

Carol Skalnik Leff: The Czech and Slovak Republics: Nation Versus State

Boulder, CO, Westview Press 1997, 295 p.

The book by Carol Skalnik Leff, *The Czech and Slovak Republics....* is an attempt at a complex analysis of the developments in the Czech Lands and in Slovakia since the emergence of their joint state in 1918. The author, however, pays most attention to the events of the period 1989-96.

The first part of the book deals with the 1918-1938 period. The brief account of this historical epoch is dominated by Czech-Slovak relations, set by the author against the broad international and domestic backgrounds. Thus, for instance, she devotes attention to the history of minor Central European countries, influenced by the policy of the Great Powers, the movement of capital between the Czech Lands and Slovakia, the insistence of the Czech representatives on a single state as a means of defence against foreign interventions, and many other important facts.

Much attention is also given to an analysis of the period of communist rule. It is a short but apt description of the 1948-89 period, with identification of the key aspects of the development of communist Czechoslovakia (exhaustion of sources, lack of investment, falling behind in the development of science and technology, transformations of the forms of repression, etc.). But the author also points out that the communist regime, besides its gross deficiencies, must be credited with the achievement of levelling out the differences in development between the Czech Lands and Slovakia.

The author further deals with the Prague Spring, but without suggesting the complexity of this event, consisting in the issues of the possibility of a reform of communism, the mechanisms of reproduction of power, and so on. I believe that more attention could have been focused in this part of the book also to the 'Helsinki process' and its role in the dismantling of the communist state.

The core of the book is in part two, i.e. in the analysis of the events leading from the Velvet Revolution up to 1996 (pp. 75-209). The interpretation of this period is based on the

concept of "triple transformation" by K. Offe, who operates with transformations in three spheres – political, economic and identity/security relations. The problem given most attention is the break-up of the Czechoslovak Federation. In the author's opinion it was the orientation of the programmes of political parties in the two republics to national interests, which prevented the possibility of their operation throughout the whole territory of the federation, and thus considerably contributed to the split of Czechoslovakia.

Much attention is paid in the book to privatisation, regarded by the author as a step with positive effects. But she believes that this step also had its disadvantages because the privatisation undertaken through the coupon method brought profit neither to the plants nor to the state. The author, however, only briefly mentions the social impact of transformation and the responses to it. She leaves completely aside the legislative frame of the privatisation processes, which in an important way structured the transformations both in the Czech and in the Slovak Republics. She also passes over the importance of the pre-revolutionary expectations of the people and the role of the idea of economic prosperity, which in my opinion was one of the driving engines of those processes. The author deals in more detail with the shortcomings of the post-revolutionary economic start of Slovakia, much more closely linked than the Czech Lands to the needs of the former Soviet bloc in the sphere of arms production, which in the 1990s was hit by the decline in foreign orders.

The third part of the book analyses the international dimension of the transformation of both republics. Among other things, she analyses the differences between the Czech Republic and Slovakia in their attitude to NATO. This difference is explained primarily by the geographical factor and Slovakia's fear that its approach to NATO would bind its hands in the settling of relations with its Hungarian minority.

The author regards the transformation of the Czech Republic as relatively successful and believes that some of its sacrifices were unavoidable, regardless of which of the available strategies of transformation was accepted. In

the case of Slovakia, she identifies its latent authoritarian tendencies, which presage less freedom in the political sphere in the future. One of the barriers to a successful transformation of the Czech and Slovak Republics is seen, however, in a certain reservedness of Western Europe towards co-operation with the two countries.

It is difficult to find an adequate conceptual framework for the explanation of the turbulent processes taking place in post-communist countries. The conception of triple transformation, used by Skalnik Leff, offers a relatively simple and effective tool for this role.

But it seems that this tool somewhat ignores the aspect of values and norms of the processes under analysis; underestimation of these is now often thought to have been one of the major mistakes committed by the post-November development in the two republics.

Carol Skalnik Leff's book is a systematic work, filled with facts and with a solid analysis of the theme (probably one of the best treatments available on the development of the Czech and Slovak Republics), and should not be overlooked by anyone with a serious interest in the developments in the two countries.

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