

'President Benes has given in to the demands of Mr Gottwald' from Le Monde (26 February 1948)

Caption: On 26 February 1948, the French daily newspaper Le Monde recounts the events which took place the previous day in Prague and which led to the resignation of President Edvard Benes following pressure from Klement Gottwald supported by the Soviet Union.

Source: Le Monde. dir. de publ. Beuve-Méry, Hubert. 26.02.1948, n° 959. Paris: Le Monde. "Le président Bénès a capitulé devant les exigences de M. Gottwald", auteur:Penchenier, Georges , p. 1.

Copyright: (c) Translation CVCE.EU by UNI.LU

All rights of reproduction, of public communication, of adaptation, of distribution or of dissemination via Internet, internal network or any other means are strictly reserved in all countries.

Consult the legal notice and the terms and conditions of use regarding this site.

URL:

http://www.cvce.eu/obj/president_benes_has_given_in_to_the_demands_of_mr_gottwald_from_le_monde_26_february_1948-en-9a81f819-4372-422f-b4ba-50f374fbb79c.html



Last updated: 06/07/2016

Coup d'état in Prague

President Benes has given in to the demands of Mr Gottwald

The Communists reduce the other parties to impotence

The crisis in Czechoslovakia is heading rapidly towards its climax. Mr Gottwald and the Communist Party look as if they will succeed in attaining their principal objectives.

Mr Benes held serious talks with Mr Gottwald this morning and seems to have capitulated in the face of Mr Gottwald's demands; he has accepted the dismissal of 11 anti-Communist Ministers, and rumour has it that the new Cabinet will be appointed on the basis of an 'expanded National Front'. Face will therefore be saved, but the Communists will hold the high ground.

The actual make-up of the government will be announced this evening. It is rumoured that the Social-Democratic Party will participate in it on the basis of the proposals submitted to it by the Communists, given that the right wing of the party and its Communist wing reached agreement this morning.

The sequence of events on 24 February

From our special correspondent, Georges Penchenier, by telephone.

Prague, 25 February. 24 February will go down in history as a decisive day for Czechoslovakia. Although, up until now, we could still delude ourselves, this is no longer possible. The Iron Curtain has fallen on the last act, and tomorrow we shall have a seamless Eastern bloc in which Czechoslovakia, finally brought to heel, will play an economic and political role, an immense factory of the Slav world and in the vanguard of the future federation of 'People's Republics'.

The few dissenting voices raised by the key players in this drama are of little importance, and the arguments with which we shall be presented tomorrow, bolstered by statistics, will not be able to hide the truth: on 24 February 1948, the parliamentary system, at least such as we define it in France and in England, will no longer be the system of government in the Republic founded by Masaryk and restored by Benes.

The methodology of the coup d'état

Political parties no longer exist.

Or, to be more accurate, only the Communist Party exists. Its operations over the past forty-eight hours demonstrate the discipline of its followers, the political intelligence of its leaders and lengthy and painstaking preparations. Because whichever way we look at it, smashing organised political parties, organising mass rallies, occupying public buildings, arresting dissenters and dismissing factory managers in such a calm, seemingly effortless manner in order to foil an opponent's plans takes more than just a few hours.

This morning, it has naturally become impossible to secure any information from sources other than the official ones. We dare not make telephone calls for fear of putting people in jeopardy. When, after weighing the pros and cons, we do call, we get no reply: either the person in question has been arrested or has quietly moved house.

It is, however, possible to have some idea of the situation. The Socialist Party was liquidated at four o'clock yesterday. The daily newspaper did not appear this morning, because the print works has been occupied by the police. The political leaders are not leaving their homes, and some have already decided to abandon politics and return to more peaceful occupations in the hope of escaping Communist reprisals.

In Slovakia, the Democrats, though twice as numerous as their opponents, have given in to pressure. There

are no more Democrats on the Council of Commissioners, the Party's daily newspaper is no longer being published, and there have been numerous arrests.

A Populist Party Congress has been convened for today, but we do not know if it will even be able to meet. The Steering Committee expelled two of its members yesterday morning on disciplinary grounds and quickly regretted doing so. The expelled pair, Deputy Speaker Petr and an MP, Abbot Plojhar, obtained the support of the Minister for the Interior, Nosek, and have occupied the premises of the Populist newspaper, 'Lidova Demokratie'. And so 'Lidova Demokratie' was published this morning, although its readership was unaware that it in no way represented the Party.

Mr Fierlinger shows his true colours

A similar procedure took place within the Social-Democratic Party. We are aware of Mr Lausman's efforts to resist both the left wing (dependent on Fierlinger) and the right wing. Yesterday afternoon, Mr Fierlinger signed a communiqué in which, finally deciding to show his true colours, he formally condemned the right-wing tendencies of the Brno Congress and invited the Social Democrats to unite around him. At the same time, and while the Executive Committee continued to hold interminable discussions, the pro-Communist elements formed an action committee to be led by Mr Reiman and Mrs Kusona Petrankova who had been expelled the day before as a disciplinary measure. Repeating the tactic which had been so successful at 'Livoda Demokratie', they did the same thing to the Social-Democratic daily 'Pravo Lidu', which simply changed hands. Seeing this, and realising that it could do no more, the Executive Committee adjourned its meeting without even trying to publish a statement.

So ends the existence of the four parties which, with the Communists, constituted the National Front for two and a half years as sole source of authority in the Czech and Slovak countries.

The bets are on.

The brilliant operation mounted by the Communist Party went without a hitch. Or at least only one, which set things off: **President Benes' refusal to submit to the orders of the Council President.**

Since yesterday morning, police squads have been reinforcing the pickets stationed at the entrances of public buildings. The police force, which in Prague is numerically three times stronger than before the war, nonetheless received reinforcements from outside the city. They arrived in buses carrying mobile units and equipment. Billets were set up in various parts of the city. From 11 o'clock in the morning, one could see here and there, in the side streets off the main boulevards, groups of armed men awaiting orders.

Successively protected or occupied, according to whether they were for or against the new rulers, telephone exchanges, radio stations, newspapers, the headquarters of the political parties and even, showing just how well organised the putsch was, some non-political sectors, as for example the Union of Wholesalers whose staff were dismissed while the various offices were sealed off.

Yesterday, you felt that you had been transported ten years back in time. The same unspoken emotions are shown, in women by tears, in men by the way in which they saluted, with a tenderness which did not seem ridiculous, the national flags brandished by some reckless students. But the police quickly dispersed the 'reactionary' groups which vanished as soon as the columns mobilised by the Communist Party branches appeared.

During the evening, the city was entirely given over to this crowd, not particularly revolutionary but perfectly disciplined, which walked up and down Vaclavské Namesti, the main city thoroughfare, twenty times. No hesitation, no disorder. It was like being at a historical recreation of a revolutionary event without the weapons. And, nonetheless, it was really happening.

Violent blow to the Social-Democratic majority

But if the right-wing parties were dealt with simply by the police, it was a completely different story with the Social Democrats, and the operation was no less remarkable. At 3 o'clock, two buses, called up by Rudolf Remain, who had been expelled from the Party the previous day, stopped outside the headquarters of the Social Democrats. About fifty individuals, all wearing red armbands, lined up in front of the building and allowed only members of the Executive Committee to enter. The Committee refused to meet under pressure until they learned that the dissidents were organising themselves into an Action Committee and were taking over the Social-Democratic newspaper. The game was over, and Lausman was forced to adjourn the meeting.

Action Committees = soviets

Action Committees (we do not know how they were elected but we know perfectly well who elected them) continued to multiply throughout the Republic's territory. Soviets are mushrooming everywhere: in businesses, factories, villages and towns, in clubs, political parties, the press and public services. They are taking everything over, running everything, expelling or rewarding, and determining the future.

At the Foreign Affairs Ministry, among others, they are taking ministerial decisions, for instance recalling certain ambassadors who have been deemed incompetent or lukewarm to the cause. Mr Masaryk himself, ill for the past two days, insisted on getting out of bed, against the advice of his doctor, to attend the Action Committee. He had to go back to bed an hour later.

Everybody is rushing to obey their orders, fearing that they will lose their livelihood, should they oppose them, a livelihood secured with difficulty after years of work, and perhaps even their freedom.

Non-Communists terrorised

In the meantime, terror has descended on all the non-Communists. National Socialists, Populists, Slovak Democrats, even Social Democrats, are in fear of a future that does not seem particularly bright ... Those who had the idea of leaving three days ago are safe. But, now that the border is closed, the others have very little hope of escape other than by admitting their past errors. But a number of them, to begin with, are very wisely not sleeping at home. A new underground has been born, but one which holds very few possibilities for action. And the police, admirably organised and admirably served, will soon get the better of it.

Georges Penchenier