

15 January 1990

CZECHOSLOVAKIA: ANNUAL REVIEW FOR 1989

HER MAJESTY'S AMBASSADOR AT PRAGUE TO
THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

1. Last two months of the year brought radical, peaceful change restoring Czechoslovak morale and national pride (paras 1 - 2)
2. The events unpredictable: for the most part, the year was apparently calmer than 1988 allowing the authorities to ease petty restrictions notably on travel and contacts with foreigners (paras 3 - 4)
3. A good year for the churches, particularly the Roman Catholics. Cardinal Tomasek's prominent role in the overthrow of the regime (para 5)
4. No serious attempt to tackle fundamental economic problems. This is now the task of the new economic Ministerial team (para 6)
5. Troubles with the neighbours; cool relations with the Soviet Union; Johannes's ill-judged visit to China; trading partners refuse to honour their debts (paras 7 - 9)
6. Little content in relations with Western countries which continued to complain of human rights abuses. New government begin negotiations to open diplomatic relations with South Korea and Israel and announce applications to join IMF and IBRD (para 10)
7. Good Anglo/Czechoslovak cooperation over Semtex. No progress on trade. Excellent cultural relations. Expulsions leading to cancellation of Sir G Howe's visit (para 11)

8. The winners, Vaclav Havel above all (para 12)

9. Future outlook. Government moving to rejoin the European family as quickly as possible. Inexperienced; needs help and advice. Competition for influence where we have good assets. Some predictions for 1990 (paras 13 - 14).

BRITISH EMBASSY
PRAGUE

15 January 1990

The Rt Hon Douglas Hurd CBE MP
Secretary of State for Foreign and
Commonwealth Affairs
LONDON

Sir,

CZECHOSLOVAKIA: ANNUAL REVIEW 1989

Internal

1. The tidal wave of reform in Eastern Europe finally caught up with Czechoslovakia in the last two months of the year, sweeping out of office the President, all but four ministers of the previous administration and all but the veteran Adamec and the arriviste Urbanek from the party leadership. The Praesidium (Politburo) is no more; the Czech and Slovak National Governments are unrecognisable; the General Secretaries of the other two main National Front parties are gone. Almost daily we hear of the collapse of provincial satrapies and of former members of the apparat looking for work. There have been several suicides of compromised local leaders.
2. And yet 1989 will be recalled for the peaceful nature of what the Czechoslovaks call their velvet revolution. That so much was accomplished so quickly without violence or damage to this most lovely city is a matter of wonderment. Not a single window was broken; even the rose bushes in Wenceslas Square survived undamaged; and when it was all over the

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students began clearing up the traces of their struggle leaving only candles to burn at significant points and the national flag to float above the great statue of the King. This, above all, has given the Czechoslovak people back their self respect. All are by now piously reminding themselves of the hardships and sacrifices to come; and as I write the spirit of retribution and revenge is beginning to stir. But at the end of the year the mood was of a joy so intense as to be almost palpable. An old lady of our acquaintance tells us that some of her contemporaries literally died of happiness, their blood pressure unable to stand the strain of so much emotion. Churches in this, one of the most irreligious capitals of Europe, were thronged at Christmas with worshippers thankful for their peaceful delivery. The bearing of young and old alike, the very expression on their faces, tell of the restoration of personal integrity and national pride.

3. While change must obviously have been coming, no one could have foretold how and when it would happen. Havel himself described the apparently immobile situation to a mutual friend on 12 November in terms which the Department will recognise from my First Impressions Despatch last May. And yet, five days later the students held their historic rally; two days after that the Civic Forum was founded; and eight days later the entire country went on strike to bring the edifice down. It was not as though the year was proving particularly vexatious for the authorities up to this point; it was, if anything, quieter than the previous year when there were the anniversaries of 1918, 1938, 1948 and 1968 to commemorate. True, there was a large rally in January on the twentieth anniversary of the self-immolation of Jan Palach, an event which saw the riot police at their most sanguinary and led to the re-imprisonment of Vaclav Havel. Thereafter such demonstrations as there were attracted only the hard core of dissenters, somewhere between two and five thousand people in all; and better police training

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saw to it that these were contained with much less violence. There had been petitions of all kinds, notably one against the police violence in January and the imprisonment of Havel signed by artists and writers, many formerly conformist. Semi-official groups of the intelligentsia were forming and radical students gave their more conformist colleagues and high party dignitaries a rough time in discussion. Even so, there was no evidence of general unrest: even the latest manifesto of the Charter 77 group, "A Few Sentences" launched in June attracted only about 35,000 signatures by November, a twentieth of those supporting Augustin Navratil's 1988 protest about the treatment of the Church. The protesters looked to be running out of steam, content to wait until the pear dropped of its own weight, as some put it. Only the students reached up to pluck it down. The country owes them a huge debt of gratitude and knows it.

4. In the comparative calm, and presumably to avert unnecessary public discontent, the regime eased some unnecessary restrictions. One of the sights of the early summer was the long queue for visas outside the German and Austrian Embassies as travel, and the holding of foreign currency, became easier for the average citizen. We had a modest little queue of our own then as visa applications rose by about 25%. Contacts with foreigners were no longer regarded with paranoid suspicion; and there was much enjoyment to be had making friends with Czechoslovaks who had hitherto been forced to shun our contaminating presence.

The Churches

5. The Churches, too, particularly the Roman Catholic, found life a little easier. Negotiations with the Vatican resulted in the appointment of an Archbishop to the senior Slovak archdiocese of Trnava and of three bishops elsewhere. The authorities were in greater haste to fill the sees than the Eternal Church and official irritation at its deliberate pace was being privately expressed by the autumn. It was a historic year for the Czech province. Not only was there Cardinal Tomasek's ninetieth birthday

birthday to celebrate: but the good old man led 8,000 pilgrims to Rome for the canonisation of St Agnes Premyslide on 25 November. He came back just in time to put the archiepiscopal boot into a regime on the point of panic and he was subsequently unflinching. The mass in honour of St Agnes on 25 November, even for unbelievers, was probably the most moving event of the year. Father Vaclav Maly will remember 1989 with pride. After leading the rallies in Wenceslas Square and on Letna Plain with boyish charm and good humour he was sent off, for the good of his soul and little reluctantly, to renew his vocation as a suburban parish priest. We shall hear more of him.

The Economy

6. There was greater anxiety in the high reaches of the government and administration over the continued deterioration in Czechoslovakia's economic position. The servile National Assembly passed some legislation in the name of economic reform; but ideological objections to anything fundamental proved obdurate in the face of gloomy and persuasive forecasts about the future. Only Prime Minister Adamec seemed willing to confront his reactionary colleagues. He took his case to the National Assembly in June in a speech which led to seismic disturbances in the Praesidium. This speech so closely mirrored the views of the Prognostics Institute that for one moment it looked as if this authoritative body would be closed, thus adding one more adventure to Dr Komarek's picaresque career: [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Komarek believes that this meeting proved to be the end of the line for the old order. He and two of his former colleagues at the Institute, Dlouhy and Klaus, must now steer the country back to the market economy.

Foreign Affairs

7. There were the usual exchange of visits with fraternal states many of undecipherable purport, part of the vanishing rituals of

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international "socialism". Even so some of the smiles grew a little fixed. There were serious, and unresolved, difficulties with Hungary over the Gabčíkovo/Nagymaros dam project on the Danube which now looks dead but which will trouble their relations for many years to come. There were also difficulties with Hungary, as with Poland and the GDR, over a customs regime designed to protect supplies for Czechoslovak customers; and tensions persisted on the Polish/Czechoslovak border over pollution. The regime kept its dignity during the mass emigrations from the GDR in September and October when the FRG Embassy here nearly foundered under the impact of the thousands scrambling to get in. Their presence in the centre of Prague was an ideological embarrassment to the regime but the episode did not seem to have any significant effect on events here. The population at large seemed to regard it as an intra-German affair irrelevant to their own circumstances.

8. Relations with the Soviet Union were correct but not noticeably any warmer. Gorbachev could not have been best pleased when Ligachev came here in the spring to inspect the wonders of Czechoslovak collective farming at a difficult time. I have no evidence that the Russians actively intervened in the events of November and December but the fact Gorbachev did nothing to save the old order in the GDR must have given courage to discontented fainthearts here. 1989 saw the first Soviet withdrawals in accordance with the plan for unilateral arms cuts announced by Gorbachev last year and Czechoslovakia followed suit with the retirement of three front line divisions to reserve status; but the modernisation and upgrading of weapon systems continued unabated. Almost the first problem the new government took on was the presence of Soviet troops here. Their position that, now that the 1968 invasion has been declared invalid, so too must be the resultant Status of Forces Agreement, is logical; but this presumably cuts across Russian ambitions for the CFE talks in Vienna and friction over the issue is likely to result.

9. Foreign Minister Johanes' visit to China in November, along with his hard line speech at the closing session of the Vienna CSCE meeting last January, made him a prime target for the Forum in its dealings with Adamec. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Adamec himself unsuccessfully tried to persuade Syria and Iraq to pay their debts; and Egypt made only a half-promise to do so. Arafat paid a visit to Prague and mystified the diplomatic community with his references to the helpful Czechoslovak interest in the Arab-Israel dispute.

10. Relations between the old regime and the West showed little change. France tried a heavy diplomatic and commercial offensive as a follow-up to Mitterrand's visit last year but with no very evident result. For most, there seemed to be little real diplomatic business to conduct apart from regularly complaining about human rights abuses. Western countries, the Netherlands conscientiously in the lead, tried out the new CDH mechanism, provided for in the Vienna Concluding Document for the correction of such abuses. The authorities soon worked out a routine for dealing with these importunities but, as the Permanent Secretary found during his visit, the civilised officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs found the task of defending the indefensible distasteful. This was a thing of the past by the end of the year when all Czechoslovaks regained their human rights. December also saw the first moves towards opening diplomatic relations with South Korea and Israel and the announcement of an early application to rejoin the IMF and IBRD.

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Future Outlook

13. The new government is making up for lost time by moving quickly, as they put it, to rejoin Europe. This involves tackling fundamental economic reform at home without the support of proper democratic institutions but as an insurance policy lest anything untoward should happen to Gorbachev. They will make mistakes and will need western encouragement and support. The problem for us now is the competition for influence where we have been a little slow off the mark. Our assets are however large and I have telegraphed suggestions how to realise on them. Since then it is clear that we can have a cultural institute with full British Council representation as soon as Spring Gardens can find the funds.

14. For the rest, and barring some cataclysm in the Soviet Union, the only safe predictions are:-

- a) free elections in June;
- b) [REDACTED]
- c) the continued overwhelming political influence, direct or indirect, of the Civic Forum;
- d) a preoccupation with the German problem leading to support for Helsinki II in 1990;
- e) friction with the Soviet Union over the stationing of Soviet troops and the CMEA; and
- f) inflation but much foreign interest in investment here.

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