

'The sound of silence' from the Süddeutsche Zeitung (28 February 1948)


Caption: On 28 February 1948, the German newspaper Süddeutsche Zeitung speculates on the consequences of the 'Prague Coup' which culminates in the establishment of a Communist Government in Czechoslovakia led by Klement Gottwald.

Source: Süddeutsche Zeitung. Münchner Neueste Nachrichten aus Politik, Kultur, Wirtschaft und Sport. Hrsg. FRIEDMANN, Werner; GOLDSCHAGG, Edmund; SCHÖNINGH, Dr. Franz Joseph; SCHWINGENSTEIN, August. 28.02.1948, n° 17; 4. Jg. München: Süddeutscher Verlag. "Lautes Schweigen", auteur:Scriptor , p. 1.

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The sound of silence

The crisis in Czechoslovakia

(Cable report from our Czechoslovak staffer) — Despite repeated reports to the contrary, the Czechoslovak president Dr Edvard Benes has not yet commented on the events in Czechoslovakia. Dr Benes' silence speaks volumes and may also constitute something very serious. The people feel that something important is being concealed from them.

The new list of 24 Ministers, announced by Mr Gottwald, half of whom are Communists despite that party's poor showing in the recent elections when, as we all know, it secured only 38 % of the votes. The Communists are providing the Prime Minister (Gottwald), two Deputy Prime Ministers (Siroky and Zapotocky, the latter the all-powerful President of the Trade Union Confederation and of the new Action Committee), the new Minister of Foreign Trade, Dr Gregor (replacing the National Socialist Minister Ripka), the Minister of Education Professor Nejedly (replacing the National Socialist Stransky), and the Minister of Justice Cepicka (replacing the National Socialist Drtina). They have retained the Ministry of the Interior (Nosek), the Ministry of Finance (Dolansky), the Ministry of Agriculture (Duris), the Ministry of Information (Kopecky), the Ministry of Domestic Trade (Krajcir), and the post of Junior Minister in the Foreign Ministry (Clementis). There are also four Social Democrats in the Cabinet (Lausman, previously Party Chairman and Deputy Prime Minister, Fierlinger, Erban and Mrs Jankovcova), two representatives of the Catholic People's Party (Father Plojhar and Alois Petr), two representatives of the Nationalist Socialist Party (Professor Slechta und Neuman), one Slovak (Sevcik, Junior Minister in the Ministry of Defence) and one Slovak Independent (Srobar). Also in the Cabinet are Masaryk (Foreign Minister) and General Svoboda (Minister of War) who do not belong to any political party.

When we look at this list, we must not forget that the Social Democrats, after much internal dispute, are now in favour of very close collaboration with the Communists, so that the Communists, apart from holding the most important key positions, dominate in every way. What is more, they not only control the administrative machinery, they have also formed the so-called Action Committees, which, centrally run, encroach in all spheres of political, economic and cultural life. Many journalists, who worked for either National Socialist, Catholic or independent newspapers, have already been dismissed, including Dr Ivan Herben of the *Svobodne Slovo* (Free Word) and Ferdinand Peroutka from the magazine *Dnesek* (Today) and the daily paper *Svobodne Noviny* (Free Newspaper). Changes have also been made in other institutions and organisations.

The crisis began, as we remember, with the resignation of twelve Ministers on Friday, 20 February in protest against the attitude of the Minister of the Interior who had ignored the decisions of the entire Cabinet. This mass resignation was clearly meant to be a trial of strength; however, it seems that the Opposition underestimated the true balance of power. It also seems as though they had based many of their hopes on the great moral authority of the President, Dr Benes, on the assumption that he would not accept their resignation, bring them back into government and play them as an important psychological trump card against the Communists in the forthcoming elections. Dr Benes did indeed refuse to accept their resignation for a long time. However, in the meantime, dramatic events, such as the aforementioned intervention of the 'Action Committees', had taken place that had upset all political manoeuvring.

Leading the Opposition were the Minister of Justice Dr Drtina, to whom the Communists are particularly hostile because of his energetic intervention in the investigation of the attempted assassination of three Ministers, as well as Dr Ripka, Stransky and Dr Zenkl, all four of whom are members of the National Socialist Party. These men had played a very important role in public life for many years. Drtina had been Head of the President's Private Office for a long time. Ripka, a well-known journalist, had been the spokesman for Dr Benes before the war, and Zenkl, who had once been Lord Mayor of Prague, had spent many years in a German concentration camp. Amongst the Catholic Ministers who resigned, the most well-known are Msgr Sramek and Dr Hala.

Come what may, the dramatic sequence of events has shown that these will not develop without difficulty,

as has been the case in other East European countries. Czechoslovakia has a deep-rooted democratic and parliamentary tradition; it also has a higher standard of living and has reached a state of industrial development which requires it to export to the East. The alliance with the Soviet Union is generally perceived — by all political parties — as a cornerstone of security; Czechoslovakia, however, hopes to preserve its internal independence. Dr Benes believed that it could be preserved precisely because the alliance with Russia ought to fend off Moscow's suspicions. In a world where East and West are balanced against each other, this programme would truly be feasible, and Czechoslovakia would even constitute a strong link between the two sides. Geographically and ideologically it had been assigned the role of mediator; it is clear, however, that international tensions and the aggravated ideological antagonism between East and West were bound to have internal repercussions. What is noteworthy about this crisis is the moral power of a man who was able to influence the development of events because his authority is so undisputed and so deeply enshrined in the entire nation that even the Communists dare not directly attack him. It is Dr Benes who is nowadays faced with a decision similar to the one at the time of the Munich crisis. What will be his final word? Will he break his silence or maintain it? Accustomed to seeing things from a superior vantage point and to taking international relations into consideration, he knows that he is not dealing with a government crisis but with a crisis in the system and a conflict affecting the entire world. He is well aware that the Czechoslovak crisis has a very different scale because it reflects the world crisis. If the world can find a solution to its desperate problems, then Czechoslovakia will also find a way of establishing the synthesis between democracy and socialism which is Benes' political belief. If not, then the Czechoslovak crisis is but a prelude to a situation on which it would be unwise to speculate.

Scriptor