Czechoslovak Reply to Warsaw Meeting's Criticisms. Mr. Dubcek's Assurances of Continuation of Democratic Reforms. - Soviet Demand for Meeting of Czechoslovak and Soviet Politburos. - Continuation of Soviet “Nerve War” against Czechoslovakia.

A reasoned, point-by-point reply to the criticisms of the Communist Parties represented at Warsaw was made on July 18 by the presidium of the central committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party. On the same day Mr. Dubcek, the First Secretary of the party, gave an assurance in a radio and television broadcast that there would be no retreat from the democratic reforms begun since January. Declaring that “we want our socialism deeply anchored in the minds of the people,” Mr. Dubcek said that after many years “an atmosphere has been created in this country in which everyone can publicly, without fear, express his opinion openly and with dignity.” While emphasizing that Czechoslovakia remained loyal to the Warsaw Pact and that there was no danger of the Czechoslovak Communist Party losing its leading position in the country, Mr. Dubcek stressed that “we shall finish the democratic process we have begun” and “shall not permit any return to the pre-January situation.”

In its reply to the “Warsaw letter,” the Czechoslovak Communist Party denied that any serious threat had arisen to its position or authority; reiterated Czechoslovakia's loyalty to the Warsaw Pact and to the socialist community; pointed out inter alia that the Communist Party, the Government, and the National Front had rejected the “2,000 Words” document; declared that the overwhelming majority of the Czechoslovak people favoured the abolition of censorship and supported free expression of opinion; and said that the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia was trying to give a different leadership than that of the “discredited bureaucratic-police methods” of the past. The statement of the Czechoslovak Communist Party was worded in part as follows:

“… In the letter there is mention of attacks against socialist foreign policy, of assaults against the alliance and friendship with socialist countries, of voices calling for the revision of our common and co-ordinated policy against the German Federal Republic. It is even stated that advances by the G.F.R. authorities and by revanchists are finding response in leading circles of our country.

“We are surprised at such statements, because it is well known that the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic is applying a thorough socialist foreign policy, the principles of which were formulated in the Action Programme of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia…. These documents and statements by leading Czechoslovak representatives, and also our further actions, are consistently based on the principles of socialist internationalism, alliance, and the development of friendly relations with the Soviet Union and the other socialist States….
“With regard to the bitter historical experiences of our nations with German imperialism and militarism, it is inconceivable that any Czechoslovak Government—which less a socialist government—could ignore these experiences and foolhardily hazard the fate of our country, and we must refute any suspicion in this direction.

“As regards our relations with the G.F.R., it is universally known that although Czechoslovakia is the immediate neighbour of the G.F.R., it was the last to take definite steps towards the partial regulation of mutual relations, particularly in the economic field, while other socialist countries adapted their relations much earlier without it causing any fears.

“At the same time we thoroughly respect and protect the interests of the German Democratic Republic, our socialist ally, and do all in our power to strengthen its international position and authority….

“The staff exercise of the allied forces of the Warsaw Treaty on the territory of Czechoslovakia is a concrete proof of our faithful fulfilment of our alliance commitments….

“Ours and the members of the Army gave a friendly welcome to the Soviet and other allied soldiers on the territory of Czechoslovakia….

“The obscurities and doubts in the minds of our public occurred only after the repeated changes of the time of the departure of the allied armies from the territory of Czechoslovakia at the end of the exercise….

“The Communist Party[of Czechoslovakia] depends on the voluntary support of the people. It does not implement its leading role by ruling over society but by faithfully serving its free, progressive socialist development. It cannot impose its authority, but must constantly acquire it by its actions. It cannot force its line by orders, but by the work of its members and the veracity of its ideals.

“We do not hide the fact… that there exist tendencies aimed at discrediting the party and attempts to deny it its moral and political right to lead society. But if we ask whether can be correctly judged as a threat to the socialist system, as a decline of the political role of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia under the pressure of reactionary, counter-revolutionary forces, then we come to the conclusion that this is not so.

“The leading role of our party suffered gravely in the past by the distortions of the fifties and the policy of the leadership headed by A. Novotny. He is even more responsible for the deepening of social conflicts: between the Czechs and Slovaks, between the intelligentsia and the workers, between the young generation and the older generation. The inconsistent solution of economic problems has left us in a condition in which we cannot meet a series of justified economic demands of the workers and when the effectiveness of the entire national economy is gravely disrupted. Under that leadership, the confidence of the masses in the party dropped and there were expressions of criticism and resistance; but all this was ‘solved’ by interference from a position of power against justified dissatisfaction, against criticism, and against attempts to solve social problems in the interests of the party and of its leading role.

“Instead of the gradual removal of errors, further mistakes and conflicts accumulated as a result of subjective decision-making… sharpened social conflicts and difficulties.
“Any indication of a return to these methods would evoke the resistance of the overwhelming majority of party members, the resistance of the workers, co-operative farmers, and intelligentsia. The party would, by such a step, imperil its political leading role and create a situation in which a power conflict would really arise. This would truly threaten the socialist advantages of the people and also our common interests in the anti-imperialist front of the socialist, community.

“Our party has laid down the following main aims and stages of political work:

(1) To consistently separate the party as a whole from the distortions of the past for which specific persons of the old party leadership are responsible: these people are justifiably being called to task.

(2) To prepare the 14th extraordinary congress of the party which will evaluate the development of the political situation after the January plenum, and in accordance with the principles of democratic centralism will lay down the compulsory line for the entire party, adopt decisions on the federal structure of Czechoslovakia, approve the new party statute, and elect a new central committee which has the full authority and confidence of the party and the entire society.

(3) After the 14th congress, to launch the offensive for the solution of all fundamental internal political questions….

“The Presidium of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, the Government, and the National Front clearly rejected the appeal of the statement of ‘2,000 Words,’ which urged people to engage in anarchist acts and to violation of the constitutional character of our political reform. It should be noted that… similar campaigns did not in fact occur in our country and that the consequences of the appeal ‘2,000 Words’ did not threaten the Party, the National Front, and the socialist State.

“The campaigns and unjustified slanders against rations functionaries and public officials—including members of the new leadership of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia—which are conducted from extremist positions, both left and right, are still a negative aspect of our situation. The Communist Party central committee and leading officials have unequivocally come out against these methods in specific cases.

“We know that this situation is facilitated by the abolition of censorship in our country and the enactment of freedom of expression and of the Press. What had been spread in the form of ‘whispered propaganda,’ etc., before can now he expressed openly….

“The overwhelming majority of the people of all classes and sectors of our society favour the abolition of censorship and are for freedom of expression. The Communist Party of Czechoslovakia is trying to show that it is capable of a different political leadership and management than the discredited bureaucratic-police methods….

“At the present time the interests of socialism in our country can he served best by a measure of confidence in the leadership of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and of full support of its policy by fraternal parties. For this reason we have proposed, as a prerequisite of successful joint
discussions, bilateral meetings of our parties so that the joint talks may proceed from deep mutual consultations and factual information.

“We sincerely regret that these proposals put forward by us were not implemented. It is not our fault that the meeting in Warsaw was held without us.

“We think that the common cause of socialism is not advanced by the holding of conferences at which the policy and activity of one of the fraternal parties is judged without the presence of their representatives. We consider the principle to be still valid which was expressed in the declaration of the Government of the Soviet Union of October 30, 1956, and which said: ‘The countries of the great community of socialist nations, united by the common ideals of the building of a socialist society and the principles of proletarian internationalism, can build their mutual relations only on the basis of complete equality, respect of territorial integrity, national independence and sovereignty, and mutual non-interference in their internal affairs.’ This principle, as is known, was confirmed at the conference of Communist Parties in Moscow in November 1957 and generally adopted….”

It was announced in Moscow on July 19 that the Politburo of the Communist Party of the U.S.S.R. had proposed a bilateral meeting with the entire Presidium of the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, and that it had been suggested that this meeting should take place within a few days in Moscow, Kiev, or Lvov. In making this announcement, the Tass Agency stated that the Soviet party had proposed such a meeting more than once in June and at the beginning of July, but that the Czechoslovak leaders had “indefinitely postponed” their acceptance.

A further Tass announcement of July 22 stated that the bilateral Soviet-Czechoslovak talks would be held in Czechoslovakia, neither the date nor the site being disclosed; Tass said that this decision had been reached “meeting the wishes of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party.” [Although no statement was issued in Prague, it was believed that the Czechoslovak Presidium had been unwilling to go to the Soviet Union for these talks; the decision to hold them in Czechoslovakia was seen by foreign commentators as a tactical victory For Mr. Dubeek]

On July 26, as the Czechoslovak Presidium was preparing to meet the Soviet Politburo, a message to the Presidium was published in a special edition of Literarni Listy. Signed by most of Czechoslovakia's leading writers and intellectuals, and written by Mr. Pavel Kohout, the playwright, it appealed to the Presidium to defend the liberalization programme and exhorted Mr. Dubcek and his colleagues: “You are writing a fateful n our history…. Write with deliberation but, above all, with courage.” The text of the Literarni Listy appeal was as follows:

“Comrades, we are writing to you on the eve of your meeting with the Politburo of the Soviet Party, at which you will discuss the fate of all of us. As many times before in the history of mankind, a few men will decide the fate of millions. It is difficult and we want to help you by expressing our support.
“The history of our country over the past centuries is a history of bondage. Except for two short
intervals, we have been condemned to create our national existence illegally. We have several
times stood on the brink of disaster.

“That is why our nations welcomed so fervently the democracy brought by the liberation in 1918.
It was incomplete democracy because it did not give its working citizens social security, and yet
it was the working class who, in the Munich crisis, manifested most strongly its resolution to
defend this democracy.

“All the more fervently did our nations welcome the socialism brought by the liberation of 1945.
It was incomplete socialism because it failed to give its working citizens creative freedom. We
did strive for it, however, and we started to find it after January this year….

“We expected the whole socialist camp to be the first to welcome this development with
sympathy. Instead we are being accused of treason. We receive ultimatums from comrades who
by their declarations prove their lack of knowledge of our development and situation. We are
accused of crimes we have not committed. Intentions are attributed to us which we did not and
do not have.

“The threat of unjust punishment hangs over us, a punishment which, whatever its form may be,
will turn like a boomerang against our judges, destroy our efforts, and tragically damage the idea
of socialism for a great many years to come in the whole world.

“Comrades, it is your historic task to prevent such a danger. It is your mission to convince the
leading representatives of the Soviet Communist Party that the process of regeneration in our
country must be carried out in accordance with the interests of our country and of progressive
forces in all continents.

“All we are striving for can be expressed in four words: socialism, alliance, sovereignty, and
freedom.

“In socialism and alliance lie our guarantee to fraternal countries and parties that we will not
allow any development threatening the true interests of nations with whom we have been
fighting side by side for 20 years in a common cause. Our sovereignty guarantees that we will
not repeat the serious mistakes which have brought us to the brink of crisis in the past.

“Explain to your partners that the extreme voices which are heard bore and there in our internal
discussions are precisely the products of the bureaucratic-police system which has stifled
creative thought for so long and pushed a number of people into internal opposition. Convince
them by quoting innumerable examples to show that the authority of the party and the position of
socialism here are incomparably stronger now than ever before. Tell them that we need freedom,
peace, and time to become better and more reliable allies than before.

“Simply speak on behalf of the people, who in these days have ceased to be simply an abstract
term and have become a force creating history.
“Comrades, it may be that you do not all share the same views. Some of you, though you have helped to bring about the January events, are being sharply criticized for your pro-January mistakes. Such is the fate of politicians, and the seven months since January have shown that no one intends to turn this criticism into a vendetta. It would be tragic if the personal feelings of any one of you were to overcome the responsibility you now carry for 14,361,000 people, among whom you yourselves belong.

“Act, explain, but unanimously defend the way we have embarked upon and which we do not intend to leave alive. During the next few days we will follow your dealings hour by hour. We await your reports with impatience. We think of you. Keep us in mind. You are writing a fateful chapter of the history of Czechoslovakia. Write with deliberation but, above all, with courage. We trust you. At the same time we appeal to all citizens who agree with us to support this message.”

Meanwhile the Soviet “war of nerves” was accentuated by the announcement on July 23 of large-scale Soviet military exercises covering a wide area on the western frontiers of the U.S.S.R.; it was stated in Moscow that reservists had been called up and that civilian transport would be requisitioned for these exercises, which would continue until Aug. 10. The announcement of large-scale Russian military manoeuvres was made at a time when Soviet troops had still not completed their withdrawal from Czechoslovakia following the earlier Warsaw Pact manoeuvres; press reports from that country spoke of Soviet tanks, armoured cars, and guns traversing the roads of Slovakia, some units having come to a halt and others moving only very slowly towards the frontier.

A further move in the “war of nerves” was the action of the Soviet and Polish Governments on July 25 in halting all movement of Soviet and Polish tourists into Czechoslovakia, without any explanation. On the same day the Hungarian Communist Party newspaper Nepszabadsag called on the Czechoslovak leaders to take action against a “bourgeois counter-revolution,” accused them of an “erroneous interpretation of democracy and freedom” by abolishing press censorship, and exhorted them not to permit developments which had led in Hungary to a “counter-revolution.”

On July 19, the day on which the Soviet Politburo proposed a meeting with the Czechoslovak Presidium, Pravda reported the discovery by the Czechoslovak security authorities in north-western Bohemia, between Karlovy Vary and Cheb, of a hidden cache of American-made arms, apparently—according to Pravda—intended for use by “Sudeten revanchists and supporters of a restoration of the old order.” In the same issue Pravda alleged that a secret operational plan, prepared in the United States by the Pentagon and Site Central Intelligence Agency for the overthrow of socialism in Czechoslovakia and Eastern Germany, had found its way into Soviet bands. This alleged plan, according to Pravda, outlined subversive tactics to be used by American agents in co-operation with “insurgent elements” in Eastern Europe.

The Czechoslovak news agency (Ceteka) quoting the Ministry of the Interior, confirmed on July 19 the discovery of a small cache of arms a week earlier near Karlovy Vary; it was stated that it consisted of 20 sub-machine guns, 30 pistols, and a small quantity of spare parts and ammunition, and that investigations were being made to find the “persons who hid the weapons.” Nothing was known as to the provenance of the arms, nor was there any substantiation of Pravda allegations.
that they had been smuggled into Czechoslovakia from Western Germany for use by “insurrectionists.”

The Soviet press also strongly attacked General Vaclav Prchlik, head of the political control department of the Czechoslovak Army and the police, after he had publicly criticized the existing organization of the Warsaw Pact.

At a press conference on July 15 General Prchlik had stated—with obvious reference to the continued presence of Soviet forces in Czechoslovakia after the ending of the Warsaw Pact manoeuvres—that he had not found “one word” in the Warsaw Pact “which would authorize foreign troops to stay in one of the member-States against that country's will.” He also said that he wanted to increase the role of the member-States in the Warsaw Pact consultative committee—this statement being regarded as an implied criticism of the U.S.S.R. because the Pact forces had always been commanded by a Soviet general. Red Star, organ of the Soviet armed forces, denounced General Prchlik for “slanderous” allegations against the Warsaw Pact and said that his remarks had given encouragement to “anti-Communist elements” in Czechoslovakia.

The Presidium of the Czechoslovak Communist Party on July 25 ordered the abolition of the political control department of the Army and police, and announced that its chief, General Prchlik, would return to Army service. This action was regarded by commentators as a conciliatory gesture towards the Soviet Union. General Prchlik's criticisms of the Warsaw Pact, were subsequently repudiated officially by the Czechoslovak Ministry of Defence.

The Cierna Meeting.

From July 29 to Aug. 1 the entire Politburo of the Soviet Communist Party and the entire Presidium of the Czechoslovak Communist Party met at Cierna nad Tisou, a small Czechoslovak town near the U.S.S.R.-Czechoslovak border; this was the first occasion that the entire Soviet Politburo had left Soviet territory. The two delegations arrived at Cierna in separate trains which were drawn up about 50 yards apart at the railway station; although silence was maintained on the site of the talks, press reports said that they were being held in a cinema at Cierna which had been converted into an improvised conference hall. On July 28, as Mr. Dubcek and the other Czechoslovak leaders were leaving for Cierna, people all over Czechoslovakia sent letters of support and encouragement to the Presidium; in Prague, tables were set up in the streets at which in a few hours some 40,000 signatures were obtained in support of the manifesto published by Czechoslovak intellectuals in Literarni Listy [see above].

Taking part on the Soviet side in the Cierna talks were Mr. Brezhnev, general secretary of the C.P.S.U. central committee; Mr. Kosygin (Prime Minister), President Podgorny, Mr Gennady Voronov, Mr. Kirill Mazurov, Mr. Arvid Pelshe, Mr. Mikhail Suslov, Mr. Alexander Shelepin, and Mr. Pyotr Shelest, members of the central committee of the Politburo; Mr. Pyotr Demichev and Mr. Pyotr Mashnov, alternate members; and Mr. Konstantin Katushev and Mr. Boris Ponomaryov, secretaries of the central committee.

Participating in the talks on the Czechoslovak side were Mr. Alexander Dubcek, secretary of the central committee of the Presidium; Mr. Frantisek Barbirek, Mr. Vasil Bilak. Mr. Oldrich Cernik
(Prime Minister), Mr. Drahomir Kolder, Mr. Frantisek Kriegel, Mr Jan Piller, Mr Emil Rigo, Mr. Josef Smrkovsky, Mr. Josef Spacek, and Mr Oldrich Svestka, members of the Presidium; Mr. Antonin Kapok, Mr. Josef Lenart, and Mr. B Simon, alternate members; and Mr. M Jakes, chairman of the central control and auditing commission. The meeting was also attended by General Ludvik Svoboda, President of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic.

No statements were issued during the Cierna talks, although Prague radio announced on July 31 that Mr. Brezhnev had returned to the negotiating table after having been taken ill earlier in the day. The meeting ended on Aug. 1 with the publication of a brief communiqué saying that there had been “a broad comradely exchange of views on questions of interest to both sides,” and that a further meeting would be held at Bratislava on Aug. 3 which would be attended by representatives of the Communist and Workers’ parties of Bulgaria, Poland, Hungary, and the German Democratic Republic in addition to those of Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union. The Cierna communiqué was worded as follows:

“The meeting… was held in an atmosphere of complete frankness, sincerity, and mutual understanding and was directed towards a search for ways of further developing and strengthening the traditional friendly relations between our parties and peoples, resting on the principles of Marxism-Leninism and proletarian internationalism. During the talks both delegations by mutual consent resolved to address the central committees of the Communist and Workers’ Parties of Bulgaria, the German Democratic Republic, Hungary, and Poland with a proposal to hold a multilateral comradely meeting. The aforementioned fraternal parties agreed with this proposal.

“The meeting of representatives of the Bulgarian Communist Party, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, the Socialist Unity Party of East Germany, the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party, the Polish United Workers’ Party, and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union will be held in Bratislava on August 3.”

In a radio broadcast on Aug. 2 Mr. Dubcek reiterated that the Czechoslovak Communist Party would continue its post-January policy of “building a socialist society… profoundly democratic, socially just, and with a modern orientation.” As regards the Cierna talks and those to be held at Bratislava, Mr. Dubcek said:

“… I tell you sincerely that we can be quite satisfied with the results and the spirit of the talks. We kept our promise to you, and we are returning with the same conviction that we took to the talks: to continue resolutely along the road taken by the Czechoslovak Communist Party and all our people in January of this year….

“During the talks our Soviet comrades could see for themselves that we are helping to defend socialist principles and that we want to play our part in consolidating the socialist movement. It is our international duty to continue demonstrating in practice that we shall never deviate from the road of socialism because it has the support of the overwhelming majority of our people, communists and non-communists, the whole National Front.
“We have many times conveyed to our Soviet comrades the expressed conviction of our people that they wish to base the further development of our country on mutual fraternal bonds of alliance with the Soviet Union and the other socialist States.

“We can say that the talks were successful, that we shall again continue in our co-operation on the principles on which relations between the fraternal socialist countries should be based, and on real internationalism that includes unity and co-operation as well as respect for State sovereignty and the principle that every communist party is implementing its socialist policy in its country for the welfare of its people, to whom—as we have said many times—it is fully responsible….”

The forthcoming meeting in Bratislava of the Communist and Workers’ parties of Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, and the G.D.R., said Mr. Dubcek, would centre its attention on “the common interests of the communist parties… the interests of internationalism and the international communist movement.” Immediately after the Bratislava meeting, he added, “there will be talks with our friends from Yugoslavia and Rumania.”