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THE ATTITUDE OF GREAT BRITAIN
AND THE UNITED STATES
TO THE GOVERNMENTAL CRISIS
IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA IN FEBRUARY 1948

In February 1948, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, with Soviet backing, assumed full political power in the country. Until that time the CPCz, though playing the leading role in the government, had had to share power with three Czech parties (National–Socialist, People’s and Social Democratic) and the Slovak Democratic Party. When in July 1947 the Czechoslovak government rejected participation in talks on the American Marshall plan for the reconstruction of wardevastated Europe (the Czechoslovak cabinet gave in to Stalin’s pressure), a conflict between the Communist Party and the other parties became increasingly probable. A serious trial of strength took place in Slovakia in November 1947, but it did not satisfy the Slovak Communists, for they failed to eliminate representatives of the Slovak Democratic Party from the local government, called the Plenipotentiaries’ Council. The position of the Slovak Democratic Party did weaken, but the party was saved from a definitive reverse by the attitude of the non–Communist Czech parties. The conflict was temporarily staved off at the end of 1947, but this did not mean that the CPCz intended to renounce its plans to gain the monopoly of power in the state. The Czechoslovak Communists had already been urged to strive for power at the meeting of nine Communist parties at Szklarska Poręba¹, which was convoked by Stalin (September 22 to 27) and ended with the establishment of a body called Cominform and the proclamation of a vision of the world divided into two opposing blocs, one led by the Soviet Union and the other by the United States and Great Britain. Only effective help from the Anglo–Saxon states could have given the non–Communist parties a chance to prevent the change

¹ K. Kaplan, *Nekrvavá revoluce*, Toronto 1985, pp. 78–80.

of the Czechoslovak political system into the model existing in the other East–Central European countries. The purpose of this article, which to a large extent is based on Foreign Office documents kept in the Public Record Office in London, is to show the attitude of the two Anglo–Saxon states to the February conflict within the Czechoslovak government, a conflict which was of key importance for the future of Czechoslovakia. The political events of the last few weeks preceding the showdown and the victory of the Czechoslovak Communists have also been taken into account.

On November 27 and 18, 1947, the Central Committee of the Communist Party Of Czechoslovakia held a meeting, the principal aim of which was to overcome defeatist moods in the party apparatus. The leadership of the party, far from renouncing the methods of activity it had applied up to then, declared inflexibility over any issue that might become a matter of dispute with the non–Communist parties. It thus rejected in advance the possibility of compromise solutions. The meeting not yet resolve to launch a concrete action to remove the non–Communist parties from power, for as the Minister of Information, Václav Kopecký, a supporter of radical measures in the party leadership, explained, the CPCz already had great power. “Its direct use”, he added, “might be called a dictatorship”. Kopecký said: “We shall choose the moment when to use force, so that nobody could accuse us of departing from the democratic road”. Kopecký was reassuring the party functionaries, disappointed by the November setback, that there was no reason for apprehension, for the “right moment” was bound to come sooner or later².

In a dispatch to the Secretary of State, George Marshall, of December 12, the American Chargé d’Affaires in Prague, John Bruins (Ambassador Lawrence A. Steinhardt had left for the United States on November 24), noting “comparative political calm” in Czechoslovakia, expressed regret that the “Czechoslovak moderates seem unable to shake their defensive psychosis and seize (the) present opportunity to take (the) initiative”³. Ten days later Bruins himself succumbed to the atmosphere of apparent calm, reminiscent of the calm before a storm, and in a dispatch to the State Department of December 22 wrote that at the beginning of January the Czechoslovak Communists would seek to achieve their aims without going beyond the constitutional framework. The American diplomat’s conviction was strengthened by the Czechoslovak Foreign Minister, Jan Masaryk, who maintained that “it is unlikely” for the Communist strategy “to be altered

² *Ibidem*, pp. 106, 112, 14–145; J. Belda, M. Bouček, Z. Deyl, M. Klimeš, *Na rozhraní dvou epoch*, Praha 1968, pp. 195–197; F. Fejtö, *Praski zamach stanu 1948, (The Prague Coup d’Etat of 1948)*, Warszawa 1984, pp. 67–69.

³ W. Ullmann, *The United States in Prague 1945–1948*, New York 1978, pp. 140–141.

unless orders to (the) contrary from Moscow are received". Bruins gave three reasons for his prognosis: First, the "non-revolutionary character of (the) Czech people who would probably react to such (extra-parliamentary) methods in (a) manner unfavourable to (the) Communists". Secondly, the economic requirements of the USSR, for "unorthodox Communist election methods would impair Czech ability to get (the) necessary raw material from (the) west", and this would affect the Czechoslovak supplies of industrial goods for the Soviet Union. Thirdly, the stance of President Edvard Beneš whose "intellectual vigor" had not been weakened by the illness he had suffered from. According to Bruins, the supporters of the parliamentary system might expect Beneš "to use his position, strongly to resist", should the Communists organise an "extra-legal action"⁴.

The State Department believed that the Czechoslovak president had recovered sufficiently to lead an active political life, which in the opinion of Francis Williamson, chief of the Section for Central European Affairs, "augured well for the coming elections", all the more so as the "communists have little chance of securing a clear majority in free elections". The only thing Williamson anticipated was that the Communists would, by means of "their usual tricks of pressure, intimidation and subversion", try to achieve "a more favourable result" in the elections. Assuring Denis Allen of the British Embassy in Washington that the State Department was far from "having wiped Czechoslovakia off the slate", he expressed hope for the victory of the non-Communist parties, without indicating how the United States would support them⁵.

The British Ambassador in Prague, Philip Nichols, held a different view of what Beneš could do and, being influenced by the Czechoslovak president, had a very critical opinion of Czechoslovak society. After the farewell dinner which he gave for Beneš on December 2, Nichols, who was about to leave his post, came to the conclusion that he should change his previous opinion that the president "might perhaps continue to serve his country for another five or even ten years". "Indeed", wrote Nichols to the Foreign Office on December 5, "if Beneš were subject to any real series of shocks, as he was at the time of Munich for instance, I doubt if he would weather the storm". "I do not say", continued the ambassador, "he would die, but I think he might emerge a completely broken man"⁶.

⁴ Foreign Relations of the United States (henceforward referred to as FRUS), Diplomatic Papers 1947, vol. IV, Eastern Europe; the Soviet Union, Washington 1972, p. 255.

⁵ Public Record Office (henceforward referred to as PRO) FO-371, vol. 71311, N 480/480/12, Allen's letter to Hankey of 8.1.1948.

⁶ *Ibidem*, vol. 65787, N 14223/12/12G, Nichols's letter to Hankey of 5.12.1947.

Nearly a week later, in a letter to the British Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, Nichols repeated Beneš's opinion on Czechoslovak society which, in the president's view, consisted of "too many cowards and calculators". The ambassador, who shared this opinion, admitted that he had never before heard such strong formulations from the head of the Czechoslovak state. Though Nichols was not certain whether Czechoslovakia would "finally disappear behind 'the iron curtain'", he thought her fate would be decided "within the next years, perhaps even sooner"⁷. Unlike British diplomacy, the American diplomats were, at the end of 1947, under the influence of the encouraging statements of Beneš, who assured representatives of the Western world that "the turning point had been reached" in November, and although another attack might be expected, "the severity of any future crisis will be less pronounced"⁸.

When Ambassador Nichols left Prague on December 14, Chargé d'Affaires Anthony Rumbold began to comment on the situation in Czechoslovakia. In a dispatch to the Foreign Office of December 18, Rumbold reported two facts: the signing of the Czechoslovak–Soviet trade agreement on December 11, 1947 under which Czechoslovakia was to obtain 400,000 tons of grain and 200,000 tons of fodder in return for supplying the Soviet Union with products of the high industry for two years, and the breakdown of the Foreign Ministers' Conference (the debates were held in London from November 25 to December 15, 1947 and concerned Germany); in his opinion these events "will redound to the benefit of the Communists and weaken the position of those who have been fighting for closer friendship with the West and against absorption into the Soviet sphere". Similar views were held in the political circles of the Czechoslovak non–Communist parties, which succumbed to "an atmosphere of gloom"⁹ after the Great Powers' failure to reach an agreement on Germany. Several months before this, Beneš had taken the possibility of the failure of the Foreign Ministers' Conference into consideration, voicing this in his talk with Nichols on September 6¹⁰. It should be emphasized that at the end of 1947 the British were more realistic than the Americans in appraising the situation in Czechoslovakia, where the Communists were preparing to play the role already performed by the other Communist parties in East–Central Europe.

At the beginning of January 1948, British foreign policy gathered *momentum*. At a meeting of the cabinet on January 8, Bevin proposed that

⁷ *Ibidem*, N 14483/12/12, Nichols's letter to Bevin of 11.12.1947.

⁸ FRUS, 1947, vol. IV, pp. 248–250; Fejtö, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

⁹ PRO, FO–371, vol. 65795, N 14640/207/12, Rumbold's dispatch to FO, No. 67, 18.12.1947, Weekly Information Summary (WIS), 11.12–17.12.1947.

¹⁰ PRO, FO–371, vol. 65785, N 10605/12/12, Nichols's letter to Hankey of 6.12.1947.

Great Britain should suggest the establishment of a union of states in Western Europe "in order to resist the increasing penetration of Soviet influence". The Foreign Secretary was of the opinion that the United States could only grant material aid to the West European countries, but was unable to oppose Communist ideology by any ideas. According to him, the West European countries "despise the spiritual values of America" and would be willing to submit to the "political and moral guidance" of Great Britain. Consequently, Bevin recommended the launching of a new information and propaganda policy which would present "the satellite countries as Russia's new colonial empire, serving Russia's strategic and economic interests at the cost of the freedom and living standards of the Eastern European peoples". Contrary to the propaganda conducted by the Americans, British publicity should "emphasise the weakness of Communism rather than its strength". With regard to East-Central Europe the British should come out "against totalitarianism in all its manifestations and particularly against the suppression of human rights and the fundamental freedoms". The cabinet approved Bevin's proposals¹¹.

Soon afterwards, in the middle of January, the Foreign Office focused its attention on Czechoslovakia. Two weeks earlier, news had reached London from Prague that Czechoslovakia might soon conclude political treaties with Romania and Bulgaria, which would not be clearly directed against Germany. The British were alarmed in particular by the possibility of a treaty with Bulgaria, for London feared that Czechoslovakia might be drawn into the conflict with Greece on the side of the Balkan countries, which were supporting the Communist guerilla warfare in that country. The British Chargé d'Affaires in Prague, Rumbold, informed the Foreign Office on January 9 that following Beneš's advice, Masaryk had asked the Soviet authorities whether the USSR would come to Czechoslovakia's help, should she support Bulgaria against another country than Germany, in view of the fact that the Czechoslovak-Soviet treaty of December 1943 provided for joint action only against Germany. Beneš hoped that the USSR would give a negative reply; this would have strengthened the position of those non-Communist ministers who were against the signing of the treaty in the form proposed by Bulgaria, which provided for mutual help "against any aggressor whatsoever". On January 14, the Soviets gave an evasive answer. They stated that it was up to the Czechoslovak authorities to decide which form

¹¹ *Ibidem*, CAB 128/12, CM 48/2, 8.1.1948; pp. 9–10; memoranda: CAB 129/22, CP 47/313, Extinction of Human Rights in Eastern Europe, 24.11.1947; CAB 129/23, CP 48/6, The First Aim of British Foreign Policy, 4.1.1948; CP 48/7, Review of Soviet Policy, 5.1.1948; CP 48/8, Future Foreign Publicity Policy, 4.1.1948.

of treaty with Bulgaria to choose. This dispelled the fears of the non-Communist politicians, but the question of the Czechoslovak-Bulgarian treaty was not taken off the agenda. The Bulgarian Prime Minister, Georgi Dimitrov, was expected to arrive in Prague in February. The Foreign Office viewed the proposed treaty with aversion, not only because of the Greek problem, though this question undoubtedly played an important role in British calculations. The British were of the opinion that a “fuller entry of Czechoslovakia into (the) Soviet bloc can only have an adverse effect on (the) freedom of (the) general elections due this spring”¹².

On January 16, the new British Ambassador to Czechoslovakia, Pierson Dixon, before leaving for Prague, met in the Foreign Office the Permanent Under-secretary of State, Orme Sargent, and Director of the Northern Department, Robert Hankey, to discuss British policy towards Czechoslovakia. They agreed that “we have to maintain Czechoslovakia in her present situation between East and West, or rather, to prevent her from slipping any more towards the East and to preserve her genuine independence”. In their view, in order to reach this aim it was necessary “to put some more spirit into the non-Communist Czechs and to encourage their rather flagging belief in the West”. Admitting that — as Prime Minister Clement Attlee had told Dixon four days before — “there were many scoundrels and time-servers among the Czechs who thought it prudent to climb on the Communist bandwagon while the going was still good”, the participants in the meeting came to the conclusion that it was necessary “to convince these people that they are backing the wrong horse”. The British should in particular try to dispel their illusion that “by entering more freely into the Soviet camp” they might “buy the right to freedom in internal affairs”, for “the developments in every Soviet satellite state for the last two years illustrate the futility of any such hope”¹³.

In defining the tasks facing British policy towards Czechoslovakia, the participants in the meeting proposed support for mutual visits by the politicians of the two countries (they expected Vice-Premier Petr Zenkel from the National Socialist Party and Foreign Trade Minister Hubert Ripka, representing the same party to pay a visit to Britain) and the maintenance of British-Czechoslovak cultural exchange on the existing high level. For political reasons they also wanted to conclude, before the elections, a trade agreement which would expand the goods exchange and thus help to

¹² *Ibidem*, FO-371, vol. 71302, N 732/303/12, Rumbold's dispatch to FO, No. 1159, 30.12.1947; Rumbold's dispatch to FO, No. 7, 9.1.1948; draft of FO's dispatch to Rumbold, January 1948; vol. 71264, N 567/82/12, Rumbold's report for Bevin, No. 5, for the period 8 — 14.1.1948, 16.1.1948.

¹³ *Ibidem*, vol. 71302, N 732/303/12, memorandum, entitled *British Policy towards Czechoslovakia*, 16.1.1948; record of Dixon's talk with Attlee, 12.1.1948.

eliminate the adverse British balance of trade. They realized that the Czechoslovak side could only supply goods which were not of basic importance for the British economy. "In accordance with our new policy of exposing the Soviet myth, special attention should be paid to Czechoslovakia", read the memorandum on the discussion. In the BBC radio programmes the Czechoslovak affairs were therefore to be treated jointly with the questions concerning the Soviet Union and other states of the East European bloc. The participants in the meeting also decided to acquaint the non-Communist representatives in Prague with the methods the Communists had used in preparing and carrying out the elections in the other countries of East-Central Europe¹⁴.

The original British concept to concentrate on showing the "drawbacks of communism, Russian exploitation of her Satellites, the superiority of western standards of life etc." was changed when representatives of the Foreign Office and the BBC had discussed the question of radio propaganda with regard to Czechoslovakia. It was decided not to link Czechoslovak issues with the affairs of the Eastern bloc and rather to emphasize "the special case of Czechoslovakia"¹⁵. London seemed to have realized that the original propaganda line would prematurely include the Czechoslovak state in the group of the other East-Central European countries, in which the Communist parties were already in fact wielding unlimited power.

At the end of January, the Foreign Office sent two brief memoranda to the Prague embassy, one of which concerned the way in which the elections had been held in Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria, while the other dealt with the Polish elections of January 1947. The idea to share knowledge on these subjects had arisen during Hankey's meeting with Jan Stránský, son of Jaroslav, the National Socialist Minister for Education. Jan Stránský had put forward a proposal to this effect, emphasizing that "such material would be very useful". He met with the understanding of his British interlocutor, who believed that "the Czechoslovaks need a little encouragement" and that "once they let their communists get properly on top of them they will never get out (of this situation) until there is some major cataclysm"¹⁶. The leaders of the National Socialist Party were thus supplied with material which

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, memorandum entitled *British Policy towards Czechoslovakia*; Hankey's note for Warner, 17.1.1948; N 1407/303/12, Elliott's memorandum, 5.2.1948.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, Hankey's letter to Dixon, 26.1.1948.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, vol. 71283, N 913/157/12, Hankey's note entitled *Czech Elections*, 10.1.1948; Hankey's letter to Dixon of 28.1.1948; memorandum entitled *Techniques used to influence election results in Communist dominated countries in South East Europe*, 21.1.1948; memorandum entitled *The Polish Elections* — January 1947; vol. 71392, N 732/303/12, Rumbold's letter to Hankey of 30.1.1948.

allowed them to prepare themselves for any contingencies that might arise during the Czechoslovak parliamentary elections due to be held in May.

While the British Foreign Office was trying to work out a concept of a positive policy towards Czechoslovakia, the American State Department manifested no activity in this field, even though Ambassador Steinhardt was staying in Washington at that time. It was the Chargé d'Affaires, Bruins, in Prague who suggested that the United States should make concerted moves testifying to its interest in Czechoslovakia. In a letter to Steinhardt of January 20, Bruins proposed that the United States should "make some gesture before the elections" in Czechoslovakia. It could consist in "a quick Commercial Treaty or Cultural Treaty or both". Bruins appealed for a speedy action to strengthen the position of the moderate parties¹⁷.

A week later, on January 28, in a dispatch to the Secretary of State, George Marshall, the American chargé d'affaires reiterated his proposal for negotiations on a trade agreement and a cultural convention and added that the Americans should publish the diplomatic documents concerning the liberation of Prague. Bruins wanted to countervail the election propaganda campaign of the CPCz, which was able to make use not only of Soviet supplies of grain but also of the fact that the greatest part of Czechoslovakia had been liberated from German occupation by the Red Army. The American diplomat probably did not realize that the publication of the correspondence between the Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Forces, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, and the Chief of the Soviet General Staff, General Alexei Antonov, on the liberation of Prague would have only lowered the prestige of the United States in the eyes of the average Czech. Bruins was against granting Czechoslovakia a "loan or other monetary handout which would only expose us to (the) charge that we are trying to buy (the) souls of central Europeans with our dollars"¹⁸.

On January 23, Steinhardt had already recommended Bruins's proposals to Harold Vedeler from the Central Europe Section of the State Department, emphasizing that a commercial treaty would rather be of a propaganda character than of substantive importance. In a letter to Vedeler sent ten days later, on February 3, he suggested that the idea of a cultural convention be dropped and replaced by a "declaration of intent", which in his opinion would provide sufficient moral support to the activists of the non-Communist parties. He thought that the gullible readers of Czech papers could hardly

¹⁷ W. Ullmann, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

¹⁸ FRUS, 1948, vol. IV, *Eastern Europe; the Soviet Union*, Washington 1974, pp. 733-735.

distinguish a formal treaty from such a declaration containing “just a few pious words that commit no one to anything”¹⁹.

On February 4, Secretary of State Marshall sent a telegram to Bruins in which he announced that an expert would be sent to Prague in the second half of February to help the Embassy in discussions with the Czechoslovak side on a commercial treaty. The negotiations on this matter were to be started by Steinhardt after his return to Prague, a fact which had been communicated to Bruins already on January 23. The only thing Marshall agreed to was that a “declaration of intent” on an agreement concerning the establishment of an American educational foundation, Czechoslovak support for the educational activities of Czechoslovak citizens in American institutions and an exchange of official publications be submitted to the Czechoslovak government. The Secretary of State also promised speedier action in publishing the diplomatic documents on the liberation of Prague²⁰. But the political developments in Czechoslovakia were soon to be radically accelerated, making it impossible for the Americans to check the effectiveness of their ways of influencing Czechoslovak public opinion and reviving animosity against the CPCz.

While the American Ambassador, Steinhardt, was in no haste to return to Prague, the new British Ambassador, Dixon, arrived in the capital of Czechoslovakia in the second half of January and presented his credentials to President Beneš on January 24. After an audience with Beneš, he met the Communist Prime Minister, Klement Gottwald, and used this opportunity to dissuade him from the idea of concluding treaties of alliance with Bulgaria and Romania. Dixon had the impression that his arguments were misfiring²¹. On February 10, the ambassador had the first opportunity of having a confidential talk with Beneš and Masaryk. He conveyed to the president a personal message from Bevin, who wanted to know whether in Beneš’s view the existing internal system could be retained in Czechoslovakia, that is, whether he did not expect the Communists to try to seize full power in the state. Bevin also asked what Great Britain could do to help “to maintain the freedom of his (Beneš’s) people”. The president replied that “the democratic position of the country could be held” for the CPCz “would not win an absolute majority, but on the contrary, would emerge from the elections with lightly reduced numbers”. Beneš said that the best way of help would be for Great Britain to conclude a trade agreement with Czechoslovakia; according

¹⁹ W. Ullmann, *op. cit.*, p. 144.

²⁰ FRUS, 1948, vol. IV, pp. 735 and 733 fn. 1.

²¹ PRO, FO-371, vol. 71302, N 1199/303/12, Dixon’s dispatch to Bevin, No. 26, 24.1.1948; N 1264/303/12, Interview with Czechoslovak Prime Minister; vol. 71283, N 915/157/12G, Dixon’s dispatch to FO, No. 36, 24.1.1948.

to Masaryk, this was impeded by the Communist officials in the Ministry of Finance who were postponing the solution of the problem of compensation for the nationalized property of British nationals²².

Dixon received Beneš's statements with mixed feelings. On January 23, immediately after his arrival in Prague, he wrote in a private letter to Sargent that after four days in the Czechoslovak capital he was under the impression that Czechoslovakia was an "edifice which would collapse under a serious puff, but the Russians aren't really puffing yet". In his analysis of the internal situation in Czechoslovakia, written on February 6, he asserted that the Communist leaders wanted "to postpone the holding of elections for as long as possible", though they had never declared this publicly. Dixon also expressed the view that "the Communists do not yet know what is likely to be required of them this year by the Soviet Government nor what form of support the Soviet Government may eventually extend to them". Therefore, they had to await the decisions which would be taken in Moscow sooner or later. After his talk with Beneš, the ambassador was surprised by the "complacency" with which the president spoke about "the weakness of the Democratic Parties in face of the Communist offensive". He himself did not conceal to Beneš that in his opinion the "anti-Communist forces were disunited among themselves, many of them are scared and some of them were under the illusion that collaboration with the Communists was possible". He thought there was "a real danger that the well organized Communist Party would try and exploit these weaknesses of their opponents". Dixon was also alarmed by the state of health of the Czechoslovak head of state²³.

Dixon's reports raised doubts in the Foreign Office about the purposefulness of the policy of support for the pro-Western non-Communist parties in Czechoslovakia. Hancock from the Northern Department was of the opinion that "it is not much good helping people who will not help themselves, especially when the turn of events in Eastern Europe over the last two years shows so clearly what happens to parties who will not, or cannot, stand up for their principles: they get eaten up by other parties". But Hancock did not propose that the British circles responsible for foreign policy should change their attitude to the Czechoslovak non-Communist parties. He only suggested that during the trade talks the British should confine themselves

²² *Ibidem*, N 1710/157/12G, Dixon's dispatch to Bevin, No. 81, 11.2.1948.

²³ *Ibidem*, N 1625/157/12G, Dixon's personal letter to Sargent, 23.1.1948; N 1536/157/12, Dixon's letter to Bevin, No. 30 8/22/48, 6.2.1948; N 1710/157/12G, Dixon's dispatch to Bevin, No. 81.

to “minor concessions” and not give the Czechoslovak side “any really important economic advantage”²⁴.

The moment of the decisive showdown between the CPCz and the non-Communist parties, among which the Social Democratic Party had the most wavering attitude, was drawing near. The Communist leaders were striving to take over full power in the state, but until the end they did not have a clear idea about the best date for an effective action and the way in which it should be carried out. The leadership of the National Socialist Party had felt more and more endangered ever since the inquiry held under the supervision of the Minister of Justice (one of that party’s leaders, Prokop Drtina) had revealed that the arrests of National Socialist leaders at Most (in November 1947) on a charge of espionage, had been carried out on the basis of false accusations fabricated by functionaries of the special services, subordinated to the Communist Minister of Internal Affairs, Václav Nosek²⁵. As a result of this investigation, the National Socialist leaders decided to ask the Council of Ministers to put the Ministry of Internal Affairs under the control of the entire government.

Already at a meeting of the cabinet on January 27, Drtina defined the so-called espionage affair at Most the work of provocateurs (the National Socialist leaders had been accused of preparing an anti-state putsch) and demanded that a commission of ministers should investigate all complaints against the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Having met with resistance from the Communist ministers, he withdrew his motion. The National Socialist Foreign Trade Minister, Hubert Ripka, took up this issue again at a meeting of the National Front on February 2, but he got a categorically negative reply from Gottwald. The proposal was put forward for the third time by the Minister of Education, Jaroslav Stránský at a meeting of the government on February 13. The motion to set up a ministerial commission would probably have been put to the vote, had not a new question appeared on the agenda, a question which was also connected with the functioning of the National Security Corps (*Sbor Narodni Bezpečnosti*). By a majority of the votes of the non-Communist ministers, the government decided that Minister Nosek should revoke the order of the Czech commander of the National Security Corps dismissing eight local Corps commanders in Prague who were not members of the Communist Party and replacing them by persons dedicated to the CPCz²⁶.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, N 1536/157/12, Hancock’s note, 13.2.1948, endorsed by Reddaway, Hankey and Warner.

²⁵ K. Kaplan, *op. cit.*, pp. 139–140.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 150, 155, 158–161.

The crisis within the Czechoslovak government occurred four days later. At a cabinet meeting on February 17, the National Socialist ministers stated that Nosek had not carried out the government's decision of February 13. After the debates, the non-Communist ministers, gathered in the office of Vice-Premier Jan Šrámek, who represented the People's Party, adopted Ripka's proposal that they would resign if Nosek continued putting off the implementation of the government's decisions. Commenting on the situation, the British Ambassador Dixon (he did not know about the planned resignation) informed the Foreign Office on February 18 that "the People's Party and (the) Czech Socialist Party can be expected to take advantage of the situation to press for early elections". Elliott of the Foreign Office said that "this looks ominous, but the stand taken by the Czech Socialists and the People's Party shows more courage than might have been expected"²⁷.

The next day Dixon informed the Foreign Office that leaders of the National Socialist and the Social Democratic parties would like to bring about the "dissolution of (the) present Government, and (an) immediate election". He also communicated that the Soviet Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs, Valerian Zorin, who had been ambassador to Czechoslovakia, had arrived in Prague. Elliott thought it probable that the leadership of the CPCz would resort to extra-constitutional methods to turn the situation to its advantage. Hankey summed up the reflections of his colleagues with the remark: "I do not think there is anything we can do". "I suspect", he added, "any move by us in this internal dispute would embarrass our friends". He proposed that Dixon should be given a free hand²⁸.

On February 19 the leaders of the CPCz held a stormy meeting at which supporters of two concepts clashed over the further attitude to the non-Communist parties. Representatives of the radical wing, Václav Kopeckí, Julius Ďuriš (Czechoslovak Minister of Agriculture) and Antonín Zápotocký (Chairman of the Central Council of Trade Unions) demanded that the party mobilize the masses and take over full power in the state. Klement Gottwald and Rudolf Slánský (General Secretary of the CPCz) advised patience and wanted to postpone the final showdown. In the end no concrete decisions were taken²⁹.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 161–164; PRO, FO–371, vol. 71283, N 1917/157/12, Dixon's dispatch to FO, No. 104, 18.2.1948; Elliott's note, 20.2.1948.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, N 1919/157/12, Dixon's dispatch to FO, No. 111, 19.2.1948; Elliott's note, 20.2.1948; Hankey's note of 20.2.1948.

²⁹ K. Kaplan, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

Zorin arrived in Prague on the afternoon of the same day. He brought Stalin's instructions to the effect that the Czechoslovak Communists should take advantage of the crisis and launch an offensive. Stalin also offered military help, but Gottwald expressed the conviction that the Czechoslovak Communist Party would manage to change the political situation in the country to its advantage with its own forces. It was only after a talk with Zorin that the leaders of the CPCz adopted Stalin's instructions as binding directives and launched the showdown which brought them success after five days³⁰. It turned out that during the previous three years the Communists had managed to create an excellently organized hinterland for activities of an extra-parliamentary character. Having secured for themselves the friendly neutrality of the armed forces and having at their disposal the police forces and the workers' militia in factories, which had only to be supplied with weapons, they did not have to resort to improvised, and therefore uncertain, measures at the last moment. They had an ally in the passivity of Czech society, which had traditionally been disinclined to run a risk at the moments of key importance for the future.

On February 20, twelve ministers from the National Socialist Party, the People's Party and the Slovak Democratic Party refused to attend the government's meeting and resigned. The Social Democratic ministers did not join them and the leadership of the party took a neutral stand, criticizing both side of the conflict. In this situation the remaining 14 ministers with Prime Minister Gottwald were able to go on acting as the government, for in accordance with the law, the government had the right to continue its work as long as it was composed of a half of its members, excluding the prime minister³¹. The resignation of even a single minister would have meant the downfall of the government and created the possibility of holding early parliamentary elections. In view of the wait-and-see attitude of the Social Democrats, the key to the solution of the situation was in the hands of President Beneš. He could either reject the resignation of the twelve ministers and ease the conflict by persuading the Communists to renounce the changes in the National Security Corps (*SNB*), or accept the resignation and endorse a government expanded by the ministers co-opted by Gottwald. The CPCz leaders focused their activity on exerting pressure on Beneš (among other things, by mass demonstrations in public places) to induce him to agree to the second solution which would signify the defeat of the move by the non-Communist ministers and the victory of the government system which had already been established in the other countries of East-Central Europe.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 168–169.

³¹ M. Klimeš, *Na rozhraní*, p. 231.

It was only on February 20 that the American Ambassador Steinhardt arrived in Prague. The dispatches he sent the same day show that he was well aware of the gravity of the situation. Although he thought that “any prediction as to future developments would be hazardous”, he expressed scepticism about the official version according to which Zorin had arrived in Prague to supervise the Soviet grain deliveries and participate in the ceremonies held in connection with the fusion of two organizations: the Union of Friends of the USSR and Society for Cultural and Economic Relations with the Soviet Union. He expressed the opinion that “Moscow (was) suddenly taking (a) more active interest in (the) local political situation and (the) plight of the Czechoslovak CP”. But Steinhardt did not suggest to the State Department any specific move to strengthen the position of the non-Communist parties³².

The British Ambassador, Dixon, in a dispatch to the Foreign Office of February 21, was also unable to say whether the Communist leaders would resort to extraparliamentary methods or whether the crisis would be resolved by a compromise. He seems to have hoped that the two sides would “bury the hatchet”. He partly justified the Social Democratic Party for not having joined the front of the non-Communist parties, pointing out that the party might split should it declare itself on either side. Dixon also emphasized that Beneš was “in unusually good spirits and his health is apparently standing the strain of the crisis”. The ambassador did draw attention to the “nervousness and defeatism of the ordinary Czech” because of Zorin’s visit, but he rather belittled this fact, referring to the Czech ministers’ statements that the Soviet Vice-Minister was confining his talks to the question of grain deliveries³³.

However, Dixon took a more active attitude to the events than Steinhardt did. Not confining himself to reporting the developments, he pointed out, already on February 21, that the Foreign Office should instruct the BBC and the British press to adopt a critical attitude to the information material coming from Czechoslovak Communist sources so as not “to blur the issue”. London accepted Dixon’s suggestion and the proper instructions were at once given to the British mass media. Even though there was “no evidence of his (Zorin’s) active intervention”, the Foreign office drew the attention

³² W. Ullmann, *op. cit.*, pp. 147–148; PRO, FO–371, vol. 71264, N 1955/82/12, Dixon’s dispatch to Bevin, No. 17, 18.2.1948; Korbel’s assertion that Steinhardt, speaking with non-Communist ministers, expressed the U.S. government’s intention of granting Czechoslovakia a \$ 25 million loan is not confirmed in any of the archival sources accessible to me (J. Korbel, *The Communist Subversion of Czechoslovakia 1938–1948. The Failure of Coexistence*, Princeton, New Jersey, 1966, p. 213).

³³ PRO, FO–371, vol. 71283, N 1964/157/42, Dixon’s dispatch to FO, No. 117, 21.2.1948.

of the British press to the similarity between Zorin's visit to Prague and the visit paid to Bucharest in February 1945 by the People's Deputy Commissar for Foreign Affairs, Andrei Vyshinsky, a visit which ended with the establishment of a new Romanian government subordinated to the Communists. The Foreign Office had no doubt that Zorin was "taking a leading part in the events in Prague"³⁴.

Dixon's moderate optimism was seriously shaken on February 23, when the ambassador received unconfirmed information that the Social Democratic Party had gone over to the side of the CPCz. Dixon thought that the last hope lay in Beneš using his constitutional powers as supreme chief of the armed forces, but he came to the conclusion that the president's temperament would not allow him to resort to solutions of a military nature. In the dispatches of that day not only Dixon but also Steinhardt communicated that the CPCz leaders had taken police and administrative measures against the non-Communist parties. The British ambassador, and a day later also the American ambassador, reported that the Communists had started forming so-called action committees in factories, state institutions and the non-Communist parties, which were to take over of all the fields of public life. According to Dixon, time was playing into the Communists' hands. He cabled to the Foreign Office with irritation that he was "disturbed by reports that (the) Czech Socialists complacently view the crisis as running for several days more"³⁵.

On February 24, Dixon regained faith in the future when he learned from the press that the Social Democrats had only agreed "to open negotiations with the Communist Party". He found this news favourable, compared with that of the previous day, since, as he put it, "theoretically at least the door is open". He decided to give the Social Democratic leaders copies of "The Daily Herald" with an article warning against what might happen to "the Socialist parties who fall into the Communist trap". He asked the Foreign Office to persuade the Labour Party to issue a similar warning in the form of a resolution of the party authorities, and have it published by the press and broadcast by radio. But he was of the opinion that to use the British Embassy as "an official intermediary" in the Czechoslovak conflict would be regarded as the intervention of the British government in the internal affairs of Czechoslovakia and would cause "more harm than good"³⁶.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, Hankey's note, 23.2.1948, Balenin's note, 23.2.1948; N 1963/157/12, Dixon's dispatch to FO, No. 116, 21.2.1948; N 1964/157/12, FO dispatch to Dixon, No. 155, 23.2.1948.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, vol. 71284, N 2071/157/12, Dixon's dispatch to FO, No. 124, 23.2.1948; N 2072/157/12, Dixon's dispatch to FO, No. 123, 23.2.1948; Ullmann, *op. cit.*, p. 152.

³⁶ PRO, FO-371, vol. 71284, N 2074/157/12, Dixon's dispatch to FO, No. 125, 24.2.1948.

The Foreign Office concluded that the Social Democratic Party's consent to participation in a new government set up by Gottwald would be a defeat for the other non-Communist parties. But the Foreign Secretary, Bevin, was against the Labour Party's involvement in the Czechoslovak conflict, a move suggested by Dixon, for he believed that in this case, too, Great Britain might be accused of intervening in Czechoslovakia's internal affairs. Therefore the Director of the Northern Department of the Foreign Office, Hankey, established with the International Secretary of the Labour Party Denis Healey, that on February 24 Healey would read his own commentary on the events in Czechoslovakia in the European Service of the BBC and that this comment would be reported by the BBC Czech section. The commentary was to be general and unofficial and was not to be addressed to Czechoslovak society, let alone to the Social Democratic Party. Nevertheless, since Healey was well known in the leading circles of the Social Democratic Party, his statement might warn the party leaders against subordinating their policy to the line mapped out by the CPCz. Healey was to use the examples of Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania, where the socialist parties had been either subordinated to the communist parties or fused with them³⁷.

This timid British action could be of no practical importance, for on the morning of February 24 the central secretariat of the Social Democratic Party was taken over by adherents of Zdenek Fierlinger, who headed the left wing of the party. On the night of February 24, the chairman of the party, Bohumil Laušman (leader of the party's central wing), and its general secretary, Blažej Vilim (dismissed from his post the following day) consented to Social Democratic representation in Gottwald's new government, for Fierlinger was threatening to set up a separate social democratic party. The centre group of the party leadership was also under systematic pressure from a delegation of the Polish Socialist Party, which had been staying in Prague since April 21 and tried to induce the Social Democratic leaders to accept the Communist demands³⁸. In London, on the afternoon of February 25, Hankey firmly advised Healey against the National Executive of the Labour Party issuing any statement, motivating this by Bevin's disinclination for such an action³⁹. Dixon's attention was focused not only on the Social Democratic Party but also on Beneš. In a dispatch of February 24 he informed the Foreign Office that "under the strain of present events" the

³⁷ *Ibidem*, FO dispatch to Dixon, No. 161, 24.2.1948; Hankey's note, 24.2.1948.

³⁸ P. Vošahlíková, *Československá sociální demokracie a Národní fronta*, Praha 1985, pp. 119, 201–202; M. K. Kamiński, *Polsko-czechosłowackie stosunki polityczne 1945–1948 (Polish-Czechoslovak Political Relations 1945–1948)*, Warszawa 1990, pp. 360–363.

³⁹ PRO, FO–371, vol. 71284, N 2146/157/12, Hankey's note, 25.2.1948.

president was showing signs of hesitation, and the future of Czechoslovakia's political system depended on his stance. In this connection the ambassador proposed that Bevin should send a personal message to Beneš in which he would assure the president of his own and Prime Minister's Attlee's warm feelings for his "struggle to maintain democracy" and express the conviction "that in spite of all the difficulties he (Beneš) will be successful". Dixon wanted not only to buoy up the president but also to subtly remind him of his recent categorical statements that Czechoslovakia's internal system would not break down. In the ambassador's view the message should be constructed in a way that would not encumber Great Britain with any obligations with regard to Czechoslovakia and could not be received as proof of British interference in Czechoslovakia's internal affairs⁴⁰.

Bevin rejected Dixon's suggestions, saying that he did not see how in the existing circumstances the ambassador could hand the president his personal message. But on the morning of February 25 he authorized Dixon, should he have an opportunity, to verbally convey to Beneš "quite confidentially" expressions of "deepest sympathy for him and his country in the crisis they are now going through". After informing the Foreign Office in the afternoon of the same day that Beneš had accepted the resignation of the non-Communist ministers (this concerned not only the twelve ministers from the National Socialist Party, the People's Party and the Slovak Democratic Party, but also Vice-Premier František Tymeš and the Minister of Supplies, Vaclav Majer, who were dismissed from their posts in the leadership of the Social Democratic Party and excluded from leadership of the Social Democratic Party and excluded from the government by Gottwald), Dixon informed the Under Secretary of State, Sargent, that he would not carry out Bevin's instructions since they were already out of date⁴¹.

On the afternoon of February 25, when Beneš accepted the composition of the new government presented by Gottwald, the crisis came to an end. The CPCz carried the day, assuming full power in the state. Neither the Social Democratic Party nor President Beneš was capable of standing up to the offensive of the Communist Party. An hour before Beneš signed the list of the new government Dixon had summed up the situation, saying that "a minority has in fact seized power by means of a coup d'état"⁴². In practice

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, N 2158/157/12G, Dixon's dispatch to Bevin No. 126, 24.2.1948.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, FO dispatch to Dixon, No. 168, 25.2.1948; Dixon's dispatch to FO, No. 135, 25.2.1948; N 2162/157/12, Dixon's dispatch to FO, No. 132, 25.2.1948; *Na rozhraní*, p.307; J. Veselý, *Kronika dní lutových 1948 (The Chronicle of the February Days of 1948)*, Warszawa 1959, pp. 203–206, 211–215.

⁴² PRO, FO–371, vol. 71284, N 2165/157/12, Dixon's dispatch to FO, No. 131, 25.2.1948; cf. *Na rozhraní*, p. 307.

neither British nor American diplomacy did any thing to effectively back the non-Communist forces in Czechoslovakia. The only difference between the two ambassadors was that Dixon, unlike Steinhardt, had at least pointed out the directions of possible moves, but his proposals were cautious, marked by the fear that Great Britain would be suspected of interfering in Czechoslovakia's internal affairs. Steinhardt did not even bring himself to do this. As late as February 24, it was believed in the State Department that "with respect to (America's) friends in Czechoslovakia, two considerations should be borne in mind: (1) to keep from arousing false hopes among the non-Communists and (2) to avoid the suggestion that the situation seemed hopeless"⁴³. In other words, the United States remained neutral with regard to the political struggle going on in Czechoslovakia and was, at most, ready to create appearances of sympathy for the moderate parties.

On February 24, Washington already realized that the Communists might emerge victorious in Czechoslovakia. In a talk with representatives of the French Embassy; officials of the State Department did not conceal that the February crisis had taken them by surprise. They anticipated some form of protest from the United States "but not before Beneš had an opportunity to act". However, at the end of the day Secretary of State Marshall instructed the American Ambassador in Paris, Jefferson Caffery, to immediately get in touch with the French Foreign Minister, Georges Bidault, and learn if the minister had "any suggestions as to joint US-UK-French action in the United Nations and elsewhere which might be helpful"⁴⁴.

Marshall was in no way motivated by concern over the future of Czechoslovakia's political system. The Secretary of State was interested only in Czechoslovakia's stance in the international arena. From this point of view the take over of full powers by the CPCz in no way changed "the situation which has existed in the last three years", for Czechoslovakia "has faithfully followed the Soviet policy". In Marshall's view, "the establishment of a Communist regime (in Czechoslovakia) would merely crystallize and confirm for the future previous Czech policy". The Secretary of State was, however, afraid of "the probable repercussions in Western European countries of a successful Communist coup in Czechoslovakia without challenge or consequences". He believed that the Czechoslovak example would encourage the West European Communist parties, in particular the Italian Communists, to follow suit⁴⁵.

⁴³ W. Ullmann, *op. cit.*, pp. 153-154.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 154; FRUS, 1948, vol. IV, pp. 735-736.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 736.

On February 25, the American Ambassador in London, Lewis W. Douglas, called on Bevin and asked "whether any steps could be taken to assist President Beneš". The Foreign Secretary expressed the opinion that "it was too late" and that "the sending of notes was of no avail". It would only reveal the weakness of the two Anglo-Saxon states "in the situation which he regretted very much indeed". Bevin was sceptical about the purposefulness of submitting the Czechoslovak case to the United Nations, being of the opinion that such an action would be "a cumbersome process", for he "could not think of any article (of the U.N. Charter) under which the situation could be raised". Bevin, like Marshall, seemed to be seized with anxiety about Italy's future⁴⁶.

The Foreign Office thoroughly examined the possibility of submitting the case to the United Nations, but decided against it, coming to the conclusion that Zorin could not be accused of intervening in Czechoslovakia's internal affairs; nor was there any certainty that Beneš, who had signed the list of the new government, would not state, repeating the explanations of the Communist leaders, that the Czechoslovak government had been formed in a legal way, in accordance with democratic procedure and the rules of parliamentary game. Hankey thought that the Soviet representative on the Security Council would place a veto, invoking par. 7 of Article 2 of the United Nations Charter, which stipulated that the U.N. members were not authorized "to intervene in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any State"⁴⁷.

Thus the American proposal to give publicity to the Czechoslovak crisis in the U.N. forum did not win British approval. Marshall's concept of a joint démarche by the U.S., British and French governments to President Beneš, before he had taken the final decision on Gottwald's demands, was opposed by the French Foreign Minister, Georges Bidault. In the presence of the American Chargé d'Affaires, James Bonbright, and the British Ambassador, Oliver Harvey, Bidault stated early in the afternoon of February 25 that should Beneš capitulate, the démarche of the three states would be "pointless" and would meet with "a rebuff" of the Czechoslovak authorities. The minister was in favour of "some kind of three-power declaration"⁴⁸.

When it was already known that Beneš had given in to Gottwald's demands, Minister Bidault held yet another talk with the representatives of the United States and Great Britain in the evening. He expressed the view

⁴⁶ PRO, FO-371, vol. 71284, N 2181/157/12, Bevin's dispatch to the British Embassy in the United States, No. 299, 25.2.1948; FRUS, 1948, vol. IV, pp. 736-737.

⁴⁷ PRO, FO-371, vol. 71284, N 2181/157/12, Hankey's note 25.2.1948.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, N 2168/157/12, Harvey's dispatch to FO, No. 172, 25.2.1948; Hancock's note, 25.2.1948; Ullmann, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

that to submit the Czechoslovak case to the United Nations was “impractical” and presented the draft of a three–power declaration which might be published simultaneously by the governments of the United States, Great Britain and France the following day, February 26, at 18.00 hours French time. The two Anglo–Saxon power approved the text. The American and French sides agreed to some minor stylistic changes proposed by the British. The declaration accused the CPCz, without calling it by name, of introducing “a disguised dictatorship of a single party under the cloak of a Government of national union” and condemned the consequences of this fact which would be “disastrous for the Czechoslovak people”. The declaration, published in accordance with Bidault’s plan, was of an exclusively symbolic significance, of no importance for the internal situation in Czechoslovakia, but it was a warning to the non–Communist political forces in Italy⁴⁹.

The French draft of the declaration was approved by Bevin, but it was severely criticized by Ambassador Dixon. Several hours before the publication of the declaration, the British ambassador and the foreign secretary exchanged views on this matter. Dixon called the declaration “ineffectual” and coming “too late”; he thought it could only “fortify Communist leaders”. In his opinion “a general declaration addressed to nobody would be interpreted by them (the Communist leaders) as indicating that (the) Western Powers intended to take no action”. He suggested that the three powers should lodge a direct protest with the Soviet authorities, and should this be impossible, he advised “an ominous silence on the part of the Governments”, and such definite measures as a “decision to postpone the departure for Czechoslovakia of (the) World Bank Mission to investigate (the) Czechoslovak Government’s application for a credit and (the) fullest possible expression of public opinion through the press and radio”. However, realizing that the declaration might be published, Dixon demanded a radical change of the second paragraph, so that its formulations “would correspond more closely to the facts”. Though he did not ask that the CPCz be called by name, he wanted the Communists’ actions to be defined as “methods of force and intimidation”. He also proposed that the publication of the declaration be postpone until Beneš had made a statement on the radio⁵⁰.

Bevin rejected all of Dixon’s proposal. He thought a protest with the Soviet government was impossible for formal reasons, motivating this by

⁴⁹ FRUS, 1948, vol. IV, pp. 737–738; PRO, FO–371, vol. 71284, N 2169/157/12, Harvey’s dispatch to FO, No. 175, 25.2.1948; N 2170/15/12, draft of the French declaration; Hancock’s note, 26.2.1948; FO’s dispatch to the British Embassy in Washington, No. 2278, 26.2.1948; FO’s dispatch to Dixon, No. 183, 26.2.1948; N 2187/157/12, Hankey’s note, 26.2.1948.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, Dixon’s dispatch to FO, No. 140, 26.2.1948; cf. N 2226/157/12, Dixon’s dispatch to Bevin, No. 149, 26.2.1948.

“the absence of any evidence that the Soviet Government have intervened (in spite of the very significant presence of Mr. Zorin in Prague)”. He added that in contradistinction to the cases of Poland and Romania, the Anglo-Saxon powers could invoke neither the Yalta decisions nor (as was the case with Romania) the armistice treaty. In Bevin’s opinion, the only possibility was a three-power declaration (he asserted that the minor stylistic changes introduced by the British corresponded with Dixon’s suggestions), which should be published without waiting for a statement from Beneš, who was “obviously a prisoner of the Czechoslovak Communists”, and consequently unable to make public statements without their consent. Bevin agreed with Dixon that the declaration would be “ineffectual”, but pointed out that “the battle in Czechoslovakia itself is already as good as lost” and the “proposed declaration is thus only our first move in further efforts to halt (the) progress of communism”. The Foreign Secretary stressed the necessity of a quick publication of the declaration in view of the forthcoming elections in Italy. Moreover, the prevailing opinion in the Foreign Office was that a three-power declaration would warn the West European socialist parties against entering into close co-operation with the Communist parties⁵¹.

Whereas the British Foreign Secretary did not put forward any proposal of how to react to the take-over of power by the Czechoslovak Communists and accepted the proposal of his French colleague, Bidault, Secretary of State Marshall intended at first, on August 25, to publish “a strong statement” on the situation in Czechoslovakia. Steinhardt whom he asked for advice, encouraged him to do so. Steinhardt, who during the crisis had not suggested to Marshall any concrete steps which would have strengthened the position of the moderate parties, now maintained that a statement by the Secretary of State would have “a very sobering effect on the Czechoslovak Communists who are at present flushed with victory”. It could also contribute to “the rebirth of either open or underground opposition to complete Communist dictation”. Writing his dispatch on February 26, that is, the day after Beneš had given in to Gottwald’s demands, Steinhardt asserted that the president “has not yet clarified his position, a strong statement by the Secretary might and doubtless would, influence his (Beneš’s) course of action. In the ambassador’s view, Marshall should threaten that the United States would suspend the export of American goods to Czechoslovakia or stop Czechoslovak commercial transit through the American occupation zones in Germany and Austria⁵².

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, N 2187/157/12, Bevin’s dispatch to Dixon, No. 184, 26.2.1948; N 2226/157/12, Hancock’s note, 27.2.1948.

⁵² FRUS, 1948, vol. IV, pp. 738–741.

Unlike the British ambassador, Steinhardt was naive enough to think that a statement addressed to the Czechoslovak government might prevent the events from developing to the Communists' advantage. The American ambassador also strongly believed that the United States could influence the political developments in Czechoslovakia by economic measures. His British colleague had already lost this illusion when in a cable to the Foreign Office of February 25 he said that "the threat of economic penalties could not buy the restoration of democracy in Czechoslovakia". "On the contrary", wrote Dixon, "the new Communist regime is almost certainly prepared to pay the price of curtailing defensive ties with the West in order to force their country into the Soviet economic orbit and quite certainly able to enforce on the population the lower standard of living which this (the new economic situation) would entail"⁵³.

Marshall finally approved the French draft declaration and renounced the idea of a statement, endorsed by Steinhardt. Four days after the publication of the declaration, the American ambassador drew the attention of the Secretary of State to the fact that the three-power declaration had given "little comfort to (the) remaining dispersed moderate elements"; on the contrary, it "emboldened" the Communist leaders, by strengthening their conviction that the Western power had no intention of taking any concrete steps against the Czechoslovak authorities and would confine themselves to issuing "condemnatory statements". Steinhardt, who thought that the American military authorities should close the German-Czechoslovak frontier to Czechoslovak trade with the West, suggested to Marshall the introduction of economic sanctions against Czechoslovakia. However, Washington rejected the ambassador's proposals⁵⁴.

Neither the United States nor Great Britain intended to break off diplomatic relations with the Communist government of Czechoslovakia. The State Department, on the whole, saw "certain advantages in keeping diplomatic representation in the satellite countries" and did not plan to depart from this formula in the case of Czechoslovakia⁵⁵. The British were simply afraid that the Soviet authorities were interested in completely eradicating the influence of the Anglo-Saxon powers in Czechoslovakia, and the severing of diplomatic relations would help them to achieve this. In British opinion diplomatic contacts should be "frigid but correct" and make the Czechoslovaks "uneasy as to (the) intentions of (the) Western Great Powers". This would be promoted by the tactic of "an ominous silence", that

⁵³ PRO, FO-371, vol. 71284, N 2226/157/12, Dixon's dispatch to Bevin, No. 149.

⁵⁴ W. Ullmann, *op. cit.*, p. 156; FRUS, 1948, vol. IV, pp. 738-739, fn. 1, p. 742 and fn. 2.

⁵⁵ W. Ullmann, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

is, by giving the Czechoslovak authorities to understand that the Western powers had not yet taken the final decision on what attitude to adopt towards Czechoslovakia. Far from wanting to break off diplomatic relations, the British did not even recall their delegation to the meeting of the joint cultural commission which had been set up in pursuance of the cultural convention (signed on June 16, 1947 and ratified on October 15, 1947). The delegation arrived in Prague during the initial phase of the crisis and met the Czechoslovak side on February 27 and 28, after the Communist victory. Talks of this kind were of great advantage to the Communists, for they could be used as an argument testifying to the normalization of relations in the country. The British held the view that in this way they were manifesting their interest in Czechoslovak society and bucking it up⁵⁶.

The government crisis in Czechoslovakia in February 1948 marked the end of the transitional post-war period in the history of that country. Neither the United States nor Great Britain prevented the incorporation of the Czechoslovak state into the bloc of the East-Central European countries directed by the Soviet Union. Unlike British diplomats, American diplomacy did not show great interest in Czechoslovakia's problems. At the beginning of 1948, it made only one attempt, belated and too timid, to map out a programme of a positive policy towards that state. The British, on the other hand, all the time held the view that it would be more favourable for them to preserve the existing government system in the Czechoslovak Republic in an unchanged state. This is way they wanted to maintain British-Czechoslovak cultural exchange and strengthen economic ties through the conclusion of a new trade agreement. For the Americans, on the other hand, the rejection of the Marshall plan by the Czechoslovak government was sufficient reason for disapproving of closer economic co-operation. A close economic and cultural co-operation of the Anglo-Saxon powers with Czechoslovakia (had it been put into effect), would not have guaranteed the maintenance of that country in the position between East and West. Only a clearly formulated programme of political support for the non-Communist forces in Czechoslovakia could have preserved the government system existing there. But neither the United States nor Great Britain intended to work out such a programme. As a result, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, which in case of need could rely on effective Soviet

⁵⁶ PRO, FO-371, vol. 71284, N 2167/157/12, FO's dipatch to the British Embassy in Washington, No. 2383, 28.2.1948; Hankey's note, 26.2.1948; N 2226/157/12, dispatch of the Commonwealth Relations Office to the dominions, No. 30, 3.3.1948, vol. 71264, N 2700/82/12, Dixon's dispatch to Bevin, No. 23, 4.3.1948, Information Summary (IS), 20.2.-3.3.1948; CAB 129/25, CP 48/71, annex II, Dixon's dispatch to FO, No. 179, 1.2.1948.

aid, was able by its own forces to achieve victory in the struggle for the shape of the political system in the Czechoslovak state.

(Translated by Janina Dorosz)