

Chronicle

1988 — A Year of Anniversaries in Czechoslovakia

In October 1988 Czechoslovakia celebrated 70 years since the founding of the first independent republic. Not, however, 70 years of independence as the republic's short history has been punctuated by two periods of occupation: the first by the Nazis, following the Munich agreement of 1938, and the second by Czechoslovakia's Warsaw Pact Allies in 1968. The anniversaries of both fell in 1988.

For the Czechoslovak Communist Party 25 February 1988 marked 40 years since it assumed power. Distinctive red and white banners went up all over the country announcing the 40th anniversary of 'Victorious February', and commemorating Klement Gottwald, the first communist premier.

But for all the propaganda, the celebrations fell flat. A rally to mark the event, held on Prague's Old Town Square on 25 February, was a cold and lifeless affair. Workers, shepherded from their places of employment, showed little enthusiasm, and western observers reported that many left the square as the new party leader, Miloš Jakeš, began to speak. For those who waited, it was a speech which pulled no punches. In it Jakeš endorsed moderate reform, but firmly refuted any comparison between the Prague

Spring of 1968 and current Soviet-style restructuring. Whether on account of the wintry weather, or the general lack of interest, the rally, to which Czechoslovak radio and television had allocated 90 minutes of broadcasting time, was over in just 30 minutes.

Those who expected a similarly apathetic response to the 20th anniversary of the 1968 invasion must have been greatly surprised by events. Not even Charter '77, for 11 years Czechoslovakia's main voice of dissent, expected demonstrations on such a large scale — an estimated 10,000 people participated. The human rights group issued a statement on 14 July condemning the invasion of 21 August 1968 as a 'national disaster' and calling on Czechs and Slovaks to 'throw off their yoke of fear and voice their opinions freely'. Then on 24 July a newly-formed independent group, the Democratic Initiative, issued a strongly-worded statement. Among its demands were the immediate withdrawal of Soviet troops from Czechoslovakia and the resignations of President Husak and the then chief ideologist, Vasil Bilak, 'who more than anybody else epitomise the authoritative regime imposed after the 1968 invasion'.

But the initiative for a public

commemoration and discussion of the anniversary of the invasion came from three lesser known groups. The recently-formed Initiative for the Demilitarisation of Society, known as the Independent Peace Group (IPG), issued a leaflet advocating that citizens wear the colours of the national flag on 21 August. A second leaflet, signed by ten previously unknown activists, called for an assembly on Wenceslas Square on 20 August. Finally, a group calling itself Czech Children announced it would hold a peaceful demonstration on the Square at 6.00pm on 21 August.

In a clear effort to defuse a potentially embarrassing scene on the anniversary, police rounded up members of the International Peace Group some days before the planned rally, detaining some for 48 hours and conducting searches of the homes of others. But despite these measures, and more detentions of IPG members and prominent Charterists on the anniversary itself, several thousand people assembled on Wenceslas Square. There they held discussions that were 'public, open and critical of current economic and political problems in Czechoslovakia', according to the Peace Group. On the basis of their discussions, the participants drew up and signed an agreed statement, which makes the following demands:

1. The withdrawal of Soviet troops from our country.
2. Official condemnation of the military intervention of Warsaw Pact states in Czechoslovakia in 1968 as a violation of international law.
3. A truthful reassessment of the events of 1968 and so-called normalisation.
4. A declaration of free, democratic elections with the right to independent candidates.
5. Freedom of the media and the abolition of censorship.

6. The observance of basic human rights, as set out in the International Pact on Civil and Political Rights.

7. The release of political prisoners and the rehabilitation of all those who have been, or are, persecuted for political and religious convictions.

8. The right to independent activity and freedom for independent groups to exist publicly.

9. The dissemination of the full text of this statement by the mass media.

The statement is addressed to President Husak, the Czechoslovak government and national press agencies.

If Czechoslovak authorities were surprised at the size of the demonstration (officially estimated at 4,000 strong), Czechs and Slovaks, as well as western observers, were surprised that young people formed a majority of participants. As Charter '77 points out in a document dated 8 September and addressed to the government:

The fact that young people, who were mostly children in 1968, could after 20 years of subjection to the mass media's 'normalisation' propaganda take to the streets to express disagreement with what they learnt in school, demonstrates the complete failure of the rigid official ideology. It is clear that the gulf between the present leadership and society, particularly its younger members, is deeper than many people suspected.

The government, caught unawares by this attack from a younger, and hitherto silent sector of society, retaliated in the only way it knew, by rediscovering its tactics of the 1950s. When five independent groups, Charter '77, Czech Children, the Democratic Initiative, the Independent Peace Group and the Society of Friends of the USA, announced on 10 October their plans for a peaceful

assembly on 28 of that month, the leadership was already preparing for confrontation.

On the same day as the announcement was made, the Czechoslovak Communist Party Central Committee plenum was making major personnel changes. The result was a strengthening of the government hard line, with moderates Lubomir Strougal and Peter Colotka ousted. Party leader Miloš Jakeš used the occasion to make a speech in favour of socialist pluralism but condemning what he called 'anti-socialist political structures', a clear warning to the dissident groups. Predictably, the party daily, *Rude Pravo*, backed Mr Jakeš. In an article on 22 October it warned against 'attempts to misuse the National Day of 28 October for anti-state provocation'. In true Stalinist-style it described these attempts as 'counter-revolutionary' in essence and cautioned that security forces would take action to restore order.

But the first signs of government nervousness vis-a-vis the 70th anniversary of the Czechoslovak Republic were visible as early as 17 September. This was the start of a traditional two-day pilgrimage to Šaštín by the Slovak Catholic Church. Prior to the pilgrimage, three prominent Czech Catholics and Charter '77 signatories, Václav Benda, Václav Malý and Augustin Navrátil, made a public appeal to Czech and Moravian Catholics to join their Slovak brethren at Šaštín 'to show their desire for the fraternity of Czechs and Slovaks on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the republic'. The authorities responded by holding Benda under virtual house arrest for three days. Fr Václav Malý was warned against leaving Prague, interrogated for eight hours and threatened with vilification in the media. Three Slovak Catholics, Bishop Ján Korec,

Ján Čarnogurský and František Mikloško were also forcibly prevented from attending the pilgrimage.

Partly to assuage public national feeling and to counter the planned unofficial demonstration on 28 October, the Federal Assembly on 21 September redesignated the anniversary of the Czechoslovak state a public holiday. An official rally to mark the event was then planned for 27 October, and an existing law was amended to prevent unofficial gatherings taking place in the 'historic centre of Prague'. With the unofficial rally now declared illegal, police had carte-blanche to carry out searches on the homes of independent activists and make arrests. At least 200 arrests were made in the week prior to 28 October. One of those arrested on suspicion of distributing leaflets advertising the demonstration was Fr František Lizna, an unlicensed Catholic priest and Charterist. A month after his arrest, Fr Lizna was still in police custody. He stood trial on 29 November and was sentenced to two months in detention.

Ignoring the police ban, a crowd several thousand strong filled Prague's Wenceslas Square on the afternoon of 28 October. True to their word, police in riot gear were waiting and as the crowd commenced its programme by singing the national anthem, the police launched a violent attack and made wholesale arrests. *CTK*, the official press agency, later admitted 87 arrests, although the actual figure is likely to be very much higher.

Czech police tactics on 28 October were strongly reminiscent of those employed by Slovak police against a large assembly of Catholics on 25 March in Bratislava. In Prague as in Bratislava, water-cannon and tear-gas were used to good effect in clearing the main square of protesters. But there is another similarity

between the Bratislava vigil and this latest rally in Prague: the fearlessness of the participants.

These recent initiatives in Czechoslovakia speak of the beginning of

change in society: apathy is giving way to public protest, and fear to courage.

Compiled by members of Keston College staff

Yugoslav Press on Religion

Contemporary Christian News Service (Aktualnosti Kršćanska Sadašnjosti).

AKSA is a weekly Catholic news service published in Croatian in Zagreb by the organisation Contemporary Christianity. It includes reports on items in the Yugoslav secular press.

Religious Communities and Society

The involvement of religious communities, in particular the churches, in Yugoslav society has been a topic for debate in the media throughout the year. Comments by churches on the proposed amendments to the Yugoslav Constitution have provoked much of that debate. A document, published by the Yugoslav Bishops' Conference, suggesting that amendments to the Constitution should bring it into line with Christian principles and provide better guarantees of religious freedom received a negative response from some state officials. In an interview published in *Oslobodjenje* (Sarajevo, 19.12.87) Bozo Rudez, President of the Zagreb City Commission for Relations with Religious Communities, declared that religious freedom was already fully secured by the Constitution. The party journal *Komunist* (Zagreb, 1 and 8.4.88) printed a two-part article

on the churches' intervention in the constitutional debate. The article focused on the document of the Yugoslav Bishops' Conference and also on documents on the same theme published by *Iustitia et Pax* (the Commission of the Bishops' Conference of Slovenia) and by the Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church. *Komunist* declared that the Federal Commission for Relations with Religious Communities thought the documents an attempt to politicise religion and indirectly to inaugurate a multi-party system by securing the status of partner for the churches in government discussions. The ideas expressed in the documents, said *Komunist*, far exceeded the limits imposed by the Yugoslav Constitution. Accusations of neo-clericalism and attempting to politicise religion have been directed against the churches, and especially the Catholic Church in Croatia and the Serbian Orthodox Church. One such accusation was made by sociologist Boris Vusković in an interview in *Nedjeljna Dalmacija* (Split, 20.12.87), (*AKSA* 25.12.87, 15.4.88). Amfilohije Radović, the new Serbian Orthodox Bishop of Banat, has been accused more than once of being anti-communist and a Serbian nationalist. (*AKSA*, March and April, 1988).

At their meeting of 2 February 1988 the Federal Committee for