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CZECHOSLOVAKIA FROM LIBERATION TO COMMUNIST STATE, 1945-63: RECORDS OF THE U.S. STATE DEPARTMENT CLASSIFIED FILES



This collection documents the creation of the Third Republic, which was established after World War II, and differed markedly from the First Republic of 1918. The Third Republic was created as a result of a compromise between pre-war Czechoslovak Republic leaders and the Czech Communist Party (KSC). The Republic's hopes were subverted by the KSC, which at the time had considerable popular support and the backing of the Soviet Union.

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Detailed Description:

Czechoslovakia, as the name implies, was a state uniting two separate nationalities, the Czechs and the Slovaks. Emerging as one of several multinational states in eastern and central Europe after World War I, the Czechoslovak Republic of 1918 was the fruition of an ideal espoused by both Czech and Slovak intellectuals since the late 19th century. This collection documents the creation of the Third Republic, which was established after World War II, and differed markedly from the First Republic of 1918. The Third Republic was created as a result of a compromise between pre-war Czechoslovak Republic leaders and the Czech Communist Party (KSC). Following World War II, Czechoslovak nationalist leaders Eduard Benes and Jan Masaryk hoped to re-establish a republic with the liberal, democratic principles and institutions of pre-war Czechoslovakia. Their hopes were subverted by the KSC, which at the time had considerable popular support and the backing of the Soviet Union. The KSC steadily expanded its influence over key ministries and in 1948 delivered the final blow to Czechoslovak democracy by seizing all power. After 1948 Czechoslovakia moved completely into the Soviet sphere of influence and was transformed into a Stalinist state. The party became the only political force in the country, the state apparatus became highly centralized, and cultural and intellectual life became pedestrian and dull in line with the tenets of socialist realism. All manifestations of dissidence, whether political, religious, or artistic, were repressed; elements within the Czechoslovak society found to be the least bit nonconformist were removed from important positions, arrested, and incarcerated; and

workers and peasants, left without a voice, passively submitted to their lot. A widespread political, economic, and cultural malaise prevailed in Czechoslovakia well into the mid-1960s.

From Liberation to Communism

During World War II, Czechoslovakia disappeared from the map of Europe. The re-emergence of Czechoslovakia as a sovereign state was not only the result of Allied policies but also an indication of the strength of the Czechoslovak idea. But Czechoslovakia now found itself within the Soviet sphere of influence—a fact that had to be taken into account in any postwar reconstruction.

The Third Republic came into being in April 1945. Its government was a National Front coalition in which three socialist parties—Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSC), Czechoslovak Social Democratic Party, and Czechoslovak National Socialist Party—predominated. The Slovak Populist Party was banned as collaborationist with the Nazis. Other conservative yet democratic parties, such as the Republican Party of Farmers and Peasants, were prevented from resuming activities in the postwar period. Certain acceptable non-socialist parties were included in the coalition; among them were the Catholic People's Party (in Moravia) and the Slovak Democratic Party.

The popular enthusiasm evoked by the Soviet armies of liberation benefited the KSC. Czechoslovaks, bitterly disappointed by the West at Munich, responded favorably to both the KSC and the Soviet alliance. Communists secured strong representation in the popularly elected national committees, the new organs of local administration. The KSC organized and centralized the trade union movement. The party worked to acquire a mass membership, including peasants and the petite bourgeoisie, as well as the proletariat. Between May 1945 and May 1946, KSC membership grew from 27,000 to over 1.1 million.

In the May 1946 election, the KSC won a plurality of 38 percent of the vote. Communists were able to gain control over key ministries such as information, internal trade, finance, and interior (including the police apparatus). Through these ministries, the communists were able to suppress non-Communist opposition, place party members in positions of power, and create a solid basis for a takeover attempt. The KSC continued to proclaim its "national" and "democratic" orientation. The turning point came in the summer of 1947. In July the Czechoslovak government, with KSC approval, accepted an Anglo-French invitation to attend preliminary discussions of the Marshall Plan. The Soviet Union responded immediately to the Czechoslovak move to continue the Western alliance. Stalin summoned the Czech leadership to Moscow; upon their return to Prague, the KSC reversed its decision. In subsequent months, the party demonstrated a significant radicalization of its tactics.

The KSC raised the specter of an impending counterrevolutionary coup as a pretext for intensified activity. News of the "reactionary plot" was disseminated throughout the country by communist agents provocateurs and by the communist press. In January 1948, the communist-controlled Ministry of Interior proceeded to purge the Czechoslovak security forces, substituting communists for non-communists. Simultaneously, the KSC began

agitating for increased nationalization and for a new land reform limiting landholdings to fifty hectares.

A cabinet crisis precipitated the February coup by the KSC. On February 20, 1948, the twelve non-communist ministers resigned, in part, to induce President Benes to call for early elections; Benes refused to accept the cabinet resignations and did not call for elections. In the meantime, the KSC garnered its forces for the coup d'état of 1948. The communist-controlled Ministry of Interior deployed police regiments to sensitive areas and equipped a workers' militia. On February 25, Benes, perhaps fearing Soviet intervention, capitulated. He accepted the resignations of the dissident ministers and received a new cabinet list from Prime Minister Gottwald, thus completing, under the cover of superficial legality, the communist takeover.

In February 1948, when the Communists took power, Czechoslovakia was declared a "people's democracy" (until 1960) - a preliminary step toward socialism and, ultimately, communism. Bureaucratic centralism under the direction of KSC leadership was introduced. Dissident elements were purged from all levels of society, including the Roman Catholic Church. The ideological principles of Marxism-Leninism and socialist realism pervaded cultural and intellectual life. The economy was committed to comprehensive central planning and abolition of private ownership of capital. Czechoslovakia became a satellite state of the Soviet Union; it was a founding member of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) in 1949 and of the Warsaw Pact in 1955. The attainment of Soviet-style command socialism became the government's avowed policy. Slovak autonomy was constrained; the KSS (Communist Party of Slovakia) was reunited with the KSC (Communist Party of Czechoslovakia) but retained its own identity. Following the Soviet example, Czechoslovakia began emphasizing the rapid development of heavy industry. Although Czechoslovakia's industrial growth of 170 percent between 1948 and 1957 was impressive, it was far exceeded by that of the Federal Republic of Germany (almost 300 percent) and more than equaled by Austria and Greece.

In the 1950s, the Stalinists accused their opponents of "conspiracy against the people's democratic order" and "high treason" in order to oust them from positions of power. Large-scale arrests of Communists with an "international" background, i.e., those with a wartime connection with the West, veterans of the Spanish Civil War, Jews, and Slovak "bourgeois nationalists," were followed by show trials. The outcome of these trials, serving the communist propaganda, was often known in advance and the penalties were extremely heavy.

Destalinization had a late start in Czechoslovakia. In the early 1960s, the Czechoslovak economy became severely stagnant. The industrial growth rate was the lowest in Eastern Europe. As a result the party approved the New Economic Model, introducing free market elements into the economy.

The 1960 Constitution declared the victory of socialism and proclaimed the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic.

Publisher's Note: This collection comprises, in their entirety, the Scholarly Resources microfilm collections entitled *Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs, Czechoslovakia, 1945-1949*; *Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs, Czechoslovakia, 1950-1954*; *Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs, Czechoslovakia, 1955-1959*; and, *Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs, Czechoslovakia, 1960-1963*.