

# Not yet Czech-out time

**I**t seems only a matter of time before Czechoslovakia's neo-Stalinist regime ends up, to use a favorite Marxist phrase, on the refuse heap of history. The government of Communist party boss Milos Jakes is clearly beginning to lose its nerve in the face of mounting popular demonstrations and party infighting between hard-liners and would-be reformers.

What we are seeing in Prague is the latest round in the communist world's battle of the generations. Middle-aged Marxists in their 40s and 50s have had enough of the arthritic old Stalinists who have kept the communist world trapped in a time-warped of the early 1950s. Young people from Beijing to Bratislava are simply fed up and want immediate change. The surprising thing is that the Czechs took so long to hit the streets.

Well, perhaps not all that surprising. Czechs have always shown a startling propensity to avoid conflict and bend to the prevailing winds.

In 1938, for good example, Hitler demanded that the Sudetenland, a heavily German province of western Czechoslovakia, be ceded to the Third Reich. British PM Neville Chamberlain went to Munich and agreed to Hitler's demands. The Czechs moaned, groaned and then caved in.

The West loudly mourned the rape of Czechoslovakia. In reality, the loss of Sudetenland — and the ensuing dismemberment of the 20-year old Czech state — was almost entirely the fault of the Czechs.

French engineers had built a mini-version of the Maginot Line along the hilly border between Sudetenland and Nazi Germany. This powerful, deeply echeloned belt of forts was defended by a large and well-equipped Czech Army. German field marshal Erich von Manstein, one of history's greatest generals, was intimately involved in drawing up plans to attack the Sudetenland. After the war, he said the Czech fortifications were so strong that the then relatively weak German forces could never have broken through and could well have been defeated by the Czech Army alone. Hitler beat the Czechs by sheer bluff.

During the years of Nazi occupation the majority of Czechs quietly co-operated with the

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Germans. In 1968, when Soviet tanks rolled into Prague to crush the reformist Dubcek regime, not a shot was fired. Contrast this behavior to the bravery of the 1956 Hungarian rising.

There is a curious passivity in the Czech character that, at least for me, defies explanation — unless one accepts the claim that there really was no such nation as Czechoslovakia but merely a collection of Bohemians, Moravians, Slovaks and Carpathians.

That, of course, was yesterday. Today we may perhaps be seeing the first real demonstration of Czechoslovak national identity. Or, just as well, the beginning of a new round of intercommunal hostility between Czechs and Slovaks — if the protective mantle of communist rule is torn away.

What will happen next in Prague? Czechs are by nature cautious. Look for a gradual erosion of the present neo-Stalinist regime — although overnight collapse cannot be ruled out.

New, non-communist parties will probably join the government in some sort of pink coalition. This is likely because the hard-working Czechs are not threatened by the sort of onrushing economic collapse that faces the not so hard-working Poles. Czechoslovakia has always had a powerful and efficient manufacturing base — whether under the Hapsburgs, Nazis or Soviets.

Czech industry, while not state of the art, is light years more modern and productive than any other East Bloc nation, with the exception of East Germany. The dreadful shortages that afflict Poland and the USSR are unknown in prosperous Czechoslovakia. Nor is it weighed down like Hungary by a crushing foreign debt. So the next months will likely bring modest political reform and a move toward a more open society.

At the same time, however, the Czechs will more or less remain in Moscow's economic orbit. Like other East European nations, Czech industry is configured to run on Soviet oil, natural gas and cheap raw materials.

Much as the Czechs, who have a growing trade surplus with the USSR, might like to move their economy lock, stock and barrel to the West, reality dictates that this will be a long, slow process. The strong economic ties between the Czechs and the USSR will make it probable that West European corporations will invest in Czechoslovakia as a means of entering the huge but primitive Soviet market.

The Czechs will also continue as one of the world's leading arms exporters.

Czechs owe themselves a better government than the grey-faced bureaucrats that are clinging on to power. Let's hope they finally summon up the gumption to give party boss Jakes and his cronies a big boot in their Marxist-Leninist pants.

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