


The Break-up of Czech Democracy

BY OTTO FRIEDMAN

with a preface by

BERT MURRAY

who writes:

"I hope this book will be widely read. First, because the tragedy of Czechoslovakia is a thing that 

should never be forgotten . . . A second reason why I value this book is that, so far as I am able to judge, it explains with inside knowledge and with an unbiased wish for truth, the history, step by step, of that great downfall . . . But above all I value this book for the reasons so clearly expounded in Chapter XII. The fate of Czechoslovakia may so easily be the fate of all Western Europe.”

THE BREAK-UP OF CZECH DEMOCRACY

By the Same author

BROADCASTING FOR DEMOCRACY

INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

THE BREAK-UP OF CZECH DEMOCRACY

by

OTTO FRIEDMAN

With a Preface by

DR. GILBERT MURRAY, O.M.

LONDON

VICTOR GOLLANCZ LTD

1950

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Made and printed in England by
STAPLES PRESS LIMITED
at their Rochester, Kent, establishment

*To the memory
of my brother and sister
who together with many other Czechoslovak citizens
were brutally murdered by the Nazis
during the Second World War.*

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

FOR valuable information which would otherwise be inaccessible I am greatly indebted to the following Czechoslovak politicians who held their respective offices until February 1948: Dr. Vilem Bernard, Member of Parliament, Dr. Martin Kvetko, Slovak Trustee for Agriculture, Mr. Vaclav Majer, Minister of Food, Professor Jaroslav Stransky, Minister of Education; Mr. Jaromir Smutny, Chancellor to President Benes until the latter's resignation in June 1948; Mr. Blazej Vilim, Member of Parliament and Secretary-General of the Czechoslovak Social Democratic Party. None of them is in any way responsible for this book.

It is a pleasure to record my gratitude to Dr. C. A. Smith for reading and correcting the typescript, to Mrs. E. H. Newman and Miss Gerta A. E. Schubeler for typing it, and to Mrs. Anne Renier for reading the proofs and assisting me with the Index.

Permission to quote passages from articles has been received from the Editors of the *Cambridge Daily News*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Information Service of Free Czechoslovakia*, *New York Herald Tribune* (European Edition), and *Sunday Times*, and from Dr. J. W. Bruegel, from his article in *Rote Revue*. Permission to quote passages from books has been received from Messrs. George Allen & Unwin Ltd., Messrs. Eyre & Spottiswoode, Messrs. Hamish Hamilton Ltd., Messrs. Hutchinson & Co. (Publishers) Ltd., Messrs. Lincolns-Prager (Publishers) Ltd., and Messrs. Houghton Mifflin Company. To all these I wish to express my sincere thanks.

PREFACE

I HOPE THIS BOOK will be widely read. First, because the tragedy of Czechoslovakia is a thing that should never be forgotten. It shook the whole Western world to see a nation which we had all regarded as the very citadel of freedom and democracy in Central Europe transformed step by step into a slave state ruled by terror. Of course we might have realized the precarious condition of every small or middle-sized nation in Europe. Anyone who attended the League of Nations in the later thirties could remember how all such nations were in a state of dread, dread of Germany or else of Russia or perhaps of both. But to us in England Czechoslovakia was interpreted by Benes and the two Masaryks, father and son. Those first years of international co-operation gave a world platform to certain great men from small nations: Benes could stand with such men as Nansen and Venizelos and even Smuts. He was quick, constructive, courageous and singularly fair-minded. He was the chief author of the Geneva Protocol; if that policy had been honestly accepted or if, when the Protocol failed, his second line of defence, the Eastern Locarno, had been firmly carried through, we should in all probability have been spared the second great war, and should now be living in a decent world. His mind had been formed by the great Liberal, Thomas Masaryk. Jan Masaryk was his fellow pupil. Jan Masaryk is well described in this book: undaunted, lovable, with a spirit that never failed. I remember a dinner at the Soviet Embassy where he explained his principles. He simply wanted to be free to sing *The Lorelei* wherever he liked—it was forbidden in Germany as being the work of a Jew—and to say in an ordinary voice in an omnibus just what he thought about the Prime Minister. Maisky, the Russian Ambassador, looked on inscrutable. Some years later the victory for freedom seemed at last to be won. Benes and Masaryk went back in triumph to their native land; but they had to go by way of Moscow and they found their native land curiously changed. The habit of submission, of moral cowardice, is a thing that can be learnt

and taught. The long tyranny of the Csars taught the Russians to be obedient slaves to the Bolsheviks. The reign of terror under Hitler and Heydrich taught the Czechs to accept, almost with relief, the slavery of Stalin and Zorin. It was not obvious slavery at first. There was a period of hoping against hope: a delusion that if the democracies "moved to the left" perhaps the Kremlin would "move to the right": a creeping paralysis of freedom, to end in the death of its two chief champions. For Masaryk it was, at the best, suicide, but more probably secret murder; for Benes it was a broken heart.

A second reason why I value this book is that, so far as I am able to judge, it explains with inside knowledge and with an unbiased wish for truth, the history, step by step, of that great downfall. I do not mean that Mr. Friedman is impartial between Stalinism and freedom. He is a patriotic Czech of the Masaryk tradition. But after a great failure there is often a tendency for the leaders of the defeated side to throw the blame on one another and split into hostile groups. There is nothing of this in Mr. Friedman. He can see the weaknesses of President Benes's policy, but also the reasons which made them almost inevitable. He blames the harshness with which the Sudeten Germans were expelled and plundered, but makes one see what a natural reaction this was to the appalling cruelties of the German Nazis.

But above all I value this book for the reasons so clearly expounded in Chapter XII. The fate of Czechoslovakia may so easily be the fate of all Western Europe. Our tradition of freedom is itself a source of danger. I once asked a leading German Social Democrat how it was that, with all their numbers, they had let a Nazi minority beat them. "They had revolvers," he said: "they were ready to kill, and that was to us an unthinkable policy." Like Mr. Chamberlain in his dealings with Hitler, we westerners find it hard to believe that our opponent really means the insane things he says: besides he sometimes says quite the opposite, something sensible. That must be what he really means. We try to understand our opponent's point of view; we think that by a generous con-

cession we can make him content. That system works well in ordinary western life, where differences are temporary and a wish for agreement fundamental. To a determined aggressor it acts as a stimulant, a promise of ultimate surrender. Then our habit of freedom makes us slow to organise. No one can foresee every possibility; why should we bind ourselves beforehand? The United States has a great reluctance to bind itself with treaties. The British Dominions have never been organized. We do not intrigue. We are accustomed to a standard of decent conduct. Our opponent is highly organized, skilled in intrigue, and boasts that he is subject to no check at all, neither from the "opiate of the people" which is called Religion, nor from that talk of good faith and good will which constitutes "bourgeois morality".

This is no place to discuss the problems of British policy. The principles of the United Nations Charter are accepted by all parties and almost all nations; and, if the Security Council has been made useless, it is still possible for the law-abiding members of the U.N. to organise for the collective defence of peace under Articles 51 and 53 of the Charter. But it is time to recognise a change in the Russian attitude. It is not now the revolutionary Bolshevik shouting from the Left that constitutes the chief danger to Europe; it is the Imperialist Dictator, conscious of his unresisted strength, intimidating nation after nation into submission and deriding by insult after insult the impotence of the west. The way to peace for the Western or Christian world is to show its united strength. But for that it must first *be* really strong and really united.

GILBERT MURRAY.

INTRODUCTION

WHAT HAPPENS TO A COUNTRY when it turns from democracy to Communism? What are the aims of Soviet foreign policy? What are the methods of Communist penetration and seizure of power? And what mistaken ideas and misguided deeds of the democratic leaders have assisted and countenanced the progress and victory of their deadly enemies? The answers to these vital questions have been greatly clarified by the recent history of Czechoslovakia.

It happens very seldom that the limited experience of a little country throws much light upon world issues of this magnitude, but here several historical circumstances combined to make the Czechoslovak case especially significant and instructive.

Under the wise leadership of her great statesman, President Thomas Garrigue Masaryk, Czechoslovakia evolved a political system which in several respects was the most advanced democracy of Central Europe between the two World Wars. If the Communists could strangle Masaryk's democracy, are not other democracies faced with the same peril?

Among the democratic leaders of our time, President Benes was the one who most sincerely trusted Stalin, and in an effort to gain and preserve his friendship, induced the Czechoslovak people to make far-reaching territorial, political and economic concessions to the Soviet Union. Czechoslovakia thus became the test case of Soviet appeasement.

Czechoslovak industry had already been nationalized to a large extent when the Communists carried out their putsch. Thereby they demonstrated that their main objective is not merely the change of an economic system, but the wielding of absolute totalitarian power.

The large number of workers and farmers who had given their votes to the Communist Party in the free election of 1946 were dismayed when after the putsch they saw how little Communist deeds corresponded to enchanting Communist propaganda. How an intelligent people could be so profoundly deceived, and how experienced democratic leaders proved no

match for the Communists, before and during the putsch, forms the most tragic, but also the most instructive part of this narrative.

All these circumstances commend the study of Czechoslovakia's post-war development to the reader who is interested in the general political trends of our time. But while the Prague events have a European and world significance, they are embedded in the specific strategic and geographic position of the country, her cultural tradition and pre-war history. These specific conditions therefore must be the starting point of our account.

The political history of a little country is, to a large degree, determined by her foreign relations and by social forces which cannot be controlled even by the most efficient leaders. But within this objective framework, the ideas and the prejudices, the wisdom and the ineptitude, the courage and the cowardice of individual politicians may be decisive. To bring out these individual contributions, actual achievements must be critically contrasted with objective possibilities. The historical writer who does not disclose the errors of his friends, unwittingly magnifies the achievement of his enemies. Besides, the proper lessons for the future struggles of the Czechs and Slovaks and of other nations can be drawn only if the whole available truth is made known. *Magna est veritas et praevalabit.*

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