CHAPTER 11

The Reconstitution of Czechoslovakia, the Third Republic, and the Rise of Communism, 1945–1948

The very thought of getting rid of a category of citizens for the sake of simplicity, touches on the basic concepts of political democracy, the axioms of which include that on the long run all, also the most difficult, political problems, may be solved by its methods. A confession, that one cannot deal under any circumstances with a group of one’s own citizens, represents a declaration of bankruptcy of democracy. (Johann Wolfgang Brügel)\(^1\)

From mid-1945 until mid-1946, a Czechoslovak Republic existed only in theory. There was neither a Czechoslovak state nor a remotely democratic political system. Initially, President Beneš ruled the Bohemian lands per decrees, rapidly expanding the legal provisions of the Košice Program concerning German- and Hungarian-speaking Nazis, fascists, or collaborators towards a policy of general “transfer.” In July 1945, a number of decrees created the legal basis for a systematic settlement of the “Sudetenland” by Czech-speakers, implying the termination of the German-speakers’ presence in the area. On August 2, 1945, a decree excluded the German and Hungarian naturalization of Czechoslovak citizens from the blanket retraction of all political changes that had happened between 1938 and 1945. This meant that minority citizens suddenly found themselves living in a re-established Czechoslovakia without citizenship. One of the Beneš Decrees, this one of October 25, 1945 “nationalized” all property owned by “non-citizens” in Czechoslovakia except some immediate personal belongings.\(^2\)

On October 28, 1945, the anniversary of Czechoslovakia’s independence in 1918, a provisional assembly was constituted in Prague. It included forty delegates of each party, as well as representatives of various trade unions, cultural organizations etc., in practice almost all Communists. The only legal parties were those that had allegedly not been compromised by Nazi or fascist collaboration and were now allowed to join the so-called Národní fronta [Czech: National Front], an-all party umbrella group, under the stipulations of the Košice Program.

\(^{1}\) Brügel, Tschechen und Deutsche, 270 [quotation].

There were separate parties for the Bohemian lands and for Slovakia. In the Bohemian lands these were the four parties of the London government-in-exile: the Czech-speaking Communists, the ČsNS, the Social Democrats, and the Czech-speaking Catholic Party. In Slovakia, there were only the two partners of the Slovak National Council—the Slovak-speaking Communists and the Democratic Party, a union of non-Communist anti-Fascists. The Agrarian Party and the Hlinka Party were effectively outlawed, along with all splinter and minority parties, including the Jewish Party. On February 28, 1946 the provisional assembly retroactively passed into law Beneš’s over 100 presidential decrees, which he had first begun issuing in 1940.3

Initially, Slovakia was *de facto* ruled by the Slovak National Council, keeping its own army and currency, and raising its own customs, including on its western border with the Bohemian lands, all in line with the Košice Program. Gradually, however, Bratislava started being subordinated to Prague's rule via a number of legal adjustments, tellingly called the Prague Agreements (June 1945–July 1946). The dramatic decline of the Slovak position through these agreements reflected another subjection occurring behind the scenes and always running one step ahead—that of the Slovak-speaking Communists by their Czech-speaking comrades, in the name of “party solidarity.” After the Communist takeover of 1948, the Slovak National Council lost all political significance. At its nadir in 1951, it met only once—to mark the anniversary of the Slovak Uprising.4

Subcarpathian Ruthenia was not rejoined with Czechoslovakia any more. After Soviet “liberation” in October 1944, the province became a temporary buffer state, and between November 1944 and January 1945 the administration and economy there underwent a Soviet *Gleichschaltung*, while all Czechoslovak political influence was eliminated. Prague thus merely recognized the facts on the ground when it ceded the province to the Soviet Union in the Czechoslovak-Soviet treaty of June 29, 1945. Ivan Pop pointed out the illegality of this treaty, in which a provisional government made constitutional changes, as well as its similarity to the Munich Agreement. Now it was Prague and Moscow who decided the fate of half-a-million people over their heads, without consulting a single Ruthenian representative. Subcarpathian Ruthenia was officially incorporated into the Soviet Union in January 1946.5

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5 Encyclopedia of Rusyn History and Culture, s.v. “Czechoslovak-Soviet Treaty of 1945” (by I. Pop); Encyclopedia of Rusyn History and Culture, s.v. “Transcarpathian Ukraine” (by I. Pop).