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The Czechoslovak Crisis of 1968 and the Soviet Laboratory of Finland: The Beginning Decline of the Communist Movement. Research Project.

The reform policy of the renewed Communist leadership in Czechoslovakia since the beginning of 1968 proved to be an ideological challenge for the existing Soviet-type systems. It simultaneously seemed to free uncontrolled political streams so far stagnated by the rigid totalitarian politocratic rule as did Princess Pandora in classical Greek mythology once she opened her box. However, the Dubcek team seemed only to follow the original traditions of the Czechoslovak Communist Party (Komunistická strana Československa, KSČ) of the early 1920's under the leadership of Bohumír Šmeral, who leant more on the popular support in parliamentary elections than on the theory of tight elitist avant garde party. Without Lenin's decisive intercession Šmeral and his party might have been even ousted from the Comintern. Later in 1929, the KSC had been "bolshevisized" according to the models of other Comintern parties. Since then, the Czechoslovak Communists mainly used to copy Soviet practices and followed the Soviet line quite faithfully until the end of 1967. In 1968, Dubček's team seemed to desire to return to the democratic origins of the party's first years by regulating political and social reforms, which were genuinely popular among most of the people. Only a small group within the KSČ seemed to oppose the reforms and began to link itself to the Kremlin leadership, who was already worried on the new Czechoslovak course.

Similarly the Finnish Communist Party (Suomen kommunistinen puolue, SKP) had begun to free itself from its authoritarian Stalinist past once it had renewed its leadership in the Party Congress of 1966 in order to democratisize its organisation. However, the supporters of the old phalanx did not accept its defeat at the Party Congress and began to organize themselves within the existing party. The rising schisms within the SKP seem to have resulted into the slight but perceptible decline of the party's popular support. Many traditional Communist and left voters in Finland began to alienate themselves from the quarrelling party. But before the Warsaw Pact intervention into Czechoslovakia in August 20-21, 1968, the definite split between two separated wings within the SKP had not yet been crystallized definitely.

Czechoslovakia was an essential part of the Warsaw Pact geostrategic military front towards Western Europe, especially towards West Germany that was a red rag for the Kremlin leadership at that time. Thus the Soviets insisted on their unquestioned rule over Czechoslovakia without mention of a specific Czechoslovak system of socialism perhaps even outside the Warsaw Pact Organization. Therefore the basic question of the project concerning the Warsaw pact intervention, the "Operation Danube", is whether the military motives behind the "Operation" had a higher priority for the USSR than political, ideological, and economic motives. For the GDR, Poland, and Bulgaria, as well as partially for Hungary, the priority of political motives to participate in the "Operation" alongside the Soviet troops might have been obvious. But the Kremlin always had a decisive say over its allies, thus the Soviet order of priorities dictated the model of problem solving.

Finland in turn belonged to the Soviet political and economic sphere as an odd exceptional case. It was a country with a western parliamentary democratic system and market economy. Despite of limits that the Finno-Soviet Treaty on Friendship, Co-operation, and Mutual Assistance (Sopimus ystävyydestä, yhteistoiminnasta ja keskinäisestä avunannosta, YYA) of 1948 imposed on the existence of Finland, this north-west neighbour of the USSR had begun

to insist on its neutrality in the great power conflicts since the late 1950's and began its gradual economic integration into Western Europe via co-operation with the other Nordic countries. Thus, the USSR began to doubt that Finland might not fulfill its duties according to the YYA treaty in the international conflicts that might spread to Northern Europe too.

Eventhough Finnish communism was not able to increase its popular support after the successful parliamentary elections in 1958 and 1962, the Finnish labour movement as a whole achieved a great victory in the parliamentary elections of 1966, when the social democrats (Suomen sosialidemokraattinen puolue, SDP) advanced remarkably by regainig the position of the biggest parliamentary group. The SDP decided to re-orientate its domestic political course by shifting to the left, resulting into a new foreign political orientation of the social democrats which was more favourable towards the USSR than before. As preconditions to establish good relations with the CPSU, the Kremlin expected the Finnish social democrats to support the foreign policy of Finnish president Urho Kekkonen based on friendship and co-operation with the USSR, and to open the prospects for cooperation with the Finnish communists. At the same time, the SKP was instructed by prominent Soviet advisers to overcome their antagonism towards the social democrats. Once Finland had got a popular front government in 1966 including Communist ministers for the first time after 1948, the Soviets began to nourish expectations on the peaceful transition of Finland from capitalism into Soviet-type socialism as an example to some other Western European countries with strong Communist parties.

After the conclusion of the YYA Treaty, J.K. Paasikivi, post-war president of Finland and Kekkonen's predecessor, was quite convinced that the USSR's prior interests in Finland lied in the sphere of military and not of ideology. In the favourable situation of international politics in the spring of 1948, when Stalin aimed for any kind of treaty with Finland in order to secure the north-western part of the Soviet borders, Paasikivi had managed to include a special passage into the preamble of the Treaty, stating Finland's will to stay outside of any conflict between the Great Powers. Similarly Finland committed itself to defend only its own territory against any aggression towards the Soviet Union. The latter point constituted a remarkable difference compared to the respective treaties the Soviet Union had earlier concluded with its allies like Czechoslovakia. These points, allowing Finland to behave more freely than any other Soviet ally in Europe, made Paasikivi and later Kekkonen believe that the USSR would not advocate any political changes in Finland as long as Finland stayed loyal to the Treaty and did not irritate the Kremlin. Considering Finno-Soviet relations after World War II, and taking into account the Soviet vision for the whole of Scandinavia, *the Soviet interests concerning Finland were mainly military ones, and the ideological and political concerns had only secondary significance*. But was the short period around the Czechoslovak crisis an exception? Thus the basic question concerning Finno-Soviet relations in the shadow of a) the Czechoslovak crisis, b) the desired Soviet arrangements for structuring European security and co-operation as well as for stabilizing the European post-WW II order as de facto established after the communist coup d'état in Czechoslovakia, and c) the Soviet desires for ideological re-expansion in Europe, when there were wide social unrests in France and Italy with their strong communist parties and the popular front government was established in Finland, – is *whether ideological and political issues took a prominent place in the Soviet list of priorities in its Finnish policy aside with military issues*.

Thus, the Warsaw Pact intervention into Czechoslovakia had far reaching consequences on Finland too. First, it immmediately crystallized the split of the SKP as the majority condemned the occupation, while the minority followed the Soviet instructions. Second, it made the Soviets question Finnish neutrality, when the Kremlin began to tighten its hand on its

European sphere in front of the American threat in the West and the Chinese threat in the East.

The crushing of the Prague Spring by the Warsaw Pact Intervention in August 1968 at the same time seemed to limit the political space of manoeuvring for Finland in the neighbourhood of the USSR. The basic problem stemmed from the military articles in the YYA Treaty. Finland went on to emphasize its neutrality like it had done since Paasikivi's formulations on the Treaty. The Soviets in turn had repeatedly referred to the military articles of the Treaty, which included mutual military co-operation in the case of the Kremlin finding any external threat for Soviet territory from Western Europe, especially from West Germany, or the USA. The Czechoslovak crisis in 1968 motivated the Soviet leadership to tighten their control over their allies and to secure more intensively their interests in Northern Europe. Thus, they gradually refused to recognize Finland's neutrality, and the threat of mutual military consultations against the "West German aggression" shadowed the political field at the Soviet north-west border. Of course the event of Soviet-Finnish military consultations would have destroyed all credibility of Finland's neutrality in the West. In this context, the restart of the already once interrupted American-Soviet SALT (Strategic Armament Limitations Talks) negotiations, the fact that they took place in Helsinki and that they happened so soon after the Czechoslovak crisis (already in 1969), served an immense advantage for the defence of Finnish neutrality policy led by President Urho Kekkonen by all means.

Originally Kekkonen was not willing to contribute to the Soviet project of the Conference of European security, because he did not want to be labelled as a Soviet spokesman. But quite soon he realized that the Warsaw Pact intervention into Czechoslovakia benefitted the Soviet policy of status quo: it was the definite confirmation of the bloc borders emerged after World War II. So, Kekkonen modified the original Soviet schema by extending it to include also the USA and Canada. This was the very thing the Soviets originally did not want, since their goal was to exclude the USA's influence from Europe forever. When Finland suddenly made an offer to host the eventual security conference with American and Canadian participation, the whole project of the CSCE became part of a foreign political defence strategy of Finland's neutrality. Had Finland lost its credibility of neutrality in the West, the conference would never have been realized in Helsinki, if it would have been realized at all.

Among other things, the Kremlin and East Germany tried to push Finland into recognizing the GDR. The Pankow regime had made an appraisal of Finland as "the politically weakest link of the capitalist camp" and therefore the best candidate in the West to recognize the GDR. Had Finland agreed, its credibility would have been definitely lost in the West. But in the end, perhaps because of the Chinese threat in the East, the Soviets' priority was to keep the status quo policy in Europe, therefore they also preferred the arrangement of security conference in Helsinki over the occasional premature recognition of the GDR by Finland. As a result, Kekkonen achieved his finest hours in early August 1975, when he opened the Conference of Security and Co-operation of Europe in Helsinki.

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