Cabinet memorandum by Foreign Secretary, E. Bevin, containing a copy of a telegram from the British Ambassador in Prague, giving an appreciation of the present situation in Czechoslovakia, dated 27 February 1948

SECRET

CABINET

CZECHOSLOVAKIA

 I wish to draw the urgent attention of my colleagues to the attached telegram from H.M. Ambassador, Prague, giving an appreciation of the present situation in Czechoslovakia[[1]](#footnote-1). I consider that the concluding paragraphs are of particular interests.

ANNEX

 [1.] In determining your attitude to the proposal of M. Bidault and Mr. Marshall, of which my United States colleague has now informed me, it may be useful to you to have an appreciation of the Czechoslovak situation as we see it.

 2. The first question is whether the situation is in any way still open. The answer must be explicit and the fact is that by force and intimidation the Communist minority have succeeded under constitutional guise in obtaining control of the country. Steps have included, we suspect, prevention of the President from broadcasting or making his real views known. We are now reliably informed that the President did yesterday approve the new Government but the terms in which he expressed his approval have been withheld from the public. He is said to be very ill and to wish to resign but he is a prisoner in the castle and cannot control his fate.

 3. It is true that there is considerable popular indignation but this is organised only amongst the students, who are impotent, and were brutally beaten up by the police and troops yesterday. Five were killed demonstrating their loyalty to the President before the castle. The population as a whole who, whatever their love of freedom, are naturally timid and doubly defeatist from the memory of the German occupation, are not capable of serious resistance. There is also the feeling that the President and the Socialists contributed to the debacle by miscalculating their opponents’ strength and they failed to take effective action last weekend when the initiative still lay with them and before the Communists had had time to mobilise their full resources. Masaryk is almost universally execrated.

 4. Therefore, there seems to be a slight prospect of reversing or arresting the course of events by representation to the Czechoslovak Government and a general declaration would have even less effect.

 5. The second question is whether the continuing process of communism and anti-Western orientation can be arrested by any action on the part of His Majesty’s Government, the United States and the French Governments. There is every indication that the Communists intend rapidly to complete their strangle-hold in the country by the familiar method of purges replacing non-Communists by their own nominees in Government departments and State concerns. There will also no doubt be the familiar series, of trumped up charges against the anti-Communists, entailing trials and allegations of treason, collaboration with the Western Powers. It will be easier to frame these charges owing to the close relationships which have existed on the part of His Majesty’s Embassy and United States Embassy with non-Communist Czech politicians and other prominent Czechs. A foretaste of this has been given in charges which have already appeared in the press against the Consulates of the Western Powers in Bratislava.

 6. A weapon which it lies in the power of the United States to consider using is economic. It is true that Czech economics will inevitably suffer from inefficiency resulting from the change in personnel, etc., which will presumably make the new regime anxious, if possible, to maintain and increase trade and secure credits from the west. But in my view the threat of economic penalties could not buy the restoration of democracy in Czechoslovakia. On the contrary the new Communist regime is almost certainly prepared to pay the price of curtailing defensive ties with the west in order to force their country into the Soviet economic orbit and quite certainly able to enforce on the population the lower standard of living which this would entail.

7. A strong expression to the usurpers of power in Czechoslovakia of the disgust of the British Government and people, for the methods by which they have acquired and are consolidating the position might make them squirm though it would hardly stop them. French stock is so low here that a French protest would have little effect even amongst anti-Communists. If the Czech Communists and their masters were convinced that the United States and the Western Powers were determined that Czechoslovakia should bet the last country to be successfully exploited by Communist technique this might give them pause and bring home to them that on this second occasion in a decade the forces of Democracy did not intend that any further European territory should be lost to dictatorship. The warning, however, to be effective in Czechoslovakia would have to be given in Moscow.

[TNA, CAB 129/25/69]

Keywords: post-war Eastern Europe, Czechoslovakia

1. The Czech Coup (Victorious February) took place 21 to 25 February 1948, when non-communist ministers were expelled from the government. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)