries of time and place. Its culmination in the events of February 1948 was seen at the time as a landmark in the developing cold war, but today it is the nature of the country's postwar revolution which is of particular interest. Varying interpretations have been advanced, frequently lacking in objectivity because they were required to fit some preconceived pattern. For instance, the official version in post-1948 Czechoslovakia, which was generally accepted in the communist movement of the day, was formulated in terms of a two-stage process leading through the 'February vic-

tory' to the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat and advance towards Soviet-type socialism. This course was described as a truly Marxist policy consciously pursued by the communist leaders. In that view, what Martin Myant refers to in the introduction to his book as 'a unique example of a democratically-elected multi-party government implementing socialist changes in what, then, was one of the most advanced countries in Europe,' was no more than a temporary phase to be passed through before instituting the one true model.

When in later years, however, it was becoming increasingly obvious that the post-1948 model was incapable of giving the Czechoslovak people the kind of socialism they needed, the old stereotype carried less conviction among genuine Marxist thinkers. During the 1960s historians began to take a new look at the subject. Unfortunately much of their work remains scattered in the historical journals. Martin Myant's detailed research, drawing on original sources as well as the works of Western authors is therefore particularly valuable. Moreover, in starting with an outline of the development of the Czechoslovak Communist Party from 1918 up to the liberation in 1945, and an account of the wartime German occupation, he provides a background for understanding the strategies of the various political groupings after the war. Some insight is given into the fluctuating fortunes of attempts within the Communist Party to find a socialist strategy suited to the country's special needs, in opposition to the dominant Comintern policies — a pattern to emerge again in the postwar years. A fuller treatment of this theme would certainly be rewarding.

The substance of the work is concerned, however, with the 'national revolution' of May 1945 and its development. The author is at pains to reveal the complexity of the process, which cannot, he argues, be reduced to a simple takeover of power by one class from another. The account of how the multi-party

coalition was established and how it worked offers, despite the specific circumstances of the day, some useful ideas when considering the strategy for democratic socialist advance in Western Europe. The discussion of the class forces, the role of the working class and the social content of the revolution, the nationalities question, the policies on nationalisation and industrial management, and related matters contains many points that are relevant today. The section on factory councils and the trade unions is of particular interest.

A matter of special interest in Czechoslovakia has been whether the political and economic order that was evolving between 1945 and 1948 could be described as a specific 'Czechoslovak road to socialism'. This was of more than academic interest in 1968, when the pre-1948 period was seen by many as a model to be developed into a new form of democratic socialism. Although in the immediate post-war period, Gottwald and the communist leadership insisted that there was no question of socialism, that what was taking place was purely a 'national and democratic revolution', they did later begin to speak of a 'special road to socialism ... a longer, more complicated road', not via 'the dictatorship of the proletariat and Soviets', a view elaborated in particular after Stalin's famous interview with British Labour Party leaders when he spoke of two possible roads. But what kind of socialism did they envisage at the end of the road? Were they intending to go over to the Soviet model once their position had been secured, as their partners in government suspected? In any case, whatever the intentions, was there at least the potential for advancing to a specific Czechoslovak model?

In Myant's view, the evidence shows there was no clear-cut view. On balance it looks as if only the road was seen as new, leading to the accepted aim of a Soviet-type monopoly of power in the end. Nevertheless, the broad and flexible policies adopted by the Party, at least up to 1947, reveal two developments that could, in the author's opinion, have led to the evolution of new aims — these were the renunciation of the idea that a complete takeover of power was necessary for any advance to socialism, and the recognition that advance could be gradual. Some Czechoslovak writers on the period have, in fact, described it as a 'distant prototype' for the later, more developed theories of 'Eurocommunism'.

In the event, external and internal factors intervened to sharpen the tensions within the multi-party coalition, leading to the radical switch of course which took place in February 1948.



So many conflicting and heavily politically biased accounts of the 'February events' have been written that Martin Myant's careful marshalling of the available evidence is of particular value. The picture that emerges is more complex than any of the usual simplistic views. The same goes for the developments in post-February Czechoslovakia. The consolidation of power by the victorious Communist Party was not a matter of immediately imposing the Soviet model in all respects. In fact there was more discussion among communists immediately after February than there had been when fighting 'reaction' was seen as the main task (for instance, as the writer of this review recalls, on the theory and practice of the dictatorship of the proletariat) and the idea was still one of a fairly slow road to socialism, avoiding dictatorial methods. But in the face of economic difficulties and workers' discontent, and external pressures, this stage was short-lived. The stage was already being set for the repressions, persecution and political trials of the 1950s.

Here the question of inevitability is raised. Does the socialist road, however gradual and democratic, inevitably lead to

'totalitarianism'? The Czechoslovak experience of 1948 can only lead to that conclusion if the impact of the cold war and the shift in Soviet foreign policy at the time are discounted. The author argues that other alternatives were available even then, and he concludes that 'a party theoretically equipped to be aware of the dangers that lay ahead would have avoided crushing all opposition, diversity of opinions and effective public participation'. His book can certainly be valuable in helping to clarify some of these questions for our movement today.

Marian Sling

Other books received

A sample of some of the better books received.

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