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Principal Developments in World Communist Affairs
(19 July-20 August 1968)

1. Soviet external and internal policies conflict.

Until twenty August, the Soviets pursued a dual policy of showing a reasonable visage to the non-Communist world while continuing to tighten the screws within their own borders. Kosygin's visit to Sweden in July has been described as the "Swedish idyll." The Soviets seemed inclined to take a more moderate stand in the Arab-Israeli dispute by not backing Nasser 100% on his demands, and a number of reports suggest the Soviets wish to see the Suez Canal opened again without requiring Israeli withdrawal from their bank of the canal. Presumably at Soviet behest, Ulbricht seemed to indicate a relaxation of his conditions for talks with the West Germans on renunciation of force: he did not make it a pre-condition for talks that Bonn recognize his regime. In the Far East, the Soviets and Japanese have signed an agreement for the joint development of timberland in Siberia, and there is some thought that this will be a prelude to a wider range of collaboration in developing Siberia economically. While all these moves on the part of the Soviet Union have at base a strong national interest, part of the picture is the continuing effort of the Soviets to improve their image in the outside world. But one should not forget their military diplomacy in supplying arms to Pakistan and the Sudan, nor Soviet Defense Minister Marshal Andrey Grechko's visit in mid-July to Algiers, which could result in supplying this Arab friend of the Soviets with additional military hardware.

Contrasted with this generally amiable face shown to the free world, the Soviet leadership continues to tighten ideological lines within its own borders. In mid-July, Aleksandr Botvin, CP boss in the Ukraine, laid down the law to Ukrainian writers who have grown increasingly vociferous in venting traditional feelings of Ukrainian nationalism in recent writings. Botvin characterized their feelings as based on "putrid theories spread by hostile propaganda" and promised to correct the error by closer supervision and guidance of the wrong-thinking writers.

Similarly, the Moscow City Council late in July issued a decree (which must appear dismal to theater producers) ordering the production of more plays about the "heroes of our time," that is, workers, peasants, etc. Such a decree was the result of the theatrical producers enlivening the theatrical scene by putting on 19th century plays which, critical of the society of the time, were presented so that the criticism applied to the current scene.

These incidents, relatively minor by themselves, are, however, symptomatic of the noticeable and growing tendency to emphasize an ideological orthodoxy and rigidity which some call (with considerable justice) "re-Stalinization."

2. Communist China

a. Curbing the Red Guards. Communist China continues to be almost entirely absorbed in its own convulsions, allowing the rest of the world to go by, but finding time to keep up its polemic with the Soviet Union (the Soviets repay in kind and with an even heavier propaganda output devoted to denigrating Communist China). Once again there is a sign that an end may be sought to the havoc created by the unbridled raging about of the Red Guards in the name of the Cultural Revolution. The editorial of 18 August of the main organ of the Chinese Communist Party, Jen Min Jih Pao (People's Daily), while praising their pioneer work, suggests that the time has come for Chinese students to listen to their worker-peasant elders and learn from them. This is the latest in an accumulation of signs that the leadership wants to curb the Red Guard. It remains to be seen whether the regime can stop the Red Guard's destructive momentum.

b. Position on Czechoslovakia. At long last the Chinese Communists have taken cognizance of the turmoil in the Communism of Eastern Europe. Until this month, the Chinese Communists have ignored the Czech crisis, presumably because they have not been able to take sides. While undoubtedly welcoming any embarrassment to the Soviets by an obstreperous Satellite, they were reluctant to credit the Dubcek regime (which Peking has to regard as super-liberal) with anything good. Hence silence was the best policy. Now, however, the Chinese Communists have seen fit to publicize the Soviet-Czech dispute, using an extensive analysis provided by the main organ of the Albanian Communist Party. Zeri i Popullit of 24 July 1968 presented its own unique version of the Soviet-Czech altercation in terms of a power struggle in the Kremlin between two types of "revisionists" (in the Albanian book everyone in the Soviet dominated Bloc is some kind of revisionist -- even Ulbricht, though he is admitted to present a "problem" at times to the Bloc). There are the "liberal revisionists" and the "revisionist conservatives." In the Albanians' wondrous logic, the Soviet liberal revisionists dumped Novotny and plotted the overthrow of Gomulka with the aim of "encircling" East Germany in preparation for a sell-out of East Germany in a deal with the U.S. to unify Germany. Agreement to reunify Germany is alleged to be the outstanding problem preventing full U.S.-Soviet rapprochement which the Soviets are said ardently to be seeking. However, the liberal plot failed in Poland, allegedly because Gomulka was able to rely on "healthy elements" of Soviet military forces in Poland who were allied with the Soviet "revisionist conservatives," and the situation got out of hand in Czechoslovakia so that the Soviets are having trouble braking the chaotic liberalization of Czechoslovakia.

This version of the Soviet-Czech dispute is accepted and publicized by Peking, except that it omits Albania's reference to the Soviet military. It does not serve the Chinese Communist purpose to admit that anything, even separate elements of the Soviet military forces, is healthy in Soviet officialdom. The Chinese also show a certain delicacy in exempting the Rumanians from the derogation that the Albanians heaped on them.

3. New Pro-Chicom Groups in France and Colombia.

a. France. Early in August, a new journal appeared in France called Drapeau Rouge (Red Flag), with the avowed purpose of spreading the treasure of Mao's thought throughout France against the "antiquated revisionist ideology" of the French Communist Party. The paper presumably will be the nucleus of a new Maoist party to take the place of two groups disbanded by the French authorities as result of the May-June disturbances. The groups were the Marxist-Leninist Communist Party of France and the Union of Communist Youth. With the French authorities expecting new student disorders in the fall, this can hardly come as welcome news.

b. Colombia. A pro-Chinese faction of the Colombian Communist Party tries to claim Che Guevara as its own by asserting that both Moscow and Castro betrayed Che, the latter cutting off his supplies in Bolivia and leaving him to his fate unaided. The attached Washington Post article of 19 August gives a fuller account of the incident, pointing out the similarity of this pro-Chinese line on Che to that propounded in July by a pro-Chinese faction in Bolivia.

4. Communist World Youth Festival.

The Ninth World Youth Festival (WYF) held in Sofia, 28 July-6 August, ended on a note of deep dissension. Even the Vietnam war, the one topic which should have united the assembly, failed to do so. The WYF demonstrated and aggravated the unorthodox and dissident dispositions of Czech and Yugoslav youth, and the European New Left openly clashed with the orthodox Communist managers of the Festival, i.e., the Soviets, Bulgarians, and the Preparatory Committee. Only Bulgarian strongarm tactics prevented protests from turning into more serious clashes. The organizers probably made few converts to the Communist cause and failed to create the image of the Festival as a "united" get-together of world youth. Because of these failures the holding of future festivals is in serious doubt.

5. The Unsettled Czech-Soviet Crisis

a. Principal documents. The key documents which give the most handy and reliable guide to what has transpired in Czechoslovakia's relations with the Soviet Bloc¹ during the past dramatic month -- up to the moment of invasion -- are:

- (1) The letter of 14 July from the Warsaw Five (the Soviet Union, Poland, East Germany, Hungary, and Bulgaria) to the Czechoslovak Communist Party (CzCP) making intemperate accusations regarding the imminence of counterrevolution in Czechoslovakia and making hysterical demands for measures to be undertaken immediately by the CzCP to forestall counterrevolution.

¹The "Soviet Bloc" for present purposes will be considered to include the regimes of East Germany, Poland, Hungary, and Bulgaria, in addition to the Soviet Union, but to exclude Rumania and Czechoslovakia.

(2) The CzCP reply of 18 July, candidly admitting some of the "anti-socialist" developments taking place in Czechoslovakia, but rejecting in measured tones the dangers to the Czech Communist regime from such developments and rejecting the propriety of the suggested countermeasures.

(3) The Bratislava communique of 3 August, signed by the five Soviet Bloc parties and the CzCP, which reiterated broad, familiar generalities of international communism, permitting both sides to claim, following the letter but hardly the spirit of the truth, that their own views prevailed. (The brief, non-committal communique issued at the end of the four-day talks, 29 July to 1 August, between the Soviet Politburo and the CzCP Presidium was quite evidently a temporizing document preceding the fuller Bratislava communique prepared for the acquiescence and signature of the larger conclave.)

b. The Letter of the Warsaw Five. The hasty convening of the five Soviet Bloc parties in Warsaw on 14-15 July resulted in what appeared to be an equally hasty and ill-advised document (but as the invasion shows, proves to have been the most accurate reflection of the views of the wielders of ultimate power in the Bloc); its hysterical tone tempts one to attribute it to Ulbricht's inspiration if not his pen. Three passages characterize its totally false reading of the realities of the Czech scene:

"In your country a whole series of events in recent months indicates that counterrevolutionary forces supported by imperialist centers have launched attacks on a broad front against the socialist system.... Particularly great activity is being undertaken by leading circles of the German Federal Republic which, trying to make use of the events in Czechoslovakia, seek to foster conflicts between socialist countries, isolate the GDR, and realize their revanchist intentions."

(Comment: No objective proof could have existed for the charge of outside forces fomenting counterrevolution; such a statement was either the product of a desperately frightened Bloc leader or, what is more likely, an invented pretext in preparation for the eventuality of suppressing by force the freedom of expression in Czechoslovakia, which it was feared would spread beyond the borders and endanger the stability of the East German, Polish or even the Soviet regime.)

"Do you, comrades, fail to see these dangers? Can one remain passive in this situation, confining oneself purely to statements and assurances about loyalty to the cause of socialism and obligations of alliance? Do you fail to see that counterrevolution is taking away from you one position after another. Do you fail to see that the party is losing control over the events and is tending more and more to withdraw under pressure from anti-Communist forces?"

(Comment: The tone is little short of hysterical and surely without precedent among Communist regimes maintaining normal diplomatic relations. The tone would be more appropriate to the Stalin regime's castigation of Tito after he had left the fold, or of current Sino-Soviet polemics.)

"The cause of the defense of the power of the working class and of the workers, of socialist achievements in Czechoslovakia demands: resolute and courageous attacks on the rightist and anti-socialist forces; the mobilization of all defensive means brought into being by the socialist state; cessation of the activity of all political organizations acting against socialism; that the party must take into its own hands the means of mass communication -- the press, radio, and television -- so that they should be used in the interest of the working class, the workers, and socialism; the rallying of the party ranks on the basis of the principles of Marxism-Leninism; complete observance of the principle of democratic centralism, and a fight against those who, by their activity, help the hostile forces."

(Comment: Besides calling directly for control and censorship of the press and suppression of non-Communist political organizing activity, this passage seems to call for a restoration of the powers of the secret police ["mobilization of all defensive means...."], and disciplining of errant, liberal Communists ["rallying the party ranks on the basis of principles of Marxism-Leninism; complete observance of the principle of democratic centralism, and a fight against those who, by their activity, help the hostile forces."])

Finally, the situation is asserted to be "no longer your (the CzCP's) affair alone. This is the affair of all Communist and Workers parties.... It is a common cause of our countries, united in the Warsaw Pact, to safeguard their independence ... against the schemings of imperialist, aggressive, and revanchist forces." This suggests a new use for the Warsaw Pact: uninvited intervention in an allied country by force.

c. The Czechoslovak Presidium Replies. The letter of the Warsaw Five was made public on 17 July by the Hungarians and the CzCP Presidium published its reply on 18 July. It was sober, realistically reasoned, and admitted the existence of "extremist tendencies, which the remnants of anti-socialist forces ... are trying to take advantage of ..." but expressed "astonishment" at "assertions describing the situation as counterrevolutionary" ... "all suspicions to this effect we must reject." The CzCP reply also rejected the Warsaw Five's request for the re-institution of Novotnyite harshly repressive measures as a cure for an undesirable situation: "Any sign of a return to these methods would arouse opposition from the overwhelming majority of party members, opposition from the toiling workers, cooperative farmers, and the intelligentsia. By precisely such a step the party would endanger its political leading role and would give rise to a situation in which a power conflict would indeed take place. This would truly endanger the socialist achievements of the people and thus too our common interest in the anti-imperialist front of the socialist community."

This statement could be taken as a plea to the Warsaw Five to try to understand that the reimposition of traditional Communist controls at this juncture would indeed bring chaos. Time is needed, as is clearly stated in the Czech leadership's immediately following remark:

"We agree that one of the foremost tasks of the party is to thwart the intentions of the rightist and anti-socialist forces. Our party elaborated its tactical political course in this matter at the May plenum of the Central Committee, and it is now solving these questions in accordance with it. This course consists of a complex of measures which can be successful only if we have the conditions to implement them gradually over a period of several months. (Emphasis added.)

It would have been interesting to know what the "tactical political course" consisted of and against what elements or phenomena on the Czech scene it was to be directed, but it does suggest the Dubcek leadership was trying to meet the Bloc's requirements.

These last two documents may be the foundation of what appears to have been a temporary agreement that arose out of the Bratislava conference some two weeks later. While there apparently was a real difference between the protagonists as to the extent and seriousness of the threat of Communist one-party rule, it was mutually understood that "anti-socialist elements" should be suppressed. Again opinions differ as to how quickly this suppression must take place.

d. Interim Maneuvering. Between the exchange discussed above and the Bratislava agreement a flurry of activity took place. The polemics between Czech and Soviet Bloc news media raged on with accusations and counter-accusations, and troop maneuvers by the Soviets and its allies continued in Czechoslovakia and immediately outside its borders, giving rise to stronger and stronger speculation (perhaps not wholly unwelcome to the Soviets as possibly influencing the Czech leadership to compliance) that the differences between the Czechs and their fellow Communist regimes would be settled by military intervention. The Warsaw letter in fact did what the Czech leadership might not have been able to accomplish on its own -- it mobilized overwhelming support from the Czech population, and apparently even from a substantial number of conservative Party and Central Committee members. (Some were said to keep their powder dry by not attending the Central Committee meeting in which Dubcek received his vote of confidence and thus avoiding a commitment to support Dubcek.) The Czechs prevailed in their insistence that bilateral meetings precede multilateral meetings and that the meetings be held on Czech soil. Comradely pressure was applied on the Soviets by most West European Communist Parties (privately or publicly) not to intervene militarily (or by other crude means), most notably by the Italian Communist Party and Waldeck Rochet, boss of the French Communist Party, who travelled to both Moscow and Prague on his "honest broker" mission and indicated his willingness to sponsor an all-European conference of Communists to iron out differences (This idea was abandoned, apparently by mutual

wish of the Soviets and the Czechs.) European Communists, of course, stood to lose much they had gained in terms of respectability in the course of the past decade if the Soviet Union should once again show itself the monster that so savagely crushed Hungary in 1956. Yugoslavia's Tito and Rumania's Ceaucescu contributed their bit to the Czech cause by explicit support.

e. Results of the Cierna and Bratislava Conferences. It is not possible to speak authoritatively about the proceedings of the two conferences (of which the Cierna meeting between Soviets and Czechs was by far the more important), because there is no official or fully trustworthy private account of what transpired, but something can be made of the resulting communique. The Soviet-Czech conference was convened in Cierna near the Soviet border on 29 July. Its importance to the Soviets may be measured by the attendance of practically the whole Soviet Politburo, an assembly on foreign soil without precedent, and of course Czechoslovakia reciprocated in the level of its representation. The difficulty of reaching agreement may be measured by the length of the meeting: four days (it was originally planned for two days at the most). But some sort of accommodation apparently was reached, though the communique issued at the end was non-committal and obviously pointed toward an official statement to be issued after a meeting of the remainder of the Warsaw Five on 2-3 August in Bratislava. At the latter meeting East German, Polish, Hungarian, and Bulgarian leaders signed a communique which probably had been prepared by the Soviets and Czechs during their earlier negotiations. The remarkable fact about the Bratislava communique is that it said everything (in reiterating all the broad, familiar platitudes governing the relations among orthodox Communist parties) and yet said nothing of the matter at issue, i.e. "counterrevolutionary developments" in Czechoslovakia was not mentioned. Such a communique has the virtue of permitting each side to claim triumph and unanimity of opinion. And each side has done just that. The Soviets claimed that the designs of Western imperialism have been frustrated, and the Czechs claimed that they have not yielded one iota from their program for Czechoslovakia.

f. The calm before the storm. It may be useful to recall a similar confrontation: that of the Soviet leadership with Gomulka in 1956 under analogous circumstances. At that time the Soviets regarded the domestic scene in Poland as chaotic, out of control, and threatening the continued rule of the Communist Party. It seems clear now that Gomulka pleaded for time to restore order, pointing out (as the Czechs did in their reply to the Warsaw Five letter) that reimposition of controls immediately would insure utter chaos and be a much more severe threat to Communist control.

However, contrary to Gomulka, Dubcek and his colleagues did not retreat from their position that they would not govern by arbitrary and repressive methods, but rather would enlist voluntary popular cooperation. Nor did they re-impose censorship, again appealing for the voluntary cooperation of the Fourth Estate to write "responsibly" (i.e. to moderate criticism of the Soviet Union). It may be that the Soviets saw more clearly than the Czech leadership that one-party rule is incompatible with the basic freedoms which the Czech people, having recently gained, would be very unwilling to relinquish: freedom of press, speech, and assembly.

Despite efforts of the Dubcek leadership to gain control of developments it was evident that it would be difficult to limit the basic freedoms without extinguishing them altogether. Tito, during his visit to Prague 9-10 August, and Ceaucescu, visiting 15-17 August, each coupled warm expressions of support with counsels of caution vis-a-vis the Soviets, but the Czech press continued its critical stance and provoked retorts from the Soviet press, thus belying Dubcek's and Smrkovsky's assurance that polemics would cease. The heavy flow of Soviet anti-Czech propaganda before the Bratislava communique was turned off abruptly like a faucet after Cierna, but the flow soon began again.

As events turned out, Soviet leaders decided to adopt far stronger medicine than propaganda verbiage.