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WHEN ONE CIVILIZATION IS REPLACED BY ANOTHER:
THE CASE OF CZECHOSLOVAKIA

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The First Steps Towards a Communist Regime in Post-War Czechoslovakia

When civilizations or systems undergo extensive change, one replacing another wholesale, those responsible for instituting the new system often feel it necessary to eradicate as many aspects of the old system as possible. This is done in order to secure the new order. Scholars are only now able to study in detail the dramatic developments which occurred in Czechoslovakia late in the 1940s and early in the 1950s. Materials recently opened for review allow us to understand the details of one mechanism used by totalitarian regimes in the Twentieth Century: the large show trial.

The Nazis were driven from Czechoslovakia in May 1945 and democracy immediately restored to the country. However, due to the new political situation after the country’s liberation by the Soviet Army in 1945, the new political system, which lasted from May 1945 to February 1948, is regarded as a “limited democracy” by current Czech historians. The pre-war rightist political parties were deliberately abolished after 1945, since they stood accused of collaboration with the Nazi regime. Other political parties and public opinions were strongly influenced by the prevailing left wing mood which arose as a result of the psychological impact of the Munich Treaty—widely regarded in Czechoslovakia as French and British treason. On the other hand the Soviet Union was presented as the most significant liberator of the country. Stalin was widely admired and not only by the Communists and leftists.

The post-war uncritical enthusiasm and lack of knowledge about the harsh reality of life in the Soviet Union was skillfully used by the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia through constant and intensive propaganda. A strange combination of nationalism and the Pan-Slavism of the 19th century together with parliamentary and non-parliamentary means, including increasing threats, even letter-bombs prepared for critics of the Communist practices, helped the Communists, who were obviously instructed from Moscow, to gain more and more influential
positions. They gradually usurped important positions at ministries and in the military and police forces.

The Communists also strengthened their position when the Sudetenland Germans were expelled from the country. The confiscated German properties were allocated predominantly to their supporters. They also triggered off a wave of nationalism, peaking sometimes in militant chauvinism. The Communists sent secret agents into the democratic political parties which participated in the post-war government coalition; these individuals sought to bring about the disintegration of the other parties. The methods used in Czechoslovakia resembled those utilized in other Soviet satellite states; but unlike the situation in these countries, the people of Czechoslovakia had inherited a strong tradition of democracy from the pre-war period.

The political system from 1945 to 1948 remained democratic in spite of these efforts, however, because there was no censorship and freedom of speech was guaranteed. Nonetheless, the majority of people did not care and were not aware of the hidden political currents and the subversive Communist activities. Only a few intellectuals and some politicians protested in the press or on the radio against the developing Communist practices. Gradually, over this three year interregnum, the pre-war democratic values were replaced by totalitarianism; soon democratic values vanished from political life altogether. The people of Czechoslovakia went about their daily lives without noticing that their freedoms had ebbed away. Seen in retrospect, there can be no doubt that Communist propaganda, coupled with the "Munich treason," had a strong impact on Czechoslovakia in the three years after liberation in 1945.

The changes from the traditional culture of Central Europe, the departures from Western civilization, were gradual; the transition to the Stalinist regime was not abrupt. It consisted of a series of Communist actions in all regions of Czechoslovakia, predominantly in the capital city.

In February of 1948, the Communist Party seized total political power. One result was a new law promulgated in order to protect "the People's Folk Democratic Republic." It was introduced in accordance with the Communist ideological program promoting what was characterized as a sharp struggle against the class enemy and domestic reactionaries. This new legislation facilitated persecution of three major groups: the leaders and members of the pre-war democratic political
parties, domestic non-communists who had fought against the Nazi occupation, and Czechoslovak soldiers who had fought on the side of the Western allies of democratic Czechoslovakia during the war.

In addition, much negative attention was directed against the Catholic Church, which was considered to be the most dangerous potential opponent for the new atheist regime, and anti-Semitism was employed by the regime as a major element in its drive for Stalinization.

The Introduction of a New Establishment: The First Post War Political Show Trials in Czechoslovakia

To combat these perceived enemies, the Communist regime gradually introduced and elaborated an extensive system of investigative techniques and instructions for the StB — the secret police. A major task of the StB, we now know, was to prepare political trials and other forms of persecution. Their assignment was carried out relentlessly. Over the years from 1948 to 1955 several waves of show trials affected and horrified the Czechoslovak society and the international community.

Czechoslovakia had been the last country incorporated into the Soviet bloc, and therefore the big post war “purge trials” or “show trials” began later than in the other Soviet satellite countries. These purges imitated the Soviet purges carried on in the 1930s, both in their organizational structure and in the treatment of the accused.

The Communist bloc employed a form of what Orwell called “newspeak.” For example: In the Czech and Slovak languages they introduced the term “the camp of peace” to describe the new system. But it was hardly peaceful on the domestic front. Following the Communist putsch, numerous brutal show trials were held, mostly aimed against Catholics, the members of the anti-Nazi resistance, or “kulaks.”

It is estimated that during the 1950s a total of about 230,000 people — of whom about 200 were executed — were victimized by the new regime. The victimizers have never been punished, or their punishment has been only symbolic. However, last year, on November 7, 2007 — 57 years later — there was one dramatic result: one of the judges in the Horakova case, who was still alive, was in fact sentenced to 8 years.

Perhaps the best known in the outside world of all the Czechoslovak show trials was the one against Rudolf Slansky, the former Czechoslovak communist leader, and his associates, which ended in their execution. Ironically, Slansky had helped to initiate the brutal system of persecution of democrats and free thinkers, including the con-
struction of labor camps holding many of them, which consumed him.

Even earlier than the Slansky trial, however, another set of show trials was put before the public—an experience that riveted the nation and helped assure the reduction of the Czechs and Slovaks to subject status for almost half a century more. These first trials started immediately after February 1948, that is, very soon after the communists in their putsch usurped all the major posts in the government and took the most significant positions in the army and the police forces. This trial was aimed against three sets of great national heroes and heroines: democratic politicians who had gone into Western exile with the government (temporarily removed to London) following Nazi invasion and occupation, soldiers who fought against the Nazis for the Czech government, and members of the domestic anti-Nazi underground who had remained in the country but cooperated with the government during the Second World War.

The first to go was General Heliodor Pika, a Czechoslovak military leader, along with a group of fellow Czechoslovak Western officers who had operated out of London. They were put on trial in March 1948, only a few weeks after the change of the regime. General Pika, a significant member of the Czechoslovak military establishment with the exiled government in London, had been active on both the Western and the Eastern fronts, commanding the most significant military operations. Once put on trial, he was denounced as a traitor to Czechoslovakia. He became the first executed victim of the newly established persecution machine.

From the very beginning of the new regime the Communists inserted their propaganda in all contemporary mass media. Rhetoric broadcast on the radio was replete with expressions new to the Czechoslovak vocabulary: “the fight against class enemies” or “Western imperialism hostile to the proletariat.” The radio dangled the threat of a Third World War which it reported was being prepared by “American imperialists and Zionists.” The nation was startled to learn that the “class enemies” were people whose political views had always been thought of as democratic. Many were significant members of the pre-war Czechoslovak democratic political parties, but others were previously unknown, typical, average citizens. The democratic leaders were generally portrayed as “pro-American spies and helpers participating in international capitalist conspiracies.”
"Conspiracy against the Republic"

The frenzy peaked in 1949-1950, just as the Iron Curtain, taking the form of a wailing up of the frontiers of the country, was erected, just as hundreds were trying to flee from the new regime. Thereafter, during the 1950s persecution methods typical of both the Nazis and the Soviets emerged in Czechoslovakia.

The indicted democratic opponents of new communist regime included especially those who had been arrested by the Nazi occupation regime during World War II. Having survived Nazi concentration camps, these men and women nonetheless were to be imprisoned once again when the new totalitarian machine started its work in 1948. Perhaps the most well-known of them was Dr. Milada Horakova, a pre-war politician from the National Democratic Party and a prominent activist in the pre-war women's movement.

A published author, Dr. Horakova was born in Prague on December 25, 1901, and she was hanged on June 27, 1950 at a prison in Prague. For the past four years the day of her execution, June 27, has been honored as "Commemoration Day of the Victims of the Communist Regime" in the Czech Republic.

A lawyer and a successful politician during the democratic years, from 1927 to 1940, Dr. Horakova worked in the Central Social Institute in Prague. She became a leader of the Czech women’s movement, and in 1929 she joined the Czech National Socialist Party, which, despite its name, was a strong opponent of the Nazis. She was active in the anti-Nazi resistance movement, beginning with the invasion in 1939, but was arrested by the Gestapo in 1940. Her trial by the Nazi regime led to imprisonment, first in Terezin (Theresienstadt) in the north of the country and then in Nazi prisons in Germany itself.

Following the liberation of Czechoslovakia, Dr. Horakova was elected to the first free, post-war Czechoslovak parliament and she was also elected the chairwoman of the Council of Czechoslovak Women. But on September 27, 1949, she was arrested and charged with treason and espionage. She said that she had remained true to the principles of Czechoslovak democracy.

The trial of Mrs. Milada Horakova, which started on May 31, 1950, differed from all previous Communist trials. It was the first monstrous show trial in Czechoslovakia constructed with the help of the Soviet
advisors. Two Soviet advisers, Lichachov and Makarov (perhaps not their true names), had arrived in Prague in 1949. These two Soviet advisers had been requested by Klement Gottwald, the first “working class” President of Czechoslovakia, and by Rudolf Slansky, then secretary of the Communist Party. Both advisors traveled from Hungary where they had helped lead the show trial against Laszlo Rajk. Their task in Czechoslovakia was the same as in Hungary: to train a team of Czechoslovak secret policemen in Soviet methods of investigation and accusation; their expertise included specific kinds of manipulation of political prisoners. They had gained a great deal of experience in the 1930s during the Soviet purges. After 1945 they had also plied their trade in Bulgaria and Albania.

In retrospect we can see that the aim of every show trial was to break the personalities of the victims, to shock the public and to indoctrinate the youth. In the words of the Czechoslovak media of that day, the main task of the time was “to reveal the true face of the class enemy and the evils of capitalist imperialists.” In reality such trials existed to deter citizens from any criticism and to suppress any possible anti-Communist resistance.

The two Soviet advisors began to train Czech secret policemen as yet inexperienced in the necessary techniques; training began immediately after the first meetings, which were held at the State Prosecution facilities. It was here that the concept and extent of the forthcoming trial was drawn up. The masterminds suggested and then literally drew up a network whose center was to be the trial of Dr. Horakova in Prague; it would be accompanied by a series of minor regional trials. The planners and makers of the trial procedures wanted to create the impression of an enormous “anti-communist international conspiracy.” According to the preparatory plans, every region in Czechoslovakia had both “main leaders and their helpers.” Their names were gathered and then written down on a map of the alleged network by the StB. In March of 1950 the major newspapers brought stunning information to the public: “632 traitors of the Republic” were revealed and had been imprisoned.

At the beginning of the investigation in 1949, the concept of the trial with Dr. Milada Horakova and her associates was vague, but as a result of the efforts of the Soviet advisors it was gradually refined; by May of 1950 it was ready for public consumption. Its political goals were evident; all of the indicted were significant politicians of the pre-war political parties, members of the Western exile resistance factions or other potential opponents of the Communist regime. The accused this
time were pre-war politicians from the Social Democratic Party, the National Democratic Party, the Christian Democratic Party, "Trotskyites", and other supposed hostile groups.

Under the supervision of the Soviet advisors the StB worked out and applied specific methods of investigation for every individual political prisoner. Different methods of pressure were used to destroy the will and psychological bearings of each personality. Besides beatings and starvation, prisoners were not allowed to sit down and they had to pace in their little cells until total exhaustion set in. Their night sleep was repeatedly interrupted. The psychological pressure grew even worse and included unbelievable rudeness and brutality. The prisoners, many of whom were educated intellectuals, were warned that their families would be physically liquidated. Their relatives were in fact forced to move out of their flats, imprisoned, sent to labor camps or persecuted in their everyday life, and their children were forbidden to study. The political prisoners were deliberately imprisoned with murderers or other serious criminals. The StB used also their own planted "prisoners," agents who shared the prison cells with the "class enemies."

Survivors of both totalitarian regimes attest to the fact that there were few or no differences between the Nazi and the Communist prisons. The aim of both regimes was the same: to eradicate human dignity. Prisoners were systematically forced to feel their absolute helplessness and total obedience. The investigators from the StB, who took over the investigation after the departure of the Soviet advisors, expressed their admiration for the new "contributive Soviet methods" and even "improved" upon some such cruelties.

Those who were psychologically strongest among the political prisoners feigned obedience, perhaps because they secretly believed that they would have the chance to deny all accusations in front of a judge during the public trial. Having lived in a democratic pre-war Czechoslovakia, they were convinced of the independence of the judiciary. Their belief was only a subjective one, however, because all the judges leading the political show trials in the 1950s were chosen by the StB and manipulated carefully by them. In addition, the leading prisoners, considered most dangerous, were carefully monitored; numerous archival documents available today show how these "stubborn" prisoners were watched day and night and then psychologically analyzed in detail during subsequent StB planning sessions.

On the basis of such psychological observance and discussions, the StB decided upon the individual treatment of each prisoner. They
focused especially on Dr. Horakova, who was considered to be the real and leading danger. It is evident from the archival documents that the trial with Dr. Horakova was prepared as a big show with the screenplay finalized well in advance.

The main role in an extensive international conspiracy was assigned to Dr. Horakova, since she was known to have had many contacts abroad. She also had been chairwoman of the Committee for International Affairs in the pre-war parliament. Moreover, the secret police knew about her contacts with former Czechoslovak politicians who had managed to flee abroad just before the Iron Curtain descended completely. Moreover, Dr. Horakova believed that the Communist regime would not last long, a widespread sentiment in the early 1950s. Therefore, she did not hide her political convictions.

The official prosecution speeches during the trial — and at the associated, minor regional trials — contained expressive passages, sentiments and expressions typically found in Communist rhetoric of the period. The lack of evidence or compelling arguments by the prosecution did not appear to disturb the judges, some of whom were newly created “proletariat judges” chosen from individuals of the “working class”. Such judges, often without any secondary schooling whatsoever, had graduated from, or were still studying at, special two-year Communist Party courses. Those on trial were described as “disgusting traitors,” “American spies,” or “international terrorists preparing political murders motivated by class hatred.” Such expressive accusations also appeared in all contemporary mass media, especially on the radio and in newsreels, because the radio and film were considered by the government be the most effective means of reaching the public.

During the preparatory phase, which was filled with intensive propaganda, StB agents worked on the prisoners. They wanted them to play the role of traitors in public reliably and without any incident. It was Dr. Horakova in particular whom they suspected would not play along and behave properly. Despite torture and humiliation Dr. Horakova and a few other prominent democratic politicians (two women among them) represented a potential danger for the planned big show. During their meetings StB frequently discussed how to achieve the total psychological shattering of such unpredictable persons and how to force from them the desired confessions.

The trial became a Communist spectacle from its opening moments. Every day special coaches transported hand-picked spectators from different regions of Czechoslovakia to the court sessions.
From the very beginning thousands of petitions, signed by "collectives of workers" and even by school children, demanded the death sentences for all the "traitors and saboteurs". All the indicted were accused of conspiracy against the Republic.

The victims confessed to all the crimes the prosecution had elaborated for them in advance. Because of the torture that had been meted out to them, the prisoners confessed one by one to charges such as pro-American espionage or subversive activities against the new regime. Even those who were felt to be stubborn personalities, who had been expected to resist confessions by the StB, confessed in accordance with the wishes of the prosecution. However, some individuals, especially Dr. Horakova, frequently used clues such as formulating the sentences in their confessions in such a way as to prove that the prosecution and the trial as a whole were faked.

None of the accused denied their political activities after February 1948, but they rejected the idea that their activities were illegal. They steadfastly rejected the accusations by the prosecution that they were hatching a "conspiracy" and preparing an "anti-regime terrorist putsch." They admitted that they had hoped for a situation in the near future when the Soviet Union would lose control over Central Europe and free elections would be held. The accused also denied that they had prepared the restoration of capitalism. Dr. Milada Horakova confessed that her party had elaborated the political program of "social democracy" for the future, after the fall of the regime.

The indicted, who were often lawyers, stressed that their activities were not against the Constitution. Some of them ironically thanked the investigators, who "had explained to them that their political activities were criminal and anti-republic." Several of the accused used their speeches to warn the citizens against any political activities. Such messages were in accordance with instructions sent to them by those democratic politicians who had managed to escape into exile. These exiled leaders did not want to lose their supporters in Czechoslovakia during the persecution. They expected future free elections and did not want to weaken their political parties by losing their supporters in the meantime.

All explanations or attempts to refute harsh accusations were to no avail; they did not change the course of the monstrous trial. On the contrary the investigators placed more pressure on the prisoners and broke them as individuals.

As of 1950, political prisoners did not yet have to memorize their speeches word by word for their confessions; this requirement was
introduced by the StB in the following years, after the show trials in 1950 and most probably as a result of them. Thus, the defendants at the Horakova trials did have some leeway to express themselves when on the stand, even though this expression could not be overt. Political prisoners in 1950 were pressured to answer questions from the prosecutors and judges in accordance with the prosecution’s plans. However, the archival documents available to scholars and others since the Velvet Revolution of 1989 show that the original confession of Dr. Horakova and her colleagues differed from the official versions published in the contemporary media.

Manipulation and faked documents

Fortuitously, the original and faked documents have been preserved in the Czechoslovak archives, placed there immediately after the trials ended. Access by independent observers was allowed beginning in 1990, Communist historians having shown no interest in researching such explosive sources.

A comparison between the original records and the propaganda fakes illustrates how the regime manipulated public perceptions in the 1950s. For example: the original protocols and stenographic texts were adapted for the media. Numerous sentences were re-written or left out of the text. The original radio record of Dr. Horakova’s confession was treated that way, with significant parts left out or rearranged. The trial of Dr. Horakova had been on the radio every day, but not all parts were broadcast. The (edited) confessions were then reported to have “initiated the fury of the working class” nationwide. Many petitions from factories were signed and sent to the Central Committee of the Communist Party demanding death sentences for all the “traitors,” especially for Dr. Horakova.

The Communist ideologists in the 1950s published materials from the trial as part of their own propaganda; the result was the Gray Book, a typical fake of that era. Inconvenient sentences or paragraphs were omitted, and many sentences or their intended messages were completely altered. The propagandists also re-wrote the actual dialogue between the judges and the indicted during the trial. Thus were the confessions of Milada Horakova and other “class enemies” presented to the public, written up in the way the Communists needed in order to manipulate the Czechoslovak public. They wanted to persuade the public at home and in abroad of the breadth and enormous reach of the “international conspiracy motivated by imperialists and their Czechoslovak helpers.”
The trial verdicts for the political prisoners were: 14 executions and 52 life-sentences, with sentences ranging from ten to 30 years of imprisonment for the others. Many well-known intellectuals, among them Albert Einstein, Winston Churchill, Eleanor Roosevelt and George Bernard Shaw, protested against such cruel verdicts, especially against the death sentence for Dr. Horakova. In spite of all protests Dr. Milada Horakova was executed early on the morning of June 27, 1950, shortly after the trial had ended. She was the only woman prisoner executed since the founding of Czechoslovakia (except during the Nazi occupation). The StB threw the ashes of Dr. Horakova and other victims onto a road in an unknown locality so that their martyrdom could not be celebrated with a pilgrimage to their resting place.

In a last letter to her sixteen-year-old daughter before her execution, Milada Horakova wrote:

When you realise that something is just and true, then be so resolute that you will be able to die for it.

American readers might be interested to know that she was posthumously awarded the Truman-Reagan Medal of Freedom by the U.S. Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation, in a ceremony that took place at the Czech Embassy in Washington on November 14, 2006. The ceremony was attended by the then Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, and by Sen. John Warner, the Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee.

The comparison of the original show trial transcripts and the fakes produced by Communist propagandists provides a highly illustrative example of how the events of the 1950s were distorted and misused by the regime to its great advantage. Perhaps also it helps to shed some light on why the population of a country specifically created by Tomas Masaryk and U.S. President Woodrow Wilson in 1918 to be the most democratic and pluralistic country in Central Europe was unable to become reacquainted with democracy until so many years afterward.

Conclusions

Studying the course of the trial of Dr. Horakova’s and her associates requires learning how the methods of the new totalitarian system affected a country with democratic traditions. From today’s perspective it is obvious that the political conviction of democrats, often educated intellectuals, that their totalitarian rivals would act in an honest or humane way proved to be naïve. The democratic parties showed unbe-
lievable weakness after 1945. Further, their political leaders unrealisti-
cally expected an early change of the post-war political settlement. 
Neither did they consider the fact that the Red Army troops occupied 
vast territories in Central and Eastern Europe after 1945. Some of them 
believed that the Communists had learnt about democracy in the War 
and would be more democratic in the future. In sum, the assessment of 
political realities by virtually all of the non-communist political parties 
in Central Europe, Czechoslovakia included, was completely flawed.

The average citizens of Czechoslovakia were not able, perhaps 
even willing, to fight against the new dangers to their freedom so soon 
after the war. Communist manipulation, uncritical nationalism com-
bined with Pan-Slavism, and mistrust of Western European democracies 
after the Munich Treaty brought about rapid irreversible changes after 
1948 and the total Stalinization of the country in just a few short years.

Despite the fact that the victims of political trials were permanent-
ly condemned by the Stalinist propaganda of the 1950s, they were never 
forgotten. Their devotion to democratic values and their human dignity 
was remembered and admired by numerous Czechs and Slovaks. Their 
names emerged again in public during the short liberal period – the 
“Prague Spring” of the 1960s. The Soviet occupation of 1968 put a sud-
den end to the rehabilitation of Dr. Horakova and her fellow victims of 
the show trials.

Fortunately, archival documents, unknown for decades, became 
available in the wake of the Velvet Revolution of 1989, following the 
final collapse of the totalitarian regime, nearly forty years after the trial. 
Scholars can now study what really happened, and the public, after so 
many decades, can find out the truth.

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