

Czechoslovakia (1)

The general . . .

A Special Correspondent discusses the climate in which science operates in Czechoslovakia

THE fact that by comparison with Czechoslovakia probably no other state in the world has so many members of its political leadership with the highest academic qualifications seems to express a very attractive idea—namely, that educational opportunity is equal for everyone, that political leadership emerges in a democratic way and that people make rational choices for the best of the society. The logical conclusion that those who take decisions are the most competent is undermined by two factors.

First, in practice it is the Communist Party which is the repository of power. For example, only those scientists who conform to party rulings are acknowledged as scientists. And the acquisition of school qualifications or of a university degree and high academic honours in the space of months may well accompany a person's improving political fortunes. Still, the fact that political leaders regard it as worthwhile to present themselves as academics symbolises the significance which they attribute to the community of learning.

Secondly, some prominent intellectuals in Czechoslovakia are now in revolt against the present regime. The *Charter 77* human rights manifesto, originally signed by more than 200 persons of "various shades of opinions, faiths, and professions", included some 25 scientists and doctors. It has since been countersigned by at least another 200 supporters, and contains a number of accusations of relevance to all who value academic and scientific freedom (see box).

The current Five Year Plan (1976–80) shows clearly that the present leadership continues to hope for an important contribution of science to economic development. Expenditure for research and development is to grow by a third of the present sum to 3.8% of GNP in 1980, and the proportion of people working in science and technology is to be 21 out of every thousand working in general. Expenditure on equipment has nearly doubled in the past five years and is to grow still further; so will the salaries of scientists.

The significance attributed to science by the present regime in Czechoslovakia is not just theoretical. Yet the apparently grave difficulties achieving the expected results from

the effort put into science seem more and more clearly to arise from the problems inherent to the system itself and not just from the capacities of its leadership.

Of the two different views about the preconditions for the advancement of learning—one stressing free inquiry, the importance of competition and the natural selection of ideas, the other maintaining that an attainment of shared norms and procedures by the scientific community is desirable and that scientific effort as a whole can and should be rationalised—communist ideology is decisively in favour of the second view, since it believes that the development of science can be encouraged when planned. Virtually the whole of scientific effort is subject to state planning in Czechoslovakia.

Even though science is administratively subordinate to the central agencies of government, it would be misleading to say that one identifiable centre prescribes what should be done. Short-term plans spell out work assignments for practically every scientist; this is done on the basis of two-yearly surveys of the country's material and manpower resources in science. The latest of the regular five-year plans was worked out by 800 scientists and specialists from production, directors and representatives of

the relevant working places and, of course, government ministries. Political supervision comes only through the political bounds on the participants themselves. Occasionally mention is made of preparations for a long-term plan, but so far nothing has materialised.

One of the basic difficulties is the right balance between research and development assignments. The current five year plan for Czechoslovak science foresees 346 main tasks; 70% of these are oriented towards current technical developments, 23% are concerned with other social needs, such as medicine and social science, and 7% are tasks of pure research. The proportion of uncommitted to committed goals is, even in the country itself, considered low.

One problem frequently pointed out in Czechoslovakia is the highly unnatural age-structure of people working in research. The official figure for the average age is 45, but this does not express the fact that there is a whole generation missing. After the continual purges in the early 1970s and the emigration of many highly qualified scientists to the West, the number of people between 30 and 50 diminished drastically. There are institutes where only isolated persons survived the past few years. The zigzag course of Prague's present policy has meant alternating periods of relative reconciliation and dogmatic reassertion. Changes and deviations from the science plan require a very expansive, unproductive bureaucracy, and the administrative complex is very demanding of scientists' time—especially when taken together with permanent political courses and meetings.

'A virtual apartheid'

Some extracts from the *Charter 77* human rights manifesto:

The right to freedom of expression . . . is in our case purely illusory. Tens of thousands of our citizens are prevented from working in their own fields for the sole reason that they hold views differing from official ones, and are discriminated against and harassed in all kinds of ways by the authorities and public organisations. Deprived as they are of any means to defend themselves, they become victims of a virtual apartheid.

. . . countless young people are prevented from studying because of their own views or even their parents'. Innumerable citizens live in fear of their children's right to education being withdrawn, if they should even speak up in accordance with their convictions.

Any exercise of the right to 'seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing, or in print' . . . is followed by extra-judicial and even judicial sanctions . . .

No philosophical, political, or scientific view or artistic activity that departs ever so slightly from the narrow bounds of official ideology or aesthetics is allowed to be published.

Many scholars, writers, artists and others are penalised for having legally published, years ago, opinions which are condemned by those who hold political power today.

All national institutions and organisations are in effect subject to political directives from the machinery of the ruling party.

Clause 2, article 12 of the [International] covenant [on Civil and Political Rights] guaranteeing every citizen the right to leave the country is consistently violated or under the pretence of 'defence of national security' is subjected to various unjustifiable conditions . . .

The granting of entry visas to foreigners is also treated arbitrarily, and many are unable to visit Czechoslovakia merely because of professional or personal contacts with those of our citizens who are subject to discrimination.