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The Mysterious Czech Turnabout.

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Observers in Prague View Reversal on Paris Conference as Indicative Of Indecision Among Rulers in Moscow Themselves

By Erika Mann

PRAGUE. NON-COMMUNIST circles here continue to be mystified by their government's Paris turnabout. Never—they say—would the Cabinet's initial decision to accept the Anglo-French invitation have been unanimous had the Communists foreseen the Soviet veto. Even those who are ready to believe that in their eagerness to be in on the Paris talks President Benes and his non-Communist ministers would have dared to face the Kremlin with a fait accompli, reject the theory that anything could have prompted the Communists to play ball unless they had reason to expect Moscow to do likewise. Was it then—people wonder—the Soviet government who changed their minds regarding Czechoslovakian participation in the Paris talks, and if so, what caused them within twenty-four hours to turn a green light into a red one?

On July 4—three days before the Czech Cabinet's unanimous acceptance of the Paris invitation—this reporter spent some seventy minutes with President Benes. He spoke freely of his country's delicate position between East and West but firmly insisted that, contrary to allegations circulating abroad, his nation and government were not, and did not expect to be, subjected to any outside pressure. Internally at least, the President declared, Czechoslovakia was entirely free. Communist influence within the government was no stronger than the outcome of last year's elections entitled it to be. (From the May, 1946, elections the Communists emerged with 32 per cent of all votes as the strongest single party. As such, it occupies today nine ministries out of a total of twenty-five. Key positions held by Communists include the Premiership, as well as the Ministries of Information, of the Interior and of Agriculture, whereas other top spots such as the Presidency, and the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, National Defense and Education are controlled by the non-Communist majority.)

Promise on Elections

As for the reported Communist opposition to next year's elections, the President said that the Communists had long since acknowledged their share in the government's pledge. The elections, he declared, would be held as promised and they would be as free, undisturbed and unhampered by fear as were those of 1946. He firmly denied reports according to which the Soviets had meant to interfere with last year's elections by moving sizable contingents of Red Army troops through Czechoslovakia at the critical moment. The troop movement in question, he said, was planned by officers in the field and for purely military reasons. When told that the presence of Russian soldiers at this particular time was undesirable, those in charge promptly postponed the movement.

As an additional bit of evidence for the friendly reasonableness which the U.S.S.R. had always displayed toward its small democratic neighbor, Dr. Benes recalled the punctuality with which, in the summer of 1945, the Red liberators had withdrawn from Czechoslovakia. "No sooner," he said, "had Premier Stalin been informed of the exact date on which the American Army proposed to quit than he notified me that the Red Army would leave simultaneously. And leave they did—all of them and on the dot."

Took Definite Stand

In answer to a question concerning the impending Paris aid talks, Dr. Benes said that the Anglo-French invitation had not yet been received but that even so this coun-

try's acceptance was virtually assured. While the Cabinet would, of course, have the last word, he expected no opposition from any quarters. Asked whether "Moscow" was likely to approve of the proposed Czech move, the President stated that he had every reason to think so.

There was nothing tentative in the way he spoke. Apparently he had been in touch with Moscow and thought he knew what the Soviet reaction was likely to be. Several times in the course of the conversation—though not in this particular context—he referred to his personal dealings with Premier Stalin. In fact, no other Russian name was ever mentioned. It seemed permissible to assume that he had received certain assurances from quarters close to the Generalissimo.

This possibility cannot be ruled out in the light of further events. Three days after this correspondent's visit with President Benes, his calmly confident prediction came true and without one dissenting vote the Cabinet accepted the Anglo-French invitation. On the whole, the news was received with satisfaction as well as surprise. Those seeking to explain the Communists' unexpected compliance pointed out that full success of the all-important two-year economic plan depended to some degree on the accessibility to Czechoslovakia of certain raw materials which only the West could supply in both the needed quantities and the desired quality. If anyone was, the Czech Communist party was vitally interested in seeing the plan succeed, which, though approved by all parties, was Communist-initiated. Any failure or partial failure resulting from a Czech refusal and traceable to Communist resistance was bound to harm severely the party's prestige and its chances in next year's elections.

In the Kremlin or Out?

Well-informed circles, however, insisted, nevertheless, that nothing could have swung the Communist vote in the face of actual, expected, or even possible Soviet opposition. Despite the President's unparalleled popularity and the very real respect in which he is known to be held by all members of his government, he would never have won this battle, had he not succeeded in removing every conceivable doubt from the minds of his Communist ministers. And since, officially, the issue at stake had not been discussed between the Czechoslovakian and Soviet governments, Dr. Benes's trump card would seem to have

been of a semi-official, yet irrefutable character.

That, twenty-four hours after this trump card was played, it should have been refuted by the very person, or persons who issued it, appears wholly unlikely. Supposing that the semi-official green light followed by Dr. Benes emanated from the Kremlin, the stop sign startlingly encountered by his ministers must have been erected by Soviet policy makers outside that venerable palace.

To observers here, no other solution of the Czech riddle carries much conviction. Even the theory advanced by some that the Cabinet merely wished to demonstrate its desire to the Western world, knowing full well that its unanimous vote would be presently nullified, proves unsatisfactory. It is pointed out that the Communists, at least, would not have knowingly exposed themselves to a Soviet rebuff and that their acceptance, for one, could not but have been based on some sort of advance Soviet approval. And since "Moscow" appears unlikely to have changed its mind within twenty-four hours, it is thought that "Moscow's" mind was split in the first place.

The 'Reality' of Russia

It deserves to be noted, though, that even the Conservatives, who were most anxious for their nation to be represented at Paris, fail to see how the government could have extricated itself from the Soviet embrace. When interviewed by this correspondent, a spokesman for the People's party (Catholic) professed to have been more surprised by the Cabinet's acceptance than by the subsequent withdrawal.

"What we were confronted with," he said, "was, on the one hand, the utter haziness of the American offer, along with the strong probability that certain elements of the Marshall plan would prove unacceptable to this republic. On the other hand, there was the vital reality of neighboring Russia on whose friendship and continued good will we depend and whom we could hardly afford to offend even for the sake of a more promising invitation."

His willingness and ability, however, to understand his government's plight does little to cheer the average, thinking, non-Communist Czech. For the first time since the liberation he feels his country's freedom of action seriously encroached upon from without. Or, as one famous Czech liberal put it: "On a sudden, my nostrils were assailed by a faint, yet horrid smell of Munich."

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