

Czechs defy CP rule, risk Russian bayonets

by Konstantin George

The two-hour political general strike by over 7 million Czech and Slovak workers on Nov. 27, embracing nearly the entire industrial, mining, transport, and white-collar workforce, following record demonstrations of 800,000 persons in Prague on Nov. 25 and 26 for free elections and an end to Communist rule, defines a turning point in world history. The general strike underscored that the workers of the Soviet empire have turned against bolshevism, and pose a logistical threat to the power of the Communist state. Bolshevism has lost the equivalent of what the Chinese call the "Mandate of Heaven." The Czechoslovak party is in shambles as its core—the party factory organizations—has broken with the leadership and joined in support of the general strike.

In the early postwar years the Communist Party in Czechoslovakia actually enjoyed popularity. By February 1948 when it seized power in a coup, it had become the country's single largest party with 38% of the vote. The 1968 "Prague Spring," led by "reform" Communists, did not break the "Mandate." After the 1968 Soviet invasion, the party's authority eroded, but still enjoyed a core of support in the gray neighborhoods and satellite towns supplying the workforce for the country's large industrial enterprises.

The November Revolution has ended this, as the upsurge has swept the country. One vignette illustrates this: the participation of the 10,000-strong workforce of the Gladno steel works outside of Prague, in the general strike. Gladno had been a *Communist Party* bastion.

The trip-wire danger

Czechoslovakia is undergoing a joyful revolution, but a happy end of that revolutionary liberation has by no means been reached. The shattering of the Czechoslovak party and the prospect of free elections within six months—the demand of the Civic Forum opposition, while the regime desperately tries to stall until late 1990—have deeply stung Moscow, which still maintains a garrison of 75,000 troops.

In the first phase of the Czechoslovak revolution, the Moscow-dictated policy of the Czech CP leadership was a "buying time" strategy of concessions to the democracy movement. In two emergency Central Committee plenums held within three days (Nov. 24 and 26), large components of the old, discredited Stalinist leadership, including nine Politburo members, were thrown to the wolves. Television and radio gave full coverage to the mass demonstrations and interviews with Vaclav Havel and other leaders of the

Citizens' Initiative. On Nov. 28, the regime began negotiations with the opposition to form a new, interim coalition government, pending free elections. On the same day, the parliament unanimously passed a resolution ending the role of the CP as "the leading force in society," and eliminated communist ideology in the realm of education, culture, and extracurricular youth programs.

Starting Nov. 29, however, the situation began to take a potentially ominous turn as a regime-opposition confrontation started to take shape. The opposition demanded free elections within six months, by June; the regime insisted that they be held in late 1990. This dispute, though dramatic, is not the crucial one.

In an apparent flight forward, the opposition demanded the resignation of the present defense and interior ministers, *and* that these posts *not* be held by Communists in the next government: a demand which even Solidarnosc in Poland, for very clear reasons, dared not make. Put in historical terms, the maximum concession that the regime and Moscow are willing to make at this time is a restoration of, roughly speaking, the 1945-48 model, where Communists occupied the defense and interior posts in a non-communist government led by President Eduard Benes and Prime Minister Jan Masaryk, son of Thomas Masaryk, who founded Czechoslovakia in 1918, and was the republic's first President.

Another opposition demand, that the Stalinist Czechoslovak President Gustav Husak step down by Dec. 10, has been unequivocally rebuffed. Husak's term expires in May 1990, and elections for a new President would have been a certainty.

The regime on Nov. 29 rejected the demands concerning the vital posts of Defense and Interior, and the ultimatum on the Husak question. The rejection was coupled with intense phone traffic between Prague and Moscow. That day, the world first learned through an announcement by Czech CP General Secretary Karel Urbanek that a "summit of Warsaw Pact member general secretaries" would be held in Moscow Dec. 4 immediately upon Gorbachov's return from the Malta summit. Urbanek added that he would first hold *bilateral* talks with Gorbachov and the Soviet leadership before the Warsaw Pact summit. That the first announcement came from Prague (Radio Moscow confirmed it only on Nov. 30) also told the world that the main agenda item at that emergency Pact summit, would be the Czech revolution.

While the Czechoslovak revolution has torn the perceived "Mandate of Heaven" from bolshevism, Soviet bayonets are still very much in existence. One recalls the 1848 revolutionary democracy wave which swept Europe, and put an end to the pre-1848 autocratic ideology of the "Holy Alliance," of Czarist Russia and Central European autocracies, which had ruled Europe since the infamous 1815 Congress of Vienna. One also recalls how the revolutionary democracy movements were drowned in blood, as in Hungary, by Czarist Cossack hordes.