Cabinet memorandum on the resignation of Dr. Beneš as President of Czechoslovakia, dated 27 July 1948

CONFIDENTIAL

[…]

RESIGNATION OF DR. BENES AS PRESIDENT OF CZECHOSLOVAKIA AND HIS PART IN EVOLUTION OF THE REPUBLIC

[…]

 10. Dr. Benes has been criticised for having undertaken his journey to Moscow in 1943, and for having re-entered his capital in the wake of the Russian army. It may be that he thereby walked into the lion’s mouth, but I think that he can hardly be blamed, if his calculations were as I have described them, in thus paying court to the Soviet Union and off-setting his wartime sojourn in the United Kingdom. Nor indeed, as it seems in the light of subsequent events, would he have been successful in restoring himself and the London Government as the legitimate Government of Czechoslovakia after the Allied victory had he not prepared the way by a visit to the Soviet Government and negotiations with the Czech Communist leaders. Indeed, his memoirs reveal, and he himself admitted to me in a conversation in February, that it had caused him a great effort to bring the Czech Communists and the Soviet Government to agree that he and the members of the London Government should be restored after the liberation. Where it seems clear that he miscalculated is on the eventual intentions of the Soviet Government and the Czech Communist leaders to install a fully Communist regime in Czechoslovakia. A conversation between Gottwald[[1]](#footnote-1) and Jan Masaryk in Moscow in March 1945 shows beyond doubt that even in those early days the Russians intended to insist on Czechoslovakia’s foreign policy unreservedly supporting Soviet policy, and, as it now appears, the governmental posts on which the Czech Communists in 1945 insisted as the price of allowing Dr. Benes to return as President were the key positions which would enable them to take over control of the country at will. These calculations on the part of the Communists were not, I believe, apparent to Dr. Benes in 1945 when, it must be remembered, the general expectation was that a European settlement, born of agreement between the Great Powers, would follow the end of the fighting. Dr. Benes consistently placed faith in the professions of the Soviet Union expressed in the clause of the Czech-Soviet treaty which pledged them not to intervene in Czechoslovakia’s internal affairs. Moreover, Benes, the constitutional lawyer and planner, believed that under his guidance and skill as a formula-finder a Czech brand of gradualist socialism could be developed and maintained in his country. He did not realise that neither the Czech Communists nor Moscow would regard this as going far enough.

 11. The final phase of Dr. Benes’s career, which ended with his resignation as President of the Republic on 7th June, must be examined against the background of events in Europe during the preceding twelve months.

 12. The opening of 1947 found the internal situation of Czechoslovakia stable and displayed no visible incompatibility between the maintenance of what had come to be regarded as a model eastern European democratic regime and Czechoslovakia’s international position. A steady and comparatively harmonious progress towards recovery after the war and occupation was being made under a coalition Government in which the Communists and four non-Marxist parties combined in an apparently genuine spirit of team work, the Communists holding the premiership as well as other key Ministries. Elections were due to be held in the spring of 1948 and there was an undercurrent of uneasiness generally ascribed to a natural pre-election nervousness. But outside Czechoslovakia developments were occurring which, in a few months, were to make an internal crisis in the country inevitable. The economic plight of Great Britain and almost every European country was developing to an alarming degree and when the American Secretary of State in his Harvard speech in June 1947 held out the possibility of American aid if Europe would help herself, the chance was seized by His Majesty’s Government and resulted in a meeting in Paris in July between them, the French Government and the Soviet Government. The Russian refusal to participate in the Marshall Plan or to allow her satellites to take part divided Europe in two. From this moment the Soviet Government set out to wreck the European Recovery Programme and relations between the Soviet Union on the one hand and the United States and British Governments on the other deteriorated rapidly. A further deterioration set in with the breakdown in November 1947 of the discussions on Germany in the Council of Foreign Ministers at London.

 13. These international developments profoundly affected Czechoslovakia. For the first time since the end of the war President Benes, though he perhaps did not appreciate it till too late, was in face of the choice between East and West which, according to his policy, must never arise for Czechoslovakia. The Marshall Plan Conferences raised the issue for Czechoslovakia in the most brutal possible way. Czechoslovakia at first accepted the invitation to attend the Paris Conference, and Dr. Benes himself wrote a memorandum explaining why it was necessary for Czechoslovakia to take part, and why Czech participation was acceptable from the point of view of the Soviet Union. Czechoslovakia withdrew her acceptance under a direct threat from the Soviet Government, Generalissimo Stalin himself making it plain to the Czechs, round a table in Moscow on 9th July, 1947, that participation would be regarded as “a step against the Soviet Union.” Dr. Benes’s doctor records that on learning of the Soviet demand (with which Czechoslovakia had no option but to comply) Dr. Benes did not sleep during the whole night and the following morning had a stroke.

 14. Thus, the year 1948 opened in a troubled atmosphere for Czechoslovakia. When I assumed duty at this post towards the end of January everybody was speculating on the issue of the forthcoming elections, from which it was generally supposed that the Communists would emerge with reduced numbers. Dr. Benes, in the private conversation that I had with him (on 11th February, 1948), was gravely troubled by the international situation and the differences between the Great Powers, but he expressed surprising confidence about the internal situation. I asked him frankly whether he thought that he would be able to maintain the democratic position of the country, and whether he anticipated that the Communists would get complete control. He replied emphatically that in his view the democratic position of the country could be held and that any possibility of a collapse of democracy could be absolutely excluded. He was pinning his faith on the issue of the elections, in which he thought that the Communists would lose ground. It is clear that during the weeks preceding the Communists coup d’état Dr. Benes was counting on a parliamentary solution of the mounting differences between the Communists and the anti-Communist parties and did not seriously reckon with the possibility of unconstitutional action by the Communist Party.

[TNA, CAB 121/359]

Keywords: post-war Eastern Europe, Czechoslovakia

1. Gottwald, Klement (1896 -1953) - Czechoslovak Communist politician. Prime Minister of Czechoslovakia (1946 - 1948), President of Czechoslovakia (1948 - 1953). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)