Chapter 18

Achilles’ Heels: Minorities and Religion

Hungary had now formalized its friendship with all its neighbor states except Czechoslovakia; to fail making a similar treaty with it would have meant admitting the inadmissible, that differences between the two countries were still too great for a formal pact of friendship. The population exchange was proceeding extremely slowly. Of the 92,390 Slovaks who had registered for resettlement 73,273 had left the country. But only 68,207 of the 105,047 ethnic Magyars slated for transfer to the mother country had actually made the move. Another 6,000, not included in the formal exchange, had resettled voluntarily. The discrepancy in figures was all the more puzzling as the Slovaks in Hungary were under no pressure to leave, nor were there any discriminatory measures instituted against them. At the same time the Magyars in Slovakia were being mercilessly harassed. The Hungarian legation in Prague was besieged by people seeking relief from the persecutions.

And yet the two countries had a political feature in common that should have been an incentive to them to draw closer together: both sought to preserve a multiparty democratic system when all the other east-bloc countries had essentially succumbed to communist domination.

Neither Hungary nor Czechoslovakia was in a hurry to choose between the two camps, both paid lip service to the principles of people’s democracies while
trading liberally with the west, and culturally both had western preferences. The American envoy in Prague reported that he believed 80 percent of the Czech people favored western-style democracy over communism, "but expediency and timidity render most of them inarticulate." He might have added that the same held true for Hungary, though there the opposition, now speaking in a lower voice, was still articulate.

Of the two countries Czechoslovakia appeared safer from sovietization. Free of occupation troops, it enjoyed wide international sympathy and a coup d'état would produce vehement repercussions. Yet, in two tumultuous weeks in February 1948, the government fell into communist hands. There had been faint signs that a change was coming. At the Cominform conference the Czechoslovak delegate had apologized for the slow pace in the "reorganization of the State apparatus," but explained that "Benes and company," with their anti-German reputation, could not easily be removed from their leading position. In the same breath he criticized Eduard Beneš for being opposed to rapid nationalization (a course the communists favored).4

In the elections of May 1947, 38 percent of the vote had gone to the communists; since then, due to many political and economic mistakes, their popularity had sharply fallen. New elections were scheduled for May 1948 and it would have been extremely embarrassing to the soviets if the party had fared poorly. The communists had a formula to prevent this, one that had been successfully employed by Josip Broz Tito and lavishly praised at the Warsaw conference. The duty of communist parties in a National Front was, according to this formula, not to practice coalition politics but to undermine and ultimately absorb the opposition parties. The Communist Party, in its New Year message to the Czechoslovak nation, had put the position in a characteristically orotund fashion: "[T]he communists do not see the National Front as a coalition of political parties . . . it is an alliance of workers, peasants, handicraftsmen and intellectuals, an alliance which must become firmer every day." The message was veiled but unmistakable: party labels no longer mattered; the Communist Party alone was ideologically capacious enough to provide a political home for all those who worked with their hands and their minds.

The issue that precipitated the crisis was a familiar one: communist control of the police. It was, to be sure, not of the magnitude to occasion a radical political change. In Hungary the year before this same problem had been painlessly solved and even a more serious one, a conspiracy case involving the premier, had been weathered without major damage to coalition politics. But in Czechoslovakia the Communist Party did not allow the opportunity to slip. Opposition parties were naive enough