

## SUMMARY

### AN EARLY SPRING THAT CAME PREMATURELY...

#### Slovak Students in 1956

The presented publication focuses on the events related to the student protests at Slovak universities, especially in Bratislava, in the spring months of 1956. The protests are analysed in the context of political crisis faced by the communist regime in Czechoslovakia after the death of Joseph V. Stalin. Although mass protests culminated following the monetary reform of 1953 while power struggles in the leadership of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSC̣) came to an end in 1955, destalinization, accelerated by a secret report by Nikita S. Khrushchev, First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union read at the 20th Congress of the CPSU, provoked a new wave of public activation, which subsided only with the suppression of the Hungarian Revolution in October - November 1956.

The publication draws primarily on the study of the central archives of Slovakia and the Czech Republic (Slovak National Archives in Bratislava and National Archives in Prague), on the archival material of Comenius University and the Slovak University of Technology and on the interviews with active participants in these events. The author attempts to show these developments partly in a comparative perspective, in the context of events in Poland and Hungary, but also against the background of the policy towards the so-called intelligentsia, youth and universities, practised in the USSR. This comparative framework is important for the understanding of what inspired the KSC̣ leadership in shaping its policy towards university students.

The Communist Party's policy towards youth must be viewed, on the one hand, through the prism of self-sovietisation, i.e., the implementation of cultural patterns, institutions and political and social practices of the USSR by the Czechoslovak communist elites, and on the other, through the prism of the tendency to transfer their utopian vision of the new socialist man to the next generations. Another important ambition pursued by the presented publication is to track the evolution of the Communist Party's policy towards the so-called intelligentsia, i.e., towards those who made a living by using their brains. While such policy showed distrust of this stratum, an attitude which resulted in an effort to mould the so-called new intelligentsia from the ranks of workers or farmers, the Communist Party was also aware of the need to have at their disposal qualified workers, who were indispensable for the implementation of its ambitious

modernization program. Following the attempts to elevate blue-collar workers straight to the managerial positions, to organize preparatory courses for those interested in higher education among the labourers, and to liberalize “cadre” policy in the mid-1950s, KSĊ resorted to tightening class criteria for admitting new students to elite secondary schools and universities. The student protests in May 1956 only contributed to this practice. However, such ideologically motivated requirements proved to be too hard to reconcile with professional criteria, as many applicants from the preferred classes were unable to pass entrance tests or to meet university study requirements. Changes in the KSĊ policy towards youth are perceived against the background of gradual softening of the communist regime in the Czechoslovak Republic, referred to as destalinization. In this context, destalinization can be seen, with reference to Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, as a specific case of relaxing the totalitarian regime (the so-called detotalitisation), which occurred gradually in Czechoslovakia, without a clearly definable milestone. In the period under review, i.e., the latter half of the 1950s, it was partly due to the societal demand, although Czechoslovak society showed no interest in such a radical change as Hungary or Poland, and partly due to the regime’s internal decline. In the given period, the detotalitization was not so much a result of the decision of the ruling elites.

In the next part, the book attempts to identify why in the past, especially in the 1990s, not only the student events of 1956, but also the entire period of destalinization remained outside the focus of more thorough research in the Slovak and Czech setting. In addition to the fact that the reprisals during the era of Stalinism and of later “normalization” following the invasion and occupation of Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw Pact troops most significantly shaped the society and the fate of individuals, the period of destalinization was marked by the search for non-capitalist democratic alternatives to Stalinism, or rather to the Soviet model of socialism. This, however, was not in line with the dominant “totalitarian-historical” interpretation of the period of 1948-1968 in Czechoslovakia.

The presented publication focuses on the analysis of the atmosphere at universities in the mid-1950s. The study of primary sources points to the fact that despite external manifestations of loyalty and the absence of overt anti-regime demonstrations of undergraduate youth, alienation from the official ideology and participatory practices gradually increased among university students. This was especially true of the Czechoslovak Youth Union (ČSM), which was the only officially approved youth organization in Czechoslovakia in the post-1948 period. This institution, however, did not enjoy high prestige among young people; the same was also true of its individual officials. The alienation did not show so much in anti-regime activities as in the low interest in public affairs, typical among the university youth before 1956 and also later, in the latter half of the 1950s.

Although the student events did not bring about, nor were a signal of, the crisis of the communist regime that would jeopardise its existence, together with the speeches of intellectuals in April 1956 (during the 2nd Congress of Czechoslovak writers) and their written contributions in the Slovak Writers' Union weekly *Kultúrny život* in the autumn of 1956, they cast a doubt on the monolithic nature of Czechoslovak society, as the official rhetoric of the Communist Party leadership sought to portray it. Events at universities starting with the so-called pyjama revolution in the residence hall in Suvorova Street in Bratislava on January 17, 1956 up to student meetings at faculties and in residence halls in May 1956, gradually spun out of control of ČSM. Participatory practices, according to which ČSM was the only acceptable form of political socialization of youth, were thus questioned. Although a number of student meetings were held also under the auspices of this organization, in later months and during the years 1957 - 1958, their participants and organizers faced sanctions, and many were even expelled from the study. Although, unlike in Hungary and Poland, the official youth organization in Czechoslovakia did not collapse in 1956, as a result of the sanctions for activities that took place within this official youth institution, it gradually lost political relevance within the political system until it was brought under the direct control of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in 1959.

The publication also discusses the consequences of the student events of 1956 for further life of their actors and for the evolution of the Communist Party's policy towards university students in the latter half of the 1950s. It highlights the fact that the new attempt to sovietise higher education in the years 1959-1960 was motivated not only by practical needs, but also by efforts to strengthen the ideological and power influence of the Communist Party in universities. After 1960, the attempt ended in failure.

The publication analyses the period of destalinization not only through the prism of democratisation efforts and gradual weakening of the repressive character of the communist regime despite the temporary increase in pressure in 1957-1958, but also in the context of N.S. Khrushchev's efforts to formulate a new ideological vision of the Soviet model of socialism, which presupposed the building of a monolithic society based less on repressions and more on the voluntary consent of the population. The KSČ leadership actively, without evident pressure from outside, adopted the above ideas and worked hard to implement them in the Czechoslovak setting.

Although at the time it seemed that, unlike in Hungary or Poland, the official course enjoyed at least passive support of the majority of society, rather than willingly accepting the new political initiatives of the KSČ leadership, the population's response was more or less passive. In contrast to the above two countries, there were no adequate conditions for a more fundamental change as there was no major conflict within the Communist Party leadership that would trigger the

process. Yet, even under the post-totalitarian regime, political discourse could not be viewed exclusively in terms of collaboration or conflict, or of unilaterally targeted interactions, but also as a space for negotiations between the state and the youth, whose members used various avenues to establish their place in the existing society. This, naturally, does not mean that in a given context one can speak of a relationship between equal partners, but of mutual conditionality of the actions of individual actors. In such an environment, young people in Czechoslovakia of the latter half of the 1950s forged their path towards their own version of good life, also by feeding their own content into some of the demands of the communist power.

Also due to the student protests in 1956, the image of young people in the official documents of the Communist Party and state authorities during the period covered by this publication diverged significantly from the idealized image of youth, presented as enthusiastically attuned supporters of the regime by the propaganda of the time, and it was especially different from the picture proffered by the official propaganda in the years 1948-1953. This change in the perception of the young generation was not triggered by any historical juncture; it took place gradually, in parallel with the weakening of totalitarian control over society and the revolutionary enthusiasm of the early 1950s. Nevertheless, the student events of May 1956 played an important part in the shift in the perception of young people from the regime's supporters to those who presented a potential source of conflict.

Thus, despite ideological indoctrination and repressive practices, including restrictions on the right to education on political grounds in the latter half of the 1950s, the ambition to build a "new socialist man" proved to be a challenging task, as the new generation either did not conform to the required standards of conduct and thinking or identified with them only in part. Attempts to get out of the totalitarian control undertaken by the young, as well as by other social strata, continued, albeit quietly and without major shocks, even though there were no adequate institutional and legal conditions for such a process. Yet, this escape did not automatically mean a transition to any form of open dissent; rather, it manifested itself in seeming conformism, which, however, subsequently created a space for the formulation of one's own life strategies as well as for parallel cultural and value discourse. This could, but did not necessarily, come into conflict with the officially defined version of good life.