

# Fifty years since the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia: Part one

## Establishment of a deformed workers' state in Czechoslovakia

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*Fifty years ago, on the night of August 20-21, 1968, some 165,000 soldiers and 4,600 tanks from four Warsaw Pact states—the Soviet Union, Poland, Hungary and Bulgaria—accompanied by military advisors from East Germany invaded Czechoslovakia.*

*The invasion and occupation of Czechoslovakia sent shock waves throughout the world. Aimed at suppressing a growing popular movement of workers and youth during the so-called “Prague Spring,” it discredited the Stalinist regimes, which were falsely equated with socialism, in the eyes of millions around the world.*

*Along with the mass general strike in France a few months earlier, the invasion of Czechoslovakia was a defining event of that period. It set into motion political and social developments that were to shape this part of the world for decades to come.*

*This series will review the origins of the crisis of 1968, its dynamic, and the role that Pabloism played in enabling the Stalinist bureaucracy to oppress working class opposition to its rule.*

Czechoslovakia was one of a series of deformed workers' states established in 1948 in Eastern and Southeastern Europe. The country had been partitioned in 1938 in the infamous “Munich agreement,” which the imperialist powers agreed to after Hitler's invasion of northwestern Czechoslovakia and annexation of the so-called “Sudetenland.” Most of what is now the Czech Republic was annexed to the Nazi Reich. The so-called “Slovak Republic” was ruled by a far-right bourgeois regime that joined the Nazi effort to exterminate the Jewish population and wage a war of annihilation against the Soviet Union.

By the time the Red Army liberated Czechoslovakia in 1945, the country had lost about 3.7 percent of its total population in the war. This was considerably less than in neighboring Poland or the Soviet Union, but it was significantly greater than in most Western European countries that had been occupied by the Nazis.

Of the pre-war Jewish community of about 255,000 people, only between 40,000 and 50,000 survived. Over 90 percent of the 8,000 Sinti and Roma who had lived in the Czech lands were murdered. In the most infamous act of terror by the Nazi regime in Czechoslovakia, the SS torched the entire village of Lidice following the assassination of SS leader Reinhard Heydrich by members of the Czechoslovak resistance movement. Hundreds of people, including many children, were murdered or put into concentration camps.

An estimated 25,000 Czechoslovak communists who resisted the fascists were murdered. Tens of thousands of workers were forced into slave labor by the Nazi regime. Many more were wounded or displaced. The total material losses from the war were estimated at \$4 billion.

In contrast to many other Eastern European countries, where the working class was decimated by the Nazis' brutal war of annihilation, Czechoslovakia, whose economy in both the Czech lands and Slovakia

had been put almost entirely at the disposal of the Nazi war economy, experienced considerable industrial growth during the war. By 1945, the industrial working class was more numerous than ever before.

Meanwhile, the Munich betrayal of 1938 and the war had totally discredited both capitalism and bourgeois democracy. As historian Kevin McDermott has noted, “...there was a widespread belief that right-wing parties and their ‘bourgeois’ leaders had collaborated with the Germans under the occupation.” [1] In short, anti-capitalist and pro-Soviet sentiment was overwhelming.

As in virtually all countries that had been liberated by the Red Army, the last months of the war and its immediate aftermath saw the establishment of factory councils at hundreds and thousands of enterprises. In Czechoslovakia, the factory councils not only represented the workers and oversaw the renewal of production, they also organized a purge from work places of collaborators and officials who had worked with the Nazis.

The Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union, which had emerged under conditions of the international isolation of the USSR in the early 1920s, and whose social privileges depended on the political oppression of the working class and the prevention of the international extension of the October revolution, was deeply troubled by these developments.

In contrast to most other countries in Eastern Europe, the Red Army left Czechoslovakia as early as November 1945. However, through the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (Komunistická strana ?eskoslovenska—KS?) and the cooperation of both the trade unions and bourgeois leaders, the Stalinist bureaucracy was able to bring the working class movement under its control. In these efforts, the bureaucracy was able to base its political legitimacy on the enormous prestige of both the October 1917 Revolution and the heroic struggle of the Red Army against the hated Wehrmacht.

Moreover, the Stalinist bureaucracy was operating under conditions where the Trotskyist movement in Czechoslovakia and Eastern Europe had been all but destroyed. Formed in 1923 by Leon Trotsky, the Left Opposition had fought the Stalinist program of “socialism in one country” and the increasingly dictatorial methods of rule of the Stalinist faction within the party. Following the rise of Hitler to power in 1933, a shattering defeat of the German working class that had been enabled, above all, by the policies of the Stalinized Comintern, Trotsky concluded that the Stalinist parties could not be reformed and that a new, Fourth International had to be built. In September 1938, the Fourth International was founded in Paris.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the struggle of the Trotskyist movement found a powerful echo in the Czechoslovak communist movement. The Czechoslovak Left Opposition translated many of Trotsky's writings and was an important liaison between the Polish and German Trotskyists.

The Soviet Left Opposition, which had numbered in the tens of thousands, was murdered by Stalin almost in its entirety during the Great Terror. The Communist parties of Eastern and Southeastern Europe were also violently purged, with tens of thousands of communists from that region murdered in the USSR. The party leaderships that remained had all proven their loyalty to Stalinism in this unprecedented massacre of revolutionaries. The Trotskyist movement in Czechoslovakia, as in Poland, was almost entirely destroyed by a combination of the Stalinist terror and that of the Nazi occupiers.

Throughout most of the 1940s, the KS? pursued a course of direct class collaboration. Already, in 1943, its leader, Klement Gottwald, who had risen to prominence for his ruthless purge of Trotskyists from the Communist Party in the mid-1920s, forged an agreement with the bourgeois government-in-exile and its leader, Edvard Beneš, who became a personal friend of Joseph Stalin.

After the end of the war, the KS?, Beneš, the Social Democratic Party and a number of other bourgeois parties in both the Czech lands and Slovakia agreed upon the formation of a "National Front" government. Beneš was declared president. Gottwald became prime minister of a government in which five important portfolios, including labor, agriculture and culture and education, went to the KS?. The Third Republic was declared and nothing was further from the Communist Party's mind than socialist revolution.

But in the meantime, the popularity of the Communist Party was rising quickly. The party's membership exploded from about 25,000 to 1 million by March 1946. That year, unrigged elections saw the KS? emerge as the most powerful party in parliament, with 40 percent of the votes in Bohemia—a center of the coal and auto industry—and 30 percent in the more agricultural Slovakia.

However, it was not until the beginning of the Cold War, provoked by the United States in 1947-1948, that the Kremlin moved toward large-scale nationalizations and the establishment of full political control in these states. In Czechoslovakia, the KS? took power in February 1948 under conditions of a deep economic crisis and initiated large-scale nationalizations in industry and agriculture.

The Fourth International described the states that emerged in Eastern Europe at this point as "deformed workers' states." Unlike the Soviet Union, they had not emerged out of a victorious socialist revolution by the working class. Rather, they originated on the basis of the political suppression of the spontaneous struggles of masses of workers at the hands of the Stalinist bureaucracy.

However, to the extent that these states represented an extension to Eastern Europe of elements of the social relations that had been established in 1917, they had to be defended from an attack by imperialism. This defense, the Fourth International insisted, could be achieved only through a political revolution by the working class against the Stalinist bureaucracies in a conscious alliance with the struggles of workers in the imperialist countries to overthrow capitalism. The Stalinist-ruled states of Eastern Europe were, in every respect, unstable and historically transient formations.

In November 1949, the Fourth International stressed the critical role that Stalinism had played in suppressing the revolutionary struggles of the working class:

An evaluation of Stalinism cannot be made on the basis of localized results of its policy but must proceed from the entirety of its action on a world scale. When we consider the state of decay which capitalism presents even today, four years after the end of the war, and when we consider the concrete situation of 1943-1945, there can be no doubt that Stalinism, on a world scale, appeared as the decisive factor in preventing a sudden and

simultaneous crash of the capitalist order in Europe and in Asia. In this sense, the 'successes' achieved by the bureaucracy in the buffer zone constitute, at most, the price which imperialism paid for services rendered on the world arena—a price which is moreover constantly called into question at the following stage.

From the world point of view, the reforms realized by the Soviet bureaucracy in the sense of an assimilation of the buffer zone to the USSR weigh incomparably less in the balance than the blows dealt by the Soviet bureaucracy, especially through its actions in the buffer zone, against the consciousness of the world *proletariat*, which it demoralizes, disorients and paralyzes by all of its politics and thus renders it susceptible to some extent to the imperialist campaign of war preparations. Even from the point of view of the USSR itself, the defeats and the demoralization of the world proletariat caused by Stalinism constitute an incomparably greater danger than the consolidation of the buffer zone constitutes a re-enforcement. [2]

This political assessment was fully borne out in the subsequent years and decades. Pursuing the reactionary and unviable program of "socialism in one country," the Stalinist bureaucracies in each and every country stumbled from crisis to crisis, cracking down violently on working class opposition at every step of the way.

As soon as the deformed workers' states had been established, the Stalinists unleashed another round of terror in the USSR and the "Eastern bloc," this time with explicit anti-Semitic overtones, targeting the politically most conscious layers of youth, workers and intelligentsia. Among those who were now executed or imprisoned were the few former Left Oppositionists who had managed to survive the war and the purges of the 1930s, and many of their children.

In Czechoslovakia, the purges were particularly ferocious. Between 1948 and 1954, 90,000 people were persecuted for political crimes. Some 22,000 people were thrown into 107 labor camps. More than 1,000 perished in detention, and over 230 were executed. In addition to these political purges, the Stalinist government expelled millions of ethnic Germans and Hungarians on the reactionary basis of ascribing collective guilt to them for the crimes of fascism. The expulsions were combined with nationalist propaganda that was aimed at undermining the class solidarity among Czech, Slovak, German and Hungarian workers.

In the notorious Slánský trial, Rudolf Slánský and a number of other party leaders were accused of sympathies for the Yugoslav leader Tito. Yet again, the bureaucracy consciously whipped up an atmosphere of toxic nationalism and anti-Semitism in order to further undermine the political consciousness of the working class. (Eleven of the 14 defendants in the trial were explicitly denounced for their Jewish origin.)

The purges were a preemptive move by the bureaucracy against the uprisings it feared from the working class. These fears were very well-grounded.

After the death of Joseph Stalin in March 1953, the Stalinist regimes were thrown into a deep crisis. The first in a series of major workers' revolts against the Stalinists bureaucracies after Stalin's death occurred in Czechoslovakia's second largest city, Plze? (Pilsen), on May 31-June 2, 1953. Some 17,000 workers at the Škoda auto factory went on strike to protest against the economic effects of a currency reform that had eaten up all their wages. They were soon joined by 2,000 students.

A spontaneously formed revolutionary committee stormed the local prison and released hundreds of political prisoners. As strikes spread to other cities, the party sent in the military, which killed some 40 workers and injured 220 more. Over 650 workers were arrested, and the suspected leader of the uprising was executed. Despite the ferocious repression, a strike wave involving some 360,000 workers in Bohemia and Moravia,

the Czech lands that immediately bordered the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) continued for about a week. [3]

Just a few days later, on June 16, the more famous workers' uprising in East Germany began. It was brutally crushed by Soviet tanks, with more than 500 people killed.

The crisis of Stalinism intensified further in 1956. The revelation of some of Stalin's most horrendous crimes in Nikita Khrushchev's famous "Secret Speech" in February at the 20th Congress of the CPSU shook the communist movement throughout the world and initiated the so-called "thaw" in the Soviet Union. In Hungary, workers launched a full-scale uprising against the Stalinist regime, which was crushed by an invasion carried out by the Soviet Union. Over 20,000 workers and youth were killed.

A few weeks later, workers rose up in Poland. Expecting a similar development in Czechoslovakia, the KS? began mass arrests. Between October and November 5, 1956, some 665 people were arrested for political reasons, almost half of whom were classified as "manual laborers." Touching upon the main fear of all the Stalinist regimes, a Czechoslovak worker said: "It's a pity that these events did not occur all at once. First there were disturbances here in Plze?, then in Poland and now in Hungary. It would be different today if they had all happened together." [4]

*To be continued*

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End notes

[1] Kevin McDermott, *Communist Czechoslovakia, 1945-89. A Political and Social History*, Palgrave 2015, p. 25

[2] Quoted in David North, *The Heritage We Defend. A Contribution to the History of the Fourth International*, Mehring Books 2018, pp. 156-157

[3] Ivan Pfaff, "Aufstand. 'Weg mit der Partei!'" [Uprising. "Away with the Party!"] *Die Zeit*, May 22, 2003. [https://www.zeit.de/2003/22/S\\_86\\_Vorspann\\_Pilsen](https://www.zeit.de/2003/22/S_86_Vorspann_Pilsen)

[4] Quoted in: McDermott, 2015, pp. 97-98



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