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Benes, Back In Office, Unchanged By Exile.

Mann, Klaus

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By Cpl. KLAUS MANN
Staff Correspondent

PRAGUE, May 19 (Delayed)—Czechoslovakia's great leader, President Edward Benes, who returned to Prague May 17 after being forced into exile by the German invaders, has not changed in the intervening bitter years. As keen and alert as ever, he doesn't look his 61 years.

"It has been a hard time for my country and for me," he said greeting this reporter, "but not for one moment have I lost hope and confidence. I have known all along the cause of justice and liberty would come out victorious in the end. I have never doubted that I would return, a little sooner or a little later, and that I would be received by my people the way I actually was received the day before yesterday."

No doubt it is his ardent idealism to which this statesman owes his energy and endurance. But this idealistic elan is combined with a good deal of realistic shrewdness and political instinct.

Benes was able to become a true leader because he has both faith and flexibility—a combination of impulses which make him akin to the late Franklin D. Roosevelt.

NATION UNITED

Like Roosevelt, Benes has the talent to recognize the most important, most urgent problems as such and to tackle them instead of worrying about secondary matters.

"For the past six years," he said, "there was only one thing I had to keep in mind and on which I had to concentrate all my thoughts and efforts—the liberation of my nation. Right now, the great task ahead is to stabilize conditions in this liberated country and to prevent a repetition of a similar disaster. Everything else is of relatively minor significance."

Benes always had been optimistic even when things didn't look too good for him and for Czechoslovakia. At this moment, however, his optimism is founded on facts and prospects. His country, he feels, has emerged from its ordeal in surprisingly good fashion. The nation is more united than ever; there have been few quislings.

The uprising of Prague's population against the Nazi tyrants which started on May 5 was "really first-class," as Benes put it.

Now, the uprising finished, the administration of the republic is firmly in the hands of the Czechoslovakian Government, notwithstanding the present division of the country into two different zones—one occupied by American troops, the other by the Russians.

AMITY WITH RUSSIA

"The Russians," he said, "have so far fulfilled conscientiously all their promises and I don't doubt that they will continue to do so in the future. But of course, we will have to live up to our obligations as well. For instance, it is our duty to feed Russian forces so long as they are in our country. That may not always be easy, but it has to be done. Besides, I am sure that our economic situation will improve rapidly. Important parts of our industrial plants have fortunately remained intact. I venture to predict that two or three years from now, Czechoslovakia will have regained the prosperity she used to enjoy before the German occupation."

"Nationalization of heavy industry may be part of the new economic program," he said, "but it will be carried out gradually and moderately. The first to be affected will be certain estates hitherto in German hands, as for instance the so-called Hermann Goering works."

There is no reason, according to Benes, to rush any political issues. There will be general elections in due time, but no date has been fixed as yet.

"Everybody in the country knows," he said, "that democracy is safe and will be maintained under all circumstances. Even now, major political parties operate freely and independently."

Benes is not afraid that interest of the little nations will be affected unfavorably by a lasting alliance of the Big Three. On the contrary, he feels that the permanence of the present coalition is the only basis upon which all nations, large or small, can pin their hopes for future security.

The Stars and Stripes, Rome
May 26, 1945

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