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Report of the Special Action of the Polish Socialist Party in Prague, 21-25 February 1948

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Summary:

In the midst of a cabinet crisis in Czechoslovakia that would lead to the February Communist coup, several delegates from the Polish Socialist Party were sent to Prague to spread socialist influence. The crisis is outlined, as well as a thorough report of the conference in Prague.

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In accordance with the resolution of the Political Commission and General Secretariat of the Central Executive Committee (CKW) of the Polish Socialist Party (PPS), made late on the night of 20 February 1948, Com. Kazimierz Rusinek, Adam Rapacki, Henryk Jablonski, and Stefan Arski were delegated to go to Prague. This decision was made after a thorough analysis of the political situation in Czechoslovakia brought on by a cabinet crisis there. The goal of the delegation was to inform the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Social Democratic Party (SD) about the basic stance of the PPS and possibly to influence the SD Central Committee in the spirit of leftist-socialist and revolutionary politics. The motive behind the decision of the Political Commission and General Secretariat was the fear that, from the leftist socialist point of view, the situation at the heart of SD after the Brno Congress was taking an unfavorable shape. It was feared that the Czechoslovak party, led by rightist elements, might easily be led astray during the present crisis to opportunism and be tempted to play the role of a "third force."

The PPS Central Executive Committee considered this turn of events in the heart of SD to be particularly dangerous because of the threat to people's democracy in Poland's immediate neighborhood. The political crisis in Czechoslovakia was unanimously judged to be an action provoked by local and international reactionary forces in order to transform Czechoslovakia into the object of direct attack by the American capitalist counteroffensive.

The delegation was given political instructions based on the above basic stance of the PPS Central Executive Committee and flew to Prague on Saturday, February 21.

After arriving in Prague, the delegation considered it necessary to conduct preliminary talks with factors [i.e., people -- translator's note] who could provide objective information about the present political situation. Since possible further active political measures depended on gaining an objective view of the state of affairs at the moment, a series of informational conversations were conducted that same day.

The general description of the situation was provided to the delegation first by Com. Krajewski, Chargé d'Affaires in Prague.

Conversations were held with Com. Rudolf Slanský, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KS) and Jaromír Dolanský, the Minister of Finance and a member of the KS Central Committee. A long conversation with Com. Zdenk Fierlinger also took place.

After these preliminary talks the delegation gained precise picture of the situation and the basic stances of the KS and the left SD.

In the general outline the situation was as follows:

The political crisis was directly caused by the resignation of the ministers of three right-wing parties: the National Socialists (Nar-Soc) [Ed.'s note: the original Polish document uses the unusual abbreviation Nar-Soc for the National Socialist Party: the eskoslovenská Strana Národn socialistická, henceforth SNS], People's Party (Lid) [Ed.'s note: the original Polish document uses Lid for the Czechoslovak People's Party: the eskoslovenská Strana Lidová, henceforth SL] and Slovak Democrats (DS). Twelve of these ministers, led by Vice-premier [Petr] Zenkl (SNS), resigned as a result of a conflict over the discharge of high National Socialist police officials and their replacement by Communists. This, of course, was only a pretext, which let into the open some conflicts that had been hidden for a long time. These conflicts had been growing for a while and became inflamed as the election date approached. They had a dual economic-political and social background. The right-wing parties clearly

sabotaged the further social reforms envisioned in the NF [National Front] program, which involved expanding the nationalization of all industrial enterprises employing more than fifty workers, the nationalization of wholesale trade, the introduction of a monopoly on foreign trade, and additional land reform. The right wing was afraid that these reforms might undermine the existing social balance to the advantage of the working classes and cut at the economic base of the propertied classes. Politically, the following elements came into play: the question of reforming the constitution, the fear of the potential electoral success of the Communists (whose rallying cry was to win 51% of seats in the next parliament), and the international situation.

There is no doubt that in the region of Central and Eastern Europe, that is, in the zone of the people's democracies, Czechoslovakia was the last hope of American capitalism. After the failure of [Stanislaw] Mikolajczyk in Poland and [Imre] Nagy in Hungary, American pressure focused directly to Czechoslovakia. American diplomacy counted on the possibility of making a certain breach here, thanks to the legal existence of a group of right-wing parties which openly showed their inclination to a pro-American orientation. American as well as British agencies in Czechoslovakia were very active, and American propaganda (i.e., the Voice of America) conducted a special campaign in the Czech and Slovak languages aimed at mobilizing reactionary and conservative elements. The emphasis directed at SNS was particularly forceful.

The political crisis developed against this general background, and at the time of the delegation's arrival entered a decisive stage. [missing line] . . . political factors.

President [Edvard] Beneš tried to avoid a revolutionary solution of the crisis, but all the signs led us to assume that this step of the right wing parties was taken in agreement with him. At the end of last week (February 20-21), President Beneš was already aware of the unfortunate position of the right wing and tried to ward off the crisis through a return to the status quo ante. In practice, this meant his refusal to accept the resignations of the right-wing ministers and his attempt to induce Premier [Klement] Gottwald to keep working with them. President Beneš dragged his decision out over the days that followed, pressing the Communists to make concessions, his goal being to restore the pre-crisis situation. Thus President Beneš's general tactic at the time was simple temporization. At the same time, President Beneš was preparing to make a solo appearance and appeal to the nation. The military authorities began putting together a special broadcast station in Hradany [Ed.'s note: the Castle in Prague] for that purpose.

Led by Generals [Ludvk] Svoboda and [Bohumil] Boek, the army declared, after some initial hesitation, a kind of supportive neutrality toward Gottwald's government. At the time it seemed certain that, by declaring their loyalty to President Beneš, the military forces did not want to get involved in the game. In its further deliberations, the delegation, in accordance with the opinions of comrades from the KS, accepted the neutrality of the army as a virtual certainty.

The right wing - the SNS, SL, and DS were ready after the opening blows to retreat to their initial positions and let Beneš know that they were ready to go to Canossa. Their price was a return to their initial position in the government and the NF. This "compliance" of the right wing inclined Beneš to stick to the status quo ante -- his concept of getting through the crisis.

The KS, from the beginning, took the position of supporting a revolutionary resolution of the crisis. The KS considered the crisis to have been caused by the right wing, which tried to undermine the people's democracy in Czechoslovakia by taking advantage of the parliamentary system to sabotage social reforms and realize reactionary political and social postulates. At the same time the KS appreciated the right wing's links to a pro-American orientation, and so decided to take up the fight and play it out so that it could once and for all make it impossible for the right wing to take any political initiative and move the balance of political forces decidedly to the left. With this goal in mind, the KS decided to propose the following postulates as a

way of going through the crisis:

- a) Immediate acceptance by President Beneš of the resignation of the ministers;
- b) Reconstruction of the government to include SNN, SL, and Slovak Democratic representatives other than those who had resigned;
- c) Reorganization of the NF by including the U[illegible]O trade unions, organizations of former political prisoners and former partisans, cultural associations, and social organizations, apart from the six political parties;
- d) Including in the future government representatives of some of those organizations, at least of trade unions;
- e) Creation of NF Action Committees as its local executive organs and factors mobilizing the worker, peasant, and white-collar masses to direct political action;
- f) Purging NF parties of reactionary and conservative elements through changing the leadership of those parties, and purging, too, the party structures and press;
- g) Tightening collaboration with the SD, which was weakened after the Brno congress, rebuilding the practically non-existent unified front, expanding the participation of the SD in the new government under the condition of removing from the SD leadership rightist elements.

The SD, led by centrist-rightist elements ([Bahumil] Laušman, [Blaej] Viln) but actually controlled by the right wing (Viln, [Vclav] Majer, Bernard), took an incredibly dangerous stance from the beginning of the crisis. Although the Social Democratic ministers did not actually resign, the party took a wait-and-see attitude and adopted a pseudo-neutral position. In reality this position really became beneficial to the right wing since it made the whole game possible. The right wing counted on such a position and was not disappointed. At that stage the position taken by SD meant that the party wanted to hold the balance. Maintaining this pseudo-neutral position for a while enabled the right wing to play its political game, until its success allowed the SD to openly support "parliamentary democracy." Seen from the outside, SD tactics were not devoid of comical elements. This fact is worth mentioning since it is so characteristic of the whole picture of the situation.

To wit, just after the crisis began the SD pasted in the window of its headquarters a large poster with a map of Czechoslovakia and a picture of a cock-fight taking place above that map. The cock on the left, marked with a red star, symbolized the Communists (and the USSR); the cock on the right stood for the right wing parties (and the USA). The sign said "Jen Klid - Nic se ne stane," or "Just keep cool and nothing will happen." The line taken by the party press reflected the wisdom of this poster equally by explaining to the masses that the crisis will pass if only everybody will keep cool and entrust themselves to Beneš's protection, who in turn will take care of everything and save the NF "democracy." As a result of the PPS delegation's strong criticism of this kind of action, the whole window, with the poster, was covered up the following day.

The Social Democratic attitude toward the Communists was at this stage even more relentless, since the SD presented the KS with an ultimatum that it would not open any talks until the decision of Interior Minister [Vclav] Nosek (KS) regarding the discharge of sixty Social Democratic policemen . . . was recanted.

In its simplest terms, the strategy of the SD could be described as playing the role of

a sui generis "third power," wanting to go back to the status quo ante using methods somewhat different than those used by the right wing.

The hopelessness of SD tactics and strategy was deepened even more by the actual development of the situation in the country. The crisis caused an undoubtedly revolutionary mood among the masses, who, under KS leadership, clearly pushed for the correct solution. Without any reservations, the working class followed the path indicated by the KS and accepted all of its postulates as its own. The rank-and-file of the SD created a unified front with the KS masses. The Social Democratic Party was absolutely not aware of the situation, did not perceive its revolutionary character, and consoled itself thinking that it was just an ordinary little parliamentary incident that could be dealt with through hallway negotiations. The correct attitude was not considered at all. The best proof of this was their quibbling over the sixty policemen, which took place amidst the most serious crisis Czechoslovakia experienced since the liberation.

It is very telling that at the large "manifestation" in February (Saturday, February 21) at the Old Town Market Square in Prague, when Kousov-Petrankov, a Social Democratic activist, appeared next to President Gottwald, she was greeted by the crowd with a great ovation for the Social Democratic and the unified front. This was the best testimony of the real mood of the Communist and Socialist masses. The rightist SD leadership reacted by immediately kicking Kousova and Dr. Nonec (the left-wing Social Democratic leader in the Prague SD organization) out of the Party.

The pivotal character of the SD's political stance had to do with the fact that together with the KS it held a 52% majority in the parliament for the workers' parties and that [by changing] its stance it was capable of overcoming the crisis and bringing victory to the left wing. Had it taken a clear stance from the beginning, the right wing would not have dared to provoke the crisis, knowing that it had no chance even in the parliament. However, the right wing was correct in its judgment of the influence of the Brno congress on the SD's evolution and politics.

Having recapitulated the situation, the delegation, in agreement with Com. Fierlinger and Com. Slnsk and Dolansk (KS), decided on a plan of action.

On Sunday, February 22, Com. Rusinek, the head of the delegation, officially communicated with the leadership of the SD and asked for a meeting with the decision-making people in the party. Com. Laušman invited the delegation to a conference with the executive department of the SD in the afternoon hours.

The conference took place in the building where the offices of the SD General Secretariat are located. It fell in two parts with a two-hour break. During the first part Laušman, Viln, and Bernard were present. During the second part, Viln, Bernard, [Ludmila] Jankovcov and a few more comrades who were members of the Central Committee, mainly from the centrist and rightist wings, were present.

Com. Rusinek was the first one to speak at the conference. He explained the purpose of the delegation's visit and stressed the common interests of people's democracy countries in defending the gains of the proletariat of those countries. Com. Rusinek pointed out the danger of dollar-diplomacy pressure on the people's democracies, and drew attention to the increased offensive of American capitalism, to the danger of the war camp's intrigues and the necessity to strengthen the collaborative ties between the left-wing socialists from the people's democracies and the Socialist left in the West. He mentioned the influence of the Czech crisis on the struggle of Western European workers, particularly in Italy. Com. Rusinek also pointed out the special connection between the interests of Poland and Czechoslovakia and to the negative results of the prolonged crisis, which could only negatively influence the effectiveness of resolutions reached during the Prague conference [between] the

Foreign Ministers of Poland, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. Com. Arski followed by characterizing the international situation, its direct connection to the Czechoslovak crisis, and the negative repercussions of the rightist provocation. He stressed the role of the leftist Socialists in the struggle for a unified front on the international scale, and he also explained the goals and methods of American politics, the role of the USSR in creating a world peace front, and the necessity to overcome the Czechoslovak crisis in the spirit of revolutionary postulates of the Socialist left and the Communists. Com. Arski conducted a detailed analysis of the flaws of the official SD leadership position, and particularly of the dangerous results of "sitting on the fence" and playing "the third force." Com. Rapacki conducted a precise analysis of the current political situation in Czechoslovakia and indicated the Socialist possibilities of overcoming the crisis. During his speech, Com. Rapacki was very precise about what practical stance the SD should take in negotiations with the Communist Party and stressed the advantages the party might obtain in really increasing its influence in the government.

Com. Jablonski added to the statements of other comrades from the PPS, analyzing the role of the right wing in the crisis and the danger of facilitating its games.

At that stage, the tactics of the delegation were designed to achieve the following postulates:

1. To induce the SD leadership to immediately start negotiations with KS;
2. [To induce the SD] to give up its neutral stance and move to the left side of the barricade;
3. [To induce the SD] clearly to threaten Beneš and the right wing that if they continue to resist, the SD will unconditionally support the KS;
4. [To induce the SD] to relax repression against leftist Socialists;
5. [To induce the SD] to abandon its wait-and-see attitude and start actively to participate in the current conflict on the side of the mobilized working masses;
6. To induce the SD leadership to recognize the revolutionary character of the situation and draw the correct conclusions;
7. To undermine the self-confidence of the rightist activists of the SD, [illegible] them morally and threaten them with the repercussions of resisting the revolutionary wave; and
8. To put a wedge between the right wing and the center, pulling the hesitant elements over to the left.

These postulates have to a great degree since been realized:

1. During the conference Com. Jankovcov (Minister of Industry) clearly expressed support for the left;
2. Com. Vojta Erban subsequently moved to the left;
3. Com. Laušman kept his neutral attitude, not engaging himself on the side of Viln and Bernard;
4. Some of the participants by the end of the meeting clearly separated themselves from the right and moved to the center;
5. During the meeting Viln, Bernard and the people closest to them became clearly isolated from the rest of more or less undecided elements.

The conference was very important, as the following day the plenum of the SD Central Committee [CC] and the destruction of the center-right majority in its CC had a decisive influence on the further development of events at the heart of SD.

After the talks with the SD Central Committee, the delegation again contacted the representatives of KS and informed them about the situation at the heart of the SD. Then Com. Rusinek made personal contact with opposition elements in the heart of the SNS Party and was assured that they would immediately contact President Beneš

and express opposition to Zenkl's directions during the internal party conference. The KS and the left wing of the SD were informed of this measure.

In the evening the delegation participated in the meeting of the leaders of the left wing SD faction, led by Com. Fierlinger. Com. Jankovcov, Jungvirtov, John, Even Erban, and [Ji] Hjek, among others, participated in the meeting.

Tactics were established for the plenum the following day, rules for the Socialist-leftist way of overcoming the crisis were discussed, and the draft of a political declaration was discussed. The declaration was to be made by the left in case the rightist elements took control of the CC plenary meeting. After establishing this plan of action, the delegation got in touch with Warsaw and determined further guidelines for actions the following day.

On the day of the CC Plenum, Com. Rusinek conducted further talks with the National Socialists, and during the luncheon hours a meeting with a group of SD members took place. The meeting was initiated by Bernard. Present were representatives of the extreme right, led by Majer and Bernard [illegible word?]. In spite of that fact, after a lengthy discussion two participants assured the PPS delegation of their readiness to speak at the Plenum meeting in the spirit of our [the delegation's] postulates.

Thanks to the account of the Plenum given by our leftist friends, we were able to conceive of the meeting as a gradual tilting from an extreme right stance in the morning to a more conciliatory attitude later in the day, with a great many delegates moving to a center-left position. Already at noon Laušman decided that the repression of the left wing forced by Majer was a mistake. By the evening, the left was finally able to win a majority for a very important postulate: to send a party delegation to the reorganization meeting of National Front, where decisive resolutions were to be reached about how to solve the crisis. All day long the delegation's efforts were focused on trying to win over as many CC members as possible in order to win that decision, since we considered this decision to be a breakthrough in the overall attitude of the party leadership. Our judgment turned out to be the right one, since from that moment began the disintegration of the right. In spite of the right wing's votes, a majority could still be found to support the decision. Vojta Erban's move to the left played a major role in this.

The CC plenary meeting was postponed until the following day. The development of events had gained a sudden momentum by then. In response to the appeal of the Employee Council, a one-hour general strike took place. Demonstrations of right-wing students took place in the streets, that [line missing]. At the same time, National Front Action Committees began to take action all over the country, aiming at Communist as well as Social Democratic oriented workers.

From the morning of February 24 on, decisive events took place also in the leadership of Social Democratic organizations. Around 10 A.M. a group of leftist SNS representatives, led by the "expelled" Com. Nmec, seized the offices of the General Secretariat on Pikop. At noon the Prague organization gave itself to the disposal of the party left led by Com. Fierlinger. The Brno organization did the same and similar news started coming during the day from other provinces as well.

Therefore the CC plenum continued in the light of faits accomplis. At the suggestion of Com. Gottwald, the SD Central Committee decided to open talks on the reconstruction of the government and the National Front. However, the representatives of the SD took a passive stance in these talks, registering the conditions presented by the KS to present them to their own Central Committee. The occupation of the offices of the Central Committee made it difficult for the normal functioning of the SD executive. Laušman presented Gottwald with a demand to have the building cleared out by the police, which Gottwald did not want to do, explaining that it was an internal party matter. He agreed in the end, however, and

the police removed the leftists, returning the building [control over] to the party authorities. The CC Plenum restarted, but the balance had clearly moved to the left. In spite of that, the majority hesitated accepting the proposals of the KS. The proposals were aimed at: participation of SD as a whole in the new NF government, participation of the SD in Action Committees and the expanded NF, granting the SD an additional ministry portfolio in the government, and improving collaboration with the KS. However, one condition was to be the removal of Majer from the government. In the light of the indecisiveness of the majority of the CC, the left departed before the meeting was over, published its political declaration, and delegated Fierlinger to talk directly to Gottwald.

An hour later, most of the CC was persuaded, and had completely isolated the right wing, including Majer and Vilm. Then it was Bernard and Laušman's turn to go to Gottwald to start negotiations on the platform suggested by the KS. In such a situation, Gottwald found himself face to face with two different SD factions and an actual split.

The PPS delegation spent all of Tuesday trying to influence the CC in order to save the unity of the Social Democratic Party by overthrowing the right and ensuring the acceptance of the KS proposals by the rest of the party. It should be noted here that at this stage a small tactical dissonance occurred between the delegation and Fierlinger's left.

Recognizing the situation and appreciating the interests of the socialist movement, the delegation wanted to lead the whole Social Democratic organization, cleared of rightist elements, onto the new political path. Therefore we wanted to keep Laušman as a symbol of party unity and organizational continuity. We realized that to overcome Beneš's obstinacy it was necessary for the Social Democratic Party under Laušman's leadership to follow hand in hand with the KS and Gottwald. Laušman's participation was very much needed. At the same time, Fierlinger seemed to perceive the situation somewhat differently and thought that he had gotten an opportunity to take revenge for Brno and Laušman's betrayal. He was counting on taking over the leadership of the party and on the full success of his group. There was a clear conflict between the political interests of the left and SD as a whole [on the one hand], and the interests of the individual leaders of the left [on the other]. The PPS delegation placed the overall interests higher, hence the small tactical discrepancy, which did not have any negative results on further collaboration, except for Laušman's momentary reserve. Hearing the news about the SD Central Committee majority resolution and the beginning of talks between Laušman and Gottwald, the delegation considered its mission to be over and decided to leave Prague.

Around 10:30 p.m., right before their departure, Com. Rusinek was asked over the telephone by the KS leadership if at least part of the delegation could stay for another 24 hours. The initiative came from Com. Gottwald and Slnsk [illegible]. It was decided that Com. Rusinek and Arski would stay. The following morning both comrades were invited over by Com. Gottwald. Even before that, Com. Slansky expressed thanks to the delegation on behalf of the KS Central Committee for its help during the crisis and its effective influence over the SD leadership.

Com. Gottwald described the situation at that stage of the crisis, the stance of the KS and related the course of the night talks with the Fierlinger and Laušman groups. Thanking the PPS delegation for their collaboration, he expressed the wish that the delegation make contact with both groups again and attempt to reconcile them in order to present a unified stance to the outside. Com. Gottwald shared the approach of the PPS delegation, which had tried to influence both SD groups in the same spirit. Com. Gottwald also expressed his positive opinion concerning the plan to initiate regular cooperation between the SD and the PPS in the future through creating a contact commission of both parties. Evaluating the course of the crisis, Com.

Gottwald expressed the hope that on Wednesday afternoon President Bene would sign the resignation of the former ministers and recognize the new National Front cabinet with eleven Czech and Slovak Communists, four representatives of Social Democratic, and two representatives from the National Socialist and Slovak Democratic left wings.

Com. Gottwald also expressed the opinion that under the influence of the PPS delegation, Laušman would accept the proposal of the party left to purge the party of rightist elements.

Immediately after this conversation, Com. Rusinek and Arski went to the SD Secretariat where they conducted talks with Coms. Nmec, Laušman, and Vojta Erban in the spirit of postulates agreed upon with Com. Gottwald.

In the course of the day, the SD reorganized its party leadership, removing Majer, Vilm, Bernard, and other rightists, temporarily entrusting Com. Vojta Erban with the duties of the General Secretary, and announcing a purge of the editorial staff of Pravo lidu and the whole organization structure. In his last conversation [with the delegation], Com. Vojta Erban promised to send to the PPS Central Executive Committee the details of the reorganization action in writing and agreed to initiate steady contacts between the SD and PPS in the near future.

At that point the delegation ended its activities and returned to Warsaw.

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Recapitulating the results of the four-day action:

1. The delegation neutralized the influence of [French Socialist leader] Guy Mollet in the SD, who visited Prague a week before and tried to dispose the party in the spirit of the "third force;"
2. [The delegation] undermined the mood of the SD's extreme right wing;
3. [The delegation] influenced the undecided elements to move to the left;
4. [The delegation] made it easier for the left wing to push the Party on to the correct path;
5. [The delegation] facilitated the reaching of an agreement of the CC majority to start talks with Gottwald's KS;
6. [The delegation] contributed to preserving the party as a whole for the NF;
7. [The delegation] influenced the precipitation of the process of removing the rightists [from the party];
8. [The delegation] influenced the resumption of the unified front;
9. [The delegation] tightened collaboration with the SD;
10. [The delegation] established close contacts with the KS leadership. In the end it proved the correctness of the leftist-socialist propositions in the practical situation of the political crisis, where it was possible to reach a revolutionary solution, under the condition of achieving unified action by the two factions of the worker's movement.