Victorious February Fifty Years On: Historians Meet in Prague to Discuss the Communist Takeover of Czechoslovakia.

Over one hundred historians from a dozen countries met in Prague from February 19th to 21st to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Communist takeover of Czechoslovakia. The attendant conference, entitled "The Czechoslovak February 1948: Preconditions and Repercussions at Home and Abroad," represented the first opportunity for a major retrospective since November 1989's Velvet Revolution brought an end to the Communist regime. Furthermore, it constituted the first major venue for the exchange of information discovered by researchers since the fall of communism. The discussion of the events of 1948 -- so often hidden in the West behind the more popular anniversaries of Czechoslovak independence (1918), the Munich Accords (1938) and the Prague Spring (1968) -- was organized by the Institute for Contemporary History (Ustav pro soudobe dejiny) of the Czech Academy of Sciences under the leadership of Vilem Precan, and received widespread attention inthe Czech press and on Czech television. As such, the conference was a resounding success. It was well-organized, well-publicized, and attracted the best-known international researchers. If there were any weakness, it lay in the overrepresentation of older Czech scholars, men who personally recalled (and often suffered from) the events of 1948 and who fled into exile in their wake, or in the aftermath of the failure of "socialism with a human face" twenty years later.

The conference was a remarkably public affair, and one with strong support from the political establishment. In addition to the lavish media attention, the proceedings were opened by an address from the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jaroslav Sedivy, and closed with a reception hosted by the Chairman of the Czech Senate, Petr Pithart. In between there were nine panels discussiong the topics of Czechoslovakia and the great powers, the Communist takeovers in neighboring states, the repercussions abroad, old and new evidence on the "peaceful Czechoslovak road to socialism," the social and political preconditions (two panels), the Slovak factor, Edvard Benes' last struggle, and the Aftermath at home and abroad. The almost fifty papers delivered under these rubrics represented a mixture of recapitulations of well-known events, presentations of the results of recent archival work, and attempts to rethink the preconditions, course and cosequences of the dramatic events of February 1948.

There were many interesting contributions to the discussion, only a few of which can be mentioned in this short report. Igor Lukes' examination of the reports and activities of the Czechoslovak intelligence services constituted an intriguing and rich view of these shadowy, Communist-dominated organizations. Jacques Rupnik's "The Elegant Takeover: 1948 or 1945? provocatively raised questions of continuity and change in Czechoslovak history by contrasting the magnitudes of change between the interwar republic and 1945 on the one hand, and 1945 and 1948 on the other. The panel on the events in Slovakia from 1945-1948 -- including contributions from Michal Barnovsky, Jozef Jablonicky and Jan Pesek -- clearly showed the distinct differences in the ways in which the Communist Party came to achieve total power in the Czech lands and Slovakia,

and raised troubling questions of typological comparison and of the very nature of Czech-Slovak relations in the period.

Perhaps the most fruitful contributions from an interpretive viewpoint came in the two shorter panels on the social, cultural, and political preconditions for the Communist Party's victory (on one of which, admittedly, this correspondent sat). These explored several facets of Czech developments that before 1989 remained unexplored, shielded from consideration by the Cold War concentration on the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union's desires and behavior, and the machination of high power-politics. Peter Heumos examined the social upheavals caused by the war and occupation, particularly to labor and social organizations, that weakened social resistance to the Communist push for total power. Benjamin Frommer presented extensive new research that reveals that the postwar retribution trials played a lesser role in aiding the Communist Party in removing its opponents that has hitherto been believed. Finally, Christianne Brenner, Milan Drapala and this correspondent critiqued the Zeitgeist of the postwar Czech lands from the viewpoint of democratic political culture. They examined the meanings, uses and abuses of "democracy" in Czechoslovak political discourse, the fate of Helena Kozeluhova and the end of Czech liberalism, and the complicity of non-Communist elites in the Communist bid to appropriate the state independence day and capitalize politically on the new celebrations of the 1945 Prague Uprising and Red Army liberation. Questions of generation politics were raised by these participants, as well as by Zdenek Suda's examination of Brno students activities.

In sum, the conference successfully both confirmed the main lines of eaarlier understandings and pointed the way for further necessary research. The opening of Czechoslovak and some Russian archives, utilized by several of the conference participants, will continue to provide exciting opportunities for researchers to explore the still shadowy features of developments in early postwar Czechoslovakia that should raise significant questions of interpretation. Similarly, the questions raised about the revolutionary conditions obtaining in particularly Czech society in the period from liberation to February 1948 indicate paths for future investigation that will shed light on domestic sources of support for communist politics. One can only hope that the conference proceedings will appear under the imprint of the Institute for Contemporary History, as planned, as a first step toward the post-Cold War rethinking of the Communist takeover of Czechoslovakia.

Brad Abrams
Institute on East Central Europe
Columbia University