

The tragedy of the countries of Eastern Europe, which have now become satellites of communism but which never knew political liberty and democracy, is that they have lost the great chance that victory gave them to establish free governments based on the popular will. They have sunk back into a different, but deeper despotism than they have ever known before. They will soon learn that, if they do not know it already.

Czechoslovakia, however, is one country which has earned and deserved a better fate. It is important that we who may be inclined to take freedom and parliamentary democracy for granted understand the chain of tragic circumstances which have led, once again, to the loss by Czechoslovakia of its hard won liberty.

This is a frightening case history of communism in action. It is worth studying.

In a free election held in Czechoslovakia in May, 1946, the communist party emerged as the strongest single party with 38 per cent of the votes. A five-power coalition cabinet was formed under a communist premier, Mr. Klement Gottwald. Among other important posts the communists were given the ministry of information, with control of the national radio, and the ministry of the interior - always their favourite post - with control of the police. The ministry of national defence was entrusted to an "independent" of strong communist leanings.

A new election was scheduled for April or May of this year, and the communists had confidently announced that this time they expected to win 51 per cent of the votes. In the meantime, however, they were taking certain steps to ensure this parliamentary majority. Of these steps the most insidious was the re-organization of the police force by the minister of the interior, who had quietly been transferring non-communists one by one from police command posts and replacing them with trusted communists until finally about 80 per cent of these posts were in the hands of communists. The communists were also trying to discredit and undermine the influence of their chief opponents by accusing them of subversive activities.

The non-communist members of the cabinet carried a majority resolution instructing the minister of the interior to cancel the appointment of communists to certain key police posts. When, by February 20, no reply had been received from the minister of the interior, twelve of the fourteen non-communist ministers resigned. Premier Gottwald promptly denounced the twelve non-communist ministers who had resigned as "agents of foreign reaction" and demanded that President Benes accept their resignations and allow him to form a new "people's government". At the same time he proceeded to demonstrate that the communists were both ready and willing to back this demand by the use of force. On February 22 the communist leaders of the General Confederation of Labour declared that the Confederation was solidly behind the Premier and later announced that a general strike would be called if the President did not bow to the demands of the communist party. The police were issued with arms, and local authorities were instructed to take orders from "action committees" appointed by the communist party. The Prague headquarters of the National Socialist and Social Democrat parties were occupied by the police. By Wednesday, February 25, all vital communications, government ministries, and industrial areas were under communist control and all opposition newspaper plants had been occupied by action committees. Mass demonstrations of workers were organized in the streets of Prague. Finally, President Benes, who ten years earlier had seen his country yield to the pressure of powerful neighbours on the West, now yielded to communist pressure in order to avoid bloodshed and chaos, and accepted the cabinet proposed by Premier Gottwald for the constitutional reason that the Premier had at last been able, by methods of persuasion at which we can only guess, to present a parliamentary majority.