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Communist Intellectuals and Postcolonial Politics
The Case of Foreign students in Czechoslovakia in the 1960s

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Introduction

This paper traces the Cold War confrontation since liberation movements were mobilized and decolonization processes started in the Middle East, Latin America and Africa in the late 1950s. The Cold War confrontation was showed not only on a global level, but also on a local level within the Soviet empire. The focus is on the postcolonial politics of “proletarian internationalism” and its communist practice in Czechoslovak higher education. The politics was to educate communist intellectuals whose way of life would be founded on practices of equal rights and transnational class-solidarity. Communist intellectuals would not any more be identified with a particular national community, but they would instead establish a universal working educated class beyond nations.

However, the politics of transnational class-solidarity turned out a failure. The case of foreign students in Czechoslovakia illustrates the problem. Foreign students, who were accepted to study at Czechoslovak universities, did not integrate into the working educated class in Czechoslovakia as well as actors of the working educated class: i.e. Czech students did not sympathize with them. Foreign students resisted the politics and on the contrary this practice by the Czechoslovak communist intellectuals did not dilute national, racial, ethnic, gender, class, religious and group differences, but reproduced them.

I Global perspective of Czechoslovak communist intellectuals

Once liberation movements were mobilized and decolonization processes started in many Asian, African and Latin American countries, the acceptance of foreign students for a study in Czechoslovakia became a point at issue. The issue shaped various social interactions between different groups of actors. The central committee secretariat of the Czechoslovak Communist Party (CPCS) in 1958 instructed the minister of education, the head of the State planning commission, and the minister of finance to elaborate details for a resolution of the party political bureau.¹ The political bureau adopted the resolution for the acceptance of foreign students from “less developed countries” two years later.² Moreover, the international and ideological departments of the party central

¹ “Návrh perspektivního plánu přijímání zahraničních studentů...“, National Archive (NA), archive file (f.) Úřad předsednictva vlády (ÚPV) 1959, box (k.) 2466, page (p.) 17.

² “Usnesení schůze politického byra ÚV KSČ ze dne 18.7. 1960 k bodu: Zvýšení počtu zahraničních studentů přijímaných do ČSR ke studiu...“, NA, f. 02/2 Politické byro ÚV KSČ 1954-1962, sv. 271, a.j. 352/b-21, p.2 ff.

committee secretariat contrasted the political meaning of the resolution with the cultural politics of the U.S. American, British and West-German imperial groups in postcolonial countries.

The Czechoslovak communist intellectuals who were specifically employed in the international and ideological departments of the party central committee argued that Western imperial groups were seeking to retain their economical and political interests in new postcolonial conditions. Western imperial groups were trying to occupy vacant positions of teachers as well as specialists after the withdrawal of European colonizers and were offering a great number of scholarships at Western universities to educate pro-western national intelligentsia from postcolonial countries.

While the Western politics of “the development aid” belonged, from the communist perspective, to new forms of imperial dominancy³, the education of the young postcolonial intelligentsia in Czechoslovakia was a socialist contribution to the postcolonial struggle for independence from capitalist states. Communist intellectuals saw the increasing number of students from postcolonial countries at universities in Czechoslovakia as a form of comradely assistance, but they pointed out the political, economical and cultural impact of the assistance as well. Foreign students studied in Czechoslovakia for between five and seven years, learned the Czech language, were aroused to the Marxist-Leninist consciousness and politically educated to belief in the Marxist worldview and in the primacy of socialist community over capitalist. Therefore, they could make friends with Czechoslovakia, take up the socialist way of life and generally become fellow travellers of the socialist order. By virtue of their special learning at universities, they mostly entered high occupations in administration and business after their return to their homeland.

Nevertheless, the communist intellectuals were not convinced that the political character of higher education, training courses in Marxism-Leninism and the day-long discipline in the socialist way of life at one-year preliminary boarding schools would change the student mind.⁴ The communist intellectuals repeatedly drew attention to the class origin of foreign students. They usually referred to who foreign students were and which families they came from. In this respect, students from Ethiopia, Guinea and Yemen denied the manual labour in socialist work teams because of their affiliation to the ruling groups in their countries. The nationalism of most students from Algeria was explained by their origin as petty national bourgeois. Students from the United Arab Republic divided into Egyptian and Syrian factions, because students from Egypt came from tradesman families and students from Syria competed with each other.

³ “Usnesení schůze politického byra ÚV KSČ ze dne 2.5. 1961 k bodu: Zvýšení počtu zahraničních studentů v ČSSR a opatření s tím spojená“, NA, f.02/2 Politické byro ÚV KSČ 1954-1962, sv.306, a.j.389/b-11, p.10 ff.

⁴ Ibid. p.19.

II Local perspective of youth functionaries

The communist intellectuals entrusted members of regional party committees and the higher education council of the Czechoslovak Youth Union (CYU) with the political education of foreign students on a local level. This shaped another kind of social interaction. In April 1962, the higher education council then delegated its representative to inquire how the political education of foreign students was practised in Brno. In his report, the representative wrote:

“In the regional committee of the CYU they did not know when the higher education council of the CYU central committee will be convened, is said they did not know when they are to make the report and therefore they waited for references of Central Committee ... The CYU regional committee has no commission for foreign students, it has not even currently too good survey of them ...⁵”

The Czechoslovak Youth Union (CYU) was to represent social and political interests of all youth in Czechoslovakia i.e. of the generation between 15 and 26 years of age. At the head of the CYU was the youth central committee that was closely related to the department for youth questions of the party central committee. Within the youth central committee, a small group called the higher education council dealt with the student question. The council put together details for decisions making of the youth central committee on student questions. The details were based on reports of youth regional committees. The youth central committee through the council gave instructions about what reports to make. The entanglement of actors in vertical communication between the youth central committee and youth local structures brought the council to send its representative to Brno. The representative picked up knowledge on a local level and elaborated a report in order that the council in the centre could make relevant decisions.

Higher education in Brno was after the capital city of Prague and the Slovak residence city of Bratislava, the third largest higher education establishment in Czechoslovakia. If about 2500 students from 80 countries were in Czechoslovakia by that time, the report of the youth representative made reference to about 250 foreign students from 28 countries studying at Brno universities, e.g. 120 medical students from the GDR, 40 students from Greece⁶ and 25 students from Africa.

The political education of foreign students in Brno was specific, the Club of Foreign Students (CFS) operated there. The club in the perception of the CFS master was not a student organization, but a student association caring for the cultural and sport needs of foreign students. The club members convened the plenary session of all foreign students in Brno once a year in autumn. The plenum voted

⁵ „Několik připomínek a poznatků k práci se zahraničními studenty v Brně“, NA, f. ČSM-ÚV, Vysokoškolská rada, k.č.1325, 2f.

⁶ Brno together with the conurbation in Moravian Silesia, was a destination of Grecian refugees since the beginning of the civil war in Greece. Total number of refugees according to ethnic origin and country of residence (1950) were about 11 941 (1950) in Czechoslovakia, with 3 500 children. Cf. Riki van Boeschoten, “Unity and Botherhood“? Macedonian Political Refugees in Eastern Europe,“ *History and Culture of South Eastern Europe* 5 (2003): 192.

on seven members of the club executive committee. The executive committee had a chairman, a vice chairman and a booking-clerk. The other four committee members covered organization, political, cultural and sport questions. The structure of the executive committee copied the structure of the youth central committee which was itself a copy of the party central committee.

The club executive committee was influenced by an advisory authority, which consisted of youth delegates at the university, at the technical and agricultural colleges, as well as the youth urban committee in Brno. The executive committee, the youth advisory authority and representatives of all nationalities at Brno colleges established 28 members of the club general committee. However, the general committee assembled as an exception.⁷

The executive committee of the CFS aspired to institutionalize practices of social grouping. Student forums, sessions, patronages and excursions were to be organized in the club. The executive committee invented the ritual of meetings on Friday evenings in the clubroom of the medicine faculty, and between 70 and 100 foreign students took part in the Friday evenings meetings. Not only discussions and parties, but also study and disciplinary proceedings took place in the club. Evenings finished with dancing for all participants.

Many foreign students had attitudes that were not conformable to the CFS. Students from the GDR, who the language of the report called “Germans”, were uncommitted to the club, though one student from the GDR worked as the club booking-clerk.⁸ Most of them framed informal parallel groups and moved out of control. Other frictions were generated by a group of 18 students at the agricultural college: of them the report described “Africans” without distinguishing them individually. In the first place they did not respect the club chairman from Sudan and instead of attending the club practice went round to night bars and sports in the Brno city centre.

Very few Czech and Slovak students regularly participated in the social life of the CFS. There were about 10 students, most of them the higher youth functionaries, who had the trust of foreign student leaders. Most ordinary students at Brno universities considered the CFS to be exclusively for foreign students. Local party departments for youth questions and youth faculty organizations, especially at the agricultural college, were not interested in club activities. They did not invite representatives of the CFS to their assemblies and left agencies of the CFS to the Brno youth urban committee. Administration of student dormitories did not cooperate with the CFS either. Room assignments were announced at a public meeting, without asking the students, so that two foreign students lived with one Czech student or two foreign with three Czech students.⁹ In the next year, the administration proposed to appropriate a special hostel only for foreign students and to separate foreign students from their Czech colleagues.

⁷ „Několik připomínek a poznatků k práci se zahraničními studenty v Brně“, NA, f. ČSM-ÚV, Vysokoškolská rada, k.č.1325, 2f.

⁸ Ibid. p.3.

⁹ Ibid., p.4.

Conclusion

The founding of the universal working educated class beyond nations on practices of equal rights and transnational class-solidarity time and again interfered with the class view of the communist intellectuals. The intellectuals did not ask why some students resisted the political education in “proletarian internationalism”, but they always explained the student negative attitudes by referring to those students’ family background and class origin. The communist intellectuals as well as the youth functionaries were not interested in particular differences among students: they tended to reduce them to prevalent stereotypes. They readily ascribed 18 different students from Africa to be “Africans”: in contrast, the members of the club executive committee had representatives from different countries such as “Iraq”, “Syria”, “Bulgaria”, “Mongolia”; one exception in comparison to others was a student from Poland denoted as the “Pole”. While the postcolonial politics of the communist intellectuals in the centre was founded on practices of equal rights and transnational class-solidarity, ordinary students on a local level experienced inequality and disrespect.