

From national discrimination toward the intensifying class struggle: Czechoslovak Welfare State 1945-1956

Jakub Rákosník

The paper is devoted to the early history of communist (popular democratic) welfare reforms after the Second World War. It is focused on the issue of redistribution and transformation of the social structure through welfare policies and labour law, which were produced by a unique combination of nationalism and socialist ideology during the post-war reconstruction. Welfare regimes always reflect the political priorities and values prevailing at a particular time and always actively contribute to the transformation or consolidation of the existing social structure. The beginning of the paper is concerned with the social conditions that emerged after the war, which were characterized by an emphasis on the idea of national unity and the ethnic and socio-economic homogenization of society. These ideas had profound impact on the post-war welfare reform. Then attention is also paid to the transformation of the social structure that caused the growth of status inconsistency. This process resulted in the failure (or only partial success) of the communists' efforts to reshape society according to their ideas. Last part is devoted to the introduction of the national insurance and the demonstration of how it contributed to the transformation or, on the contrary, the consolidation of existing social stratification.

Keywords: Czechoslovakia, Welfare State, Socialism, Inequality, Inconsistent Status, Class Discrimination

Parole chiave: Cecoslovacchia, Stato sociale, Socialismo, Ineguaglianza, Incoerenza di stato, Discriminazione di classe

The history of welfare states has often been interpreted as a basically linear process of increasing social spending (quantitative perspective) and an expanding catalogue of claimable social rights (qualitative perspective). It is only in the last decades of the last century, under the influence of political feminism and post-structuralist methodological impulses, that the power and biopolitical aspects have begun to be more accentuated, effectively challenging this progressive and teleological narrative¹. In our opinion, the welfare state should not be studied as an isolated institution, but as part of more general process of modernization in the West as well as in the East. We find it useful to view the welfare state as part of the history of both blocs rather than as a Western response to the threat of communism, as it was usual

¹ M.A. Cabrera, *The Discursive Origins of the Welfare State: Spanish Social Reformism, 1870-1900*, in «Journal of Social History», n. 4, 2019, pp. 1165-1184; *The Oxford Handbook of the Welfare State*, eds. F. Castles et al., Oxford University Press, Oxford 2010, pp. 3-14; J. Rákosník, *Historiography of the Welfare State in Transnational Perspective*, in *Theory and Practice of the Welfare State in Europe in 20th Century*, eds. Z. Zudová-Lešková et al., E. Voráček at al., Historický ústav, Praha 2014, pp. 49-59.

in earlier historiography. Basic concepts such as solidarity, social justice, freedom, equality, are universal. And that is why today's historiography prefers to look for an international or transnational perspective for their explanation². The historiography of the post-war Czechoslovak welfare state is still relatively modest, both in terms of Czech publications and articles³ and books published in foreign languages⁴. However, even during the Cold War, serious critical analyses of this topic have been published outside Czechoslovakia⁵. Recent analytical historiography has paid attention to the special fields of the social protection (such as family policies, equality in education, eugenics) instead of general overviews⁶.

This article does not aim merely to add new findings to the existing literature. Welfare policies are not only a passive form of ensuring a socially recognised quality of life, but also an active tool influencing social stratification according to the political priorities of governments, or in a broader sense, the power establishment. However, the results of governmental policies very often diverge far from the original intentions. And the example of communist Czechoslovakia can be telling in this regard.

In 2022, Radka Šustrová and I published a study on the biopolitics of state socialism focusing on selected categories of the population (children, parents, workers, pensioners)⁷. With this article, I will follow up on that study and focus this time on the issue of redistribution and transformation of the social structure through welfare

² D. Béland, K. Petersen, *Analysing Social Policy Concepts and Language: Comparative and Transnational Perspectives*, Policy Press, Bristol 2015; G. Feindt, *Making and Unmaking Socialist Modernities: Seven Interventions into the Writing of Contemporary History on Central and Eastern Europe*, in *Victimhood and Acknowledgement*, ed. P. Terhoeven, De Gruyter, Berlin 2018, pp. 133-153; D. Garland, *The Welfare State: A Fundamental Dimension of Modern Government*, in «European Journal of Sociology», n. 3, 2014, pp. 327-364.

³ L. Kalinová, *Společenské proměny v čase socialistického experimentu: k sociálním dějinám v letech 1945-1969*, Academia, Praha 2007; K. Kaplan, *Proměny české společnosti (1948-1960)*: voll. 1, 2, Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR, Praha 2007, 2012; J. Rákosník, *Sovětské sociální státu: lidově demokratický režim a sociální práva občanů v Československu 1945-1960*, Filozofická fakulta UK, Praha 2010.

⁴ P. Heumos, *Industriearbeiter in der Tschechoslowakei*, in «Bohemia», n. 1, 2003, pp. 146-171; T. Inglot, *Welfare States in East Central Europe 1919-2004*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2008; L. Kalinová, *Mythos und Realität des Arbeiterstaates in der Tschechoslowakei*, in *Arbeiter im Staatssozialismus: Ideologischer Anspruch und soziale Wirklichkeit*, eds. P. Hübner, Ch. Kleßmann, K. Tenfelde, Böhlau, Köln 2005, pp. 87-108; J. Krejčí, P. Machonin, *Czechoslovakia: A Laboratory for Social Change*, Macmillan, Basingstoke 1996; J. Rákosník, *Continuity and Discontinuity in the History of the Welfare State in Czechoslovakia (1918-1956)*, in «Czech Journal of Contemporary History», n. 2, 2014, pp. 5-29.

⁵ F.L. Pryor, *Public Expenditures in Communist and Capitalist Nations*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1968; *Czechoslovakia: Past and Present*, vv. 1,2., ed. M. Rechcigl, Mouton, The Hague-Paris 1968.

⁶ G. Albert, M. Szilvasi, *Intersectional Discrimination of Romani Women. Forcibly Sterilized in the Former Czechoslovakia and Czech Republic*, in «Health and Human Rights Journal», n. 2, 2017, pp. 23-34; R. Dudová, *The Framing of Abortion in the Czech Republic: How the Continuity of Discourse Prevents Institutional Change*, in «Czech Sociological Review», n. 6, 2010, pp. 945-976; K. Zeman, *Cohort Fertility and Educational Expansion in the Czech Republic during the 20th Century*, in «Demographic Research», n. 38, 2018, pp. 1699-1732.

⁷ J. Rákosník, R. Šustrová, *State Socialist Biopolitics: Four Stages of Human Development in Post-War Czechoslovakia*, in *Biopolitics in Central and Eastern Europe in the 20th Century: Fearing for the Nation*, eds. B. Klich-Kluczewska, J. von Puttkamer, I. Rebitschek, Routledge, London 2022, pp. 195-225.

policies and labour law. Both of them expressed a unique combination of nationalism and socialist ideology which developed during the post-war reconstruction, the distorted political cleavages of the limited pluralism of the “third” Czechoslovak Republic (1945-1948) as well as the phase of Stalinist ideological monopoly after the Communist Party had concentrated all power in its hands (1948-1953 and 1956 respectively).

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate, through empirical historical research, to what extent social security can contribute to the transformation of the social stratification of society. The welfare system is never politically or socially neutral, nor is it merely a passive social safety net protecting the population from complete pauperization. On the contrary, it always reflects the political priorities and values prevailing at a particular time and always actively contributes, to a greater or lesser extent, to the transformation or consolidation of the existing social structure. Whether the economy is socialist or capitalist is irrelevant. In order to demonstrate this point, I have chosen in this article the example of Czechoslovakia in the early socialist period, which shows very well how social law can be an active tool for restructuring society.

For the sake of clarity, my article is divided into three sections: the first section deals with the social conditions that emerged after the war and the emphasis put on the idea of national unity and the goal of ethnic and socio-economic homogenization of society. The second part analyses in more detail the transformation of the social structure that caused the growth of status inconsistency. At the same time, it illustrates the failure (or the only partial success) of the communists’ efforts to reshape society according to their ideas. The third part is devoted to national insurance, its subsequent reforms, and the demonstration of how it contributed to the transformation or, on the contrary, the consolidation of existing social stratification.

National Unity and the Social Security Project

The restoration of Czechoslovakia was thoroughly thought out and organized by the foreign and domestic resistance. Innovative economic and social policies (nationalization, planning, national insurance) framed by radical ethnic homogenization (displacement of minorities) played an important role in the reconstruction plan. Although the plan for the eviction of ethnic minorities only gradually emerged during the war, soon after the outbreak of the conflict astute observers had predicted drastic measures in case the German expansion would fail. One of them was George Kennan, who stayed in Prague in 1938-1940. As early as in May 1939, he darkly prophesied that «if the situation is ever reversed, it will be terrible to even think of Czech retaliation»⁸. In addition to the application of the principle of collective guilt, albeit weakened by the possibility of re-granting Czechoslovak citizenship to active

⁸ G. Kennan George, *Diplomat in Prag 1938-1940: Berichte, Briefe, Aufzeichnungen*, Goverts-Krüger Stahlberg, Frankfurt am Main 1972.

German anti-fascists, the problem of post-war retaliation became connected with the significant weakening of the rule of law, e.g. the use of retroactivity, the purposive interpretation of regulations, and the disregard of obligations under previously accepted international treaties⁹.

Legal historians have analysed how legal rules were reinterpreted and used in that period for decades. Even if this article does not aim to contribute to ongoing debates, one shall consider that the aforementioned circumstances were of basic importance for the topic I am dealing with here. The banning of pre-war right-wing parties from the political life marked a significant shift to the left of the political spectrum. There was a great deal of consensus among communists and legally operating non-communist parties in 1945 on the need for a comprehensive social transformation. The expression of this consensus was the Košice Government Programme, which was announced in early April 1945 and became the common platform of all legally functioning political parties associated to the so-called National Front. According to contemporary opinion polls, this programme enjoyed the support of the overwhelming majority of the population (more than two thirds)¹⁰.

In order to achieve their political priorities, the non-communist parties did not avoid to bypass their own demands for the respect of the rule of law in favour of a faster realisation of the “common good”. Together with the communists, they felt they were carrying out a national and democratic revolution, as the process of transformation was called in the post-war years. Such stance became a kind of trap for themselves, however. When moderate revolutionaries felt the time to stop the changes had come, the communist radicals – who, on the contrary, supported their continuation – easily portrayed the former as reactionaries and traitors of the revolution. Under such conditions of destabilised rule of law and limited democracy, to which the non-communists had contributed, the communists had an easy way to power even without significant help from the Soviet Union.

This institutional destabilization also facilitated the continuation of discriminatory practices adopted during the Nazi occupation, though with different nuances: in the second half of the 1940s, ethnic discrimination was gradually replaced with class discrimination, typical of the communist dictatorship, especially in its initial phase. Accordingly, after 1945, the interwar conception of a pluralist, multi-ethnic and class society was rapidly substituted with the collectivist theses of national unity and homogeneity of interests¹¹.

Social law experienced a similar fate. Post-war reconstruction stimulated an increasing need for workforce. In order to satisfy the requests, several regulations on labour obligations adopted in that period maintained an unclear stance towards

⁹ B. Frommer, *National Cleansing: Retribution against Nazi Collaborators in Postwar Czechoslovakia*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2005.

¹⁰ J. Maňák, *K problematice a postavení čs. inteligence v letech 1945-1953*, in «*Revue dějin socialismu*», n. 8, 1968, pp. 989-1024, here p. 1011.

¹¹ J. Rákosník, J. Štaif, M. Spurný, *Milníky moderních českých dějin. Krize konsenzu a legitimacy v letech 1848-1989*, Argo, Praha 2018, pp. 170-173.

forced labour. Although Czechoslovakia had not yet ratified ILO Forced Labour Convention No. 29 (ratification did not occur until 1957), the Slavery Convention had already been ratified at that time. At the same time, the government had to make considerable propaganda efforts to persuade the population that adopted regulations were fundamentally different from the Nazi measures. Nonetheless, many similarities in the norms relating to the organisation of work could not be hidden¹².

For persons who had lost their Czechoslovak citizenship, a special regulation of labour obligations applied. In September 1945, a presidential decree foresaw requirement to work for men aged 14 to 60 and women aged 15 to 50. Only a few exceptions were allowed (care of a child under 6, advanced pregnancy, disability). Work assignments were decided by the state administration (national committees) and no appeal was allowed against their decisions. In turn, workers were not paid wages, but only unspecified “compensations”. The new legislation had important outcomes. According March 1946 data, before the foreseen removal of the local Germans began (decree no. 71/1945), the number of people working under the new legislation overlapped 700,000¹³. Regular employment relationships were present, either. However, especially in the first months after liberation – when the new revolutionary authorities acted with a high degree of legal uncertainty and arbitrariness – “people’s justice” was often carried out without regard for the official legal framework. Germans, Hungarians, and people accused of collaboration were routinely removed from their jobs regardless of any legal procedures. The Czechoslovak state – as in other similar cases – proceeded to additionally legalise such procedures and recognised the validity of the legal consequences of dismissals (Law 83/1946).

The unclear legal status of compensation for work created problems in social insurance. Initially, sickness insurance contributions were not regulated, even though the sickness rate of workers was higher than average. It was in the winter months of 1945/46 that the legal regime of these allowances began to be gradually related to actual retributions. When, at the end of 1945, family allowances on an insurance basis were eventually enacted, employers also paid insurance premiums for non-citizens, irrespective of their lack of legal entitlement to these benefits. The practice was highly improvised, and legal regulation either did not exist or was hastily created. Local differences continued to characterize the system: in some cases, administrative authorities willing to advantage Czech employers allowed various concessions in the payment of insurance premiums¹⁴.

Accusations of collaboration or non-Czech origin could constitute a barrier to social benefits. A good example is the granting of allowances to families with large offspring, introduced by the Protectorate government (regulation 441/1941). Although these non-insurance benefits were explicitly designed for both Protectorate (Czech) nationals and Germans, after the liberation in May 1945, the state administration refused to pay these allowances to persons of German origin as well as

¹² Petranský, cit., p. 576.

¹³ *Rok sociální politiky v osvobozené republice*, Ministerstvo ochrany práce a sociální péče, Praha 1946, p. 8.

¹⁴ *Pojištění osob německé národnosti*, in «Národní republika», v. 2, 17. května 1946.

to Czechs suspected of collaboration, unless they could prove a certificate of state and national reliability¹⁵. Although the payment of social insurance benefits was maintained, no improvements were considered. High inflation compelled the state to help social insurance companies and pay supplements to pensions. When special pension supplements were announced at the end of 1945, the law explicitly stated that they did not apply to persons who had lost their Czechoslovak citizenship (Laws 156/1945 and 157/1945).

The Social Justice of the Intensified Class Struggle

A characteristic feature of the communist rule in Czechoslovakia was a high degree of egalitarianism. Throughout the post-war reconstruction period, the egalitarian policies intertwined ideological schemes of a classless society with the practical needs of ensuring an elementary standard of living for the lower strata of the population.

This tendency marked a significant discontinuity with previous social policies of Czechoslovakia. The Austrian and Hungarian model before the First World War, as well as the welfare state in the interwar republic, were built on Bismarckian earning-related principles. The stay of the government-in-exile in London together with the influence of communist egalitarianism accentuated Beveridgean features in the post-war reform¹⁶.

The sources in this respect sound somewhat ambivalent. The wage statistics alone speak unequivocally. Social differences decreased significantly compared to the interwar period. Although the statistical data used by historiography are not fully reliable over the long period, they are sufficient to express general trends. Interwar Czechoslovakia was characterised by relatively significant social disparities. The economic and social reforms after the First World War mitigated the inherited differences only temporarily. In the 1930s – or even from the second half of the 1920s – a gradual increase could be detected again¹⁷. In 1932, the average clerk's salary was 232% of the workers' wage, and in the case of orderlies (lower-level clerks and technical workers) it reached 147%¹⁸. Moreover, the differences in living standards were exacerbated by the fact that white-collar households used to have less children than workers' families, making the gap in per capita income even wider than when based on the income of the breadwinner alone.

¹⁵ Moravský zemský archiv [Moravian Land Archives], fund: Zemský národní výbor Brno [Land National Committee], box 2275, Jan Bělíca and Petr Novotný.

¹⁶ J. Rákosník, *Czechoslovak Social Politics and its Representatives in London Exile during Second World War*, in *Prague Papers on the History of International Relations*, Institute of World History Faculty of Arts Charles University Prague-Institute of East European History, University of Vienna, Prague-Vienna 2008, pp. 437-443; J. Soares, *Social Security: Universal Versus Earnings-dependent Benefits*, in «Economica», n. 79, 2012, pp. 611-640, here pp. 611-612.

¹⁷ V. Průcha, *Sociální struktura československé společnosti v předmnichovské republice*, Vysoká škola ekonomická, Praha 1970, pp. 36-42.

¹⁸ Ivi, p. 42.

During the Second World War, the goal to avoid conflict in the production line – so important for the war – prevailed, and increasing attention was therefore paid to workers' wages and social security. Civil servants' earnings grew much more slowly, especially in the public sector. The situation reflected a complete reversal of the tendencies of the interwar period, when, on the contrary, the gap between working-class and white-collar families was growing. Furthermore, the social consequences of the faster growth of workers' wages during the war were accompanied by a rationing (ticket) economy that further eroded the existing wage differentials between social classes by levelling consumption.

The People's Democratic regime continued the levelling policy begun by Hitler. 1945 monetary reform played an important role in this. While workers' real average wages were 150 points in 1947 (1937 = 100), those of civil servants were only 78. Not only were the differentials between the remuneration of physical and mental labour reduced, but the tendency to reduce the differences between the remuneration of skilled and unskilled labour was also intensified. In 1947, the clerical wage in the private sector was 139% of the average worker's wage; in the public sector, the average clerical wage was 117%¹⁹. This vigorous levelling process continued during the 1950s. For the first five-year period, Kaplan reports that in 1948 the technical intelligentsia still had 66% and civil servants 24% higher wages than workers. By 1953, however, the wages of the technical intelligentsia had fallen in relative terms and were only 33% higher, while those of civil servants were even 8% lower than the workers' average²⁰. In 1960, the average wage of engineering-technical workers was 133% of the workers' wage, while the clerical wage was only 88%²¹.

Although the process of levelling has been captured quite satisfactorily in quantitative terms, our ideas about its impact in everyday life are still only sketchy. In this regard, an observation by Czech demographers is quite telling. While carrying out a survey on marriage in the mid-1950s, demographers observed that, in working-class families, women's employment was felt as less necessary in order to maintain their life standard than in white-collar households, marking a complete reversal of the dominant cultural patterns since the 19th century²². For the sake of completeness, one shall consider that the same processes of levelling had also affected the sphere of social insurance. The First Republic was characterised by a significant differentiation of insurance pensions according to merit principles, as was typical of German-Austrian (so-called Bismarckian) insurance from its beginnings. At the end of the First Republic, private civil servants with higher positions had pensions roughly five times higher than those of workers (the level of insurance premiums was roughly similar). During the Protectorate and the Third Republic, however, these differences began gradually to blur. While, in 1947, workers' pensions were six times higher than in 1939, those of civil servants insured by the General Pen-

¹⁹ J. Hron, *Změny v oblasti mezd v období 1945-1953*, Ekonomický ústav ČSAV, Praha 1968, p. 30.

²⁰ K. Kaplan, *Proměny eské spole nosti (1948-1960)*, cit., p. 9.

²¹ *Tricet let budování ČSSR*, Kartografie, Praha 1975, p. 143.

²² V. Srb, M. Kučera, *Výzkum o rodičovství 1956*, Státní úřad statistický, Praha 1959, p. 29.

sion Institute increased barely twice. The same processes affected social insurance in Slovakia during the war²³.

Contrary to the efforts of the Communist Party, the income levelling and the efforts for the social rise of the members of the working class did not bring about the expected results. Significantly, the authors of a large-scale sociological survey on the social stratification of the Czechoslovak society in 1969 stated that

Significant levelling has not prevented significant differentiation in the sphere of lifestyle, which coincides with socio-professional classification and education. On the one hand, neither the ascriptive function of the workers' origin or the original workers' occupation, nor significant share of power of the workers' professions have been demonstrated. On the other hand, only a tiny fraction of workers has been advantaged by the existing incongruence between the nature of work, education and income²⁴.

Despite the traditional image of the communist dictatorship favouring applicants with a working-class background to be admitted to the higher grades of schools, the effects of this policy were far less visible than might have been expected. With regard to intergenerational mobility in education, the sociological research cited above showed the persistent importance of social origin for the attainment of higher education. Among the respondents whose parents belonged to the non-manual workers' group, 61.3 % had attended secondary school and university. The percentage fell to barely 14.4 % among those whose parents belonged to the manual workers' group. Significantly, in 2008, sociologist Martin Kreidl stated that «[t]he impact of egalitarian policies on social and economic inequalities in the allocation of education has been very limited. While communist education policies have achieved some success in de-stratifying the most common pathways to education, their effect has been erased in the non-standard pathways: delayed entry to school or detours through other types of schools»²⁵.

Instead of implementing the utopian project of a classless society, the Communists succeeded in raising the problem of widespread status inconsistency among classes with higher professional qualification, whose quality of material life was relatively low due to egalitarian policies and could only profit from reduced access to power positions, while maintaining high cultural profile. This problem was noted by domestic sociology as early as the 1960s. However, it persisted in the following decades and undoubtedly contributed to the crisis of the communist regime before 1989. Even later foreign research showed that higher status inconsistency was a characteristic feature of socialist countries when comparing them with developed

²³ J. Rákosník, *Sovětzace sociálního státu*, cit., p. 247.

²⁴ M. Petrušek, *Sociální stratifikace československé společnosti*, in «Sociologický časopis», n. 6, 1969, pp. 569-590 here p. 582.

²⁵ M. Kreidl, *Cesty ke vzdělání: vzdělanostní dráhy a vzdělanostní nerovnosti v socialismu*, Západočeská univerzita v Plzni, Plzeň 2008, p. 9.

countries with market economies²⁶. Education as an important factor of social ascent was devalued. In 1970, the wage of a university graduate and of a person with high education were, respectively, only 61% and 23% higher than the average wage of a worker with primary education²⁷. The dissident sociologist Jaroslav Klofáč expressed this problem in laconic terms in 1980, when he pointed out that

[s]tatistics show that about three-quarters of the population have incomes around the average. Yet, for the most part, incomes are determined neither by work performance nor by the factors that account for the varying contribution to the quantity and quality of the product of labour. It is mainly determined by education and qualifications, the importance of which is devalued and levelled despite all the platitudes about the scientific and technological revolution²⁸.

Spectacular and propagandistically appealing action programs supposed to immediately transform society had only a limited impact. In 1951, the action program entitled *77,500 Clerks into Production* was announced with the goal of transferring such a big amount of office workers into industrial production. As the German historian Peter Heumos has shown, using the example of the steelworks in Kladno, a fifth of the transferred workers managed to get back to their former workplaces (mostly in the bureaucratic apparatuses of ministries) by means of nepotist practices. For many others, the transfer to production merely meant placing the clerk in the administration of the industrial plant, i.e. back in the office. At the same time, other historians estimate that roughly 100-120 thousand workers were promoted to higher positions by the mid-1950s. This process also took place in later times, albeit to a lesser extent. It is not necessary to consider in depth the consequences of such politically motivated promotions without adequate training for business management and labor productivity²⁹. Statistics from the second half of the 1960s show that only 44.7 % of directors and deputy directors in national enterprises met the educational requirements, and barely 50 % in lower management³⁰.

At the same time, the Communists were well aware of the negatives that such a strong degree of social levelling entailed. In the immediate post-war period, however, they considered it to be temporarily quite desirable. In the minute of the 9th Congress of the Communist Party of May 1949, one can find, for instance, the following, quite significant statement: «The elimination of starvation wages could not be accomplished without a certain levelling. This gave rise to the erroneous view

²⁶ M. Tuček, *Zpráva o vývoji sociální struktury české a slovenské společnosti 1945-1993*, Sociologický ústav, Praha 1996, p. 5.

²⁷ F. Charvát, J. Linhart, J. Večerník, *Sociálně třídní struktura Československa*, Horizont, Praha 1978, pp. 99-100.

²⁸ J. Klofáč, *Sociální struktura ČSSR a její změny v letech 1945-1980*, Index, Köln 1980, p. 163.

²⁹ P. Heumos, *K sociálněhistorickému výzkumu komunistických systémů*, in «Soudobé dějiny», n. 3-4, 2008, pp. 686-702, here p. 698; J. Rákosník, *Sovětzace sociálního státu*, cit., p. 225.

³⁰ P. Machonin, *Československá společnost: sociologická analýza sociální stratifikace*, Epoque, Bratislava 1969, p. 278.

that the goal of socialism is wage egalitarianism»³¹. By 1953, awareness of the problem of leveling was rather rare, since economic priorities at the beginning of the decade were determined by the Soviet bloc's need to rapidly rearm for World War III, into which the Korean conflict (1950-1953) could easily have escalated. Afterwards, interest in rising living standards and the associated questioning of levelling began to appear much more frequently. This is evident in both official sources and the public speeches of state leaders.

There is no doubt that the Communists' egalitarian policy continued processes that had been going on since the German occupation and the Third Republic. After 1948, the overloading of the economy with investment expenditure, especially in the arms industry in the early 1950s, did not give much room for an expansionary wage policy. On the contrary, in 1951-1953 the real wages of the population experienced general reduction³². However, "unlevelling" became part of every economic reform planned in the following decades³³. The endurance of a high degree of egalitarianism can be interpreted in two ways. Some social scientists regard talks of "unlevelling" as a rhetorical figure without real commitment to achieve the goal on the part of the state and party leaders. The second interpretation – the one I consider more likely – assumes the sincerity of intent. Its implementation, however, encountered politically very undesirable consequences. It is clear from what we have seen earlier that the solution was to raise the wages of the educated workforce. Wages, then, would have had to be cut for workers with lesser skills, which was hard to enforce in a regime that described itself as the dictatorship of the proletariat. Alternatively, wages would have been raised at the cost of inflation, which was also politically undesirable. Levelling therefore persisted until the disintegration of the socialist establishment as an unwanted problem that nobody seriously wanted to solve.

The promise of social security vs. discrimination, and repression

Both foreign and domestic resistance shared the common understanding that, after liberation from the Nazi occupation, a profound social reform and the creation of a social insurance system for all citizens would be necessary. The population supported these goals en masse after the war³⁴. Interwar Czechoslovakia had taken a very ambitious step in this direction. In 1924-1925, insurance had been created for both employees and the self-employed. However, while the former became fully effective, the self-employed could not profit from compulsory insurance between the wars: in fact, only in case he met the criteria of social need could the self-employed be cared for within the poor relief system provided by the municipalities. Consider-

³¹ *Protokol IX. Řádného sjezdu KSČ*, Ústřední výbor KSČ, Praha 1949, p. 197.

³² J. Rákosník, *Sověťizace sociálního státu*, cit., p. 126.

³³ Z. Šulc, *Stručné dějiny ekonomických reforem v Československu (České republice) 1945-1995*, Doplněk, Brno 1998.

³⁴ *Cesta ke Květnu : vznik lidové demokracie v Československu do února 1948*, v. 2, eds. M. Klimeš et al., Nakladatelství Československé akademie věd, Praha 1965, p. 422.

ing that, after 1945, the implementation of a law passed twenty years earlier was not feasible, the government set out to create an entirely new universalist insurance system. At a first glance, the new social security system – called “national insurance” – was inspired by the British model. The representatives of the government-in-exile, who had spent the wartime in London, had had ample time to familiarize with the Beveridge Report and its principles. In fact, apart from its name, the post-war Czechoslovak model ultimately had little in common with the British reform and was much more a kind of local fusion of Bismarckian meritocratic traditions with Beveridgean egalitarianism.

When, in February 1948, the Communists successfully took power in their hands and brought the other political parties completely under their will and control, the implementation of the social security system became a tool to justify their coup. Monopolization of power was presented as an instrument to fight against the “danger” of reactionary forces taking up residence in the secretariats of the other political parties in order to prevent the implementation of the reforms originally promised by the coalition government in 1945. Hence, the legislative whirlwind of reforms that followed in the spring of 1948 included the promulgation of the National Insurance Act (Law 99/1948). In fact, despite the initial consensus on the need for its implementation, a number of controversial sub-provisions had emerged and led to a deadlock situation: almost three years after the end of the war, the law had still not been passed. After the February coup, its passage was no longer hindered by disputes between the coalition parties, and the National Insurance Act was smoothly passed and promulgated in mid-April 1948.

Although the idea of truly universal compulsory insurance was not fully implemented by law, the new national insurance covered 95% of the population. The equalization of the rights employees and the self-employed did not mean that the two groups would immediately start receiving the same benefits and services from 1948. The law provided that the self-employed had first to pay at least 5 years of contributions. The implementation of sickness insurance for the self-employed was postponed, as well.

The new legislation was ultimately less significant than would have been expected. Indeed, the number of self-employed declined rapidly after 1945 and had almost disappeared – with a few exceptions – as a statistically relevant category by 1960. First, large entrepreneurs had been removed through the nationalization of large enterprises in 1945. The land reforms of 1945-48, which had begun with the confiscation of Germans’ and Hungarians’ properties immediately after liberation and continued with the expropriation of large estates, had eliminated the group of large landowners. Although the new constitution of May 1948 guaranteed small- and medium-scale private enterprise (up to 50 employees) and allowed agricultural enterprises up to 50 hectares, these provisions were disregarded in the following years, and during the collectivization of agriculture and the liquidation of small trades the self-employed virtually disappeared. If in 1946 the self-employed and individual peasants accounted for 31% of the total population, in 1961 their number decreased to 2.5% in the Czech lands (even in Slovakia, where small-scale agricul-

tural production survived longer and initially remained around 7%, it fell below 2% in the 1960s)³⁵.

I have noted elsewhere that

[a]s long as the removal of the Bismarckian principles from traditional Czechoslovak social insurance, i. e., different insurance principles for different categories of employees were demanded, [national insurance] was clearly viewed by the egalitarian Communists as a positive measure. Nevertheless, as soon as national insurance was regarded as a tool contributing to economic development, wider differentiation of benefits than it had been deemed necessary, was required³⁶.

One of the drafters of the law, Evžen Erban, once the political priorities in social security had changed, explained the need for a new reform as follows:

The National Insurance Law, in its original conception, secured all citizens regardless of their social status and gave the right to take advantage of the benefits for the working class even to the still existing members of the exploiting class. [...] It permitted the subsistence of these elements, of foreign unions of workers and peasants, and, on the other hand, in its original form, it did not foresee the necessity of special security for the agricultural co-operators who form the vanguard of our socialist village [...] On the whole, the egalitarian method of granting pensions does not encourage the transition of workers to more socially important work, nor fidelity to the branches of heavy industry, nor the desire to serve as long as possible to the construction of a new order. It does not contribute to the consolidation of socialist labour discipline, it does not sufficiently stimulate the increase in labour productivity, and it does not reward the leading builders of socialism with their due credit.

In few words, Erban thus expressed the direction the Czechoslovak social security took in the 1950s³⁷.

While national insurance also differentiated between population groups, favouring one group or deliberately suppressing another one did not represent its primary goal. In some cases, more favourable conditions were, though temporarily, maintained (e. g., for civil servants). Nevertheless, decisions to avoid changes represented much more a kind of pragmatic respect for existing tradition or for the principle of preserving acquired rights than a genuine tool for the social reconstruction of society. Gradually, however, the class perspective began to be identified as the guiding principle of national insurance: «The class struggle extends to the sphere of social security [...] Today, our social security must still be permeated to a fairly

³⁵ F. Charvát, J. Linhart, J. Večerník, *Sociálně třídní struktura Československa*, cit., p. 74.

³⁶ J. Rákosník, *Continuity and Discontinuity*, cit., p. 456.

³⁷ Národní archiv [National Archives], fund: Ústřední výbor KSČ [Central Committee of the Communist Party]-Social Political Panel, archival unit no. 171.

large extent with class considerations, it must also fulfil its class function», stated Karel Pinc, one of the leading theorists of the early 1960s³⁸.

Class considerations manifested themselves in the legislation of the time in two forms: as a means for liquidating the alleged privileges of individuals and groups related to their position in the past social order, or as active support for groups which the Communist Party deemed of basic importance to build up socialism.

The Party committed itself openly to a crackdown on privileges in 1953. In that very year, the government issued a highly unpopular currency reform, which strongly hit the savings of the better-off³⁹. In the meantime, the government issued also a decree to regulate the pensions and provisions of people considered hostile to the people's democratic establishment (regulation 22/1953). The regulation allowed selected persons to have their pensions reduced to the minimum legal limit. Although the issued regulations specified that the reduction of pensions would apply to former ministers, politicians, directors, board members, high-ranking bureaucrats, leading journalists, and socially influential people, their implementation in practice showed different outcomes. When lower government bodies (district national committees) vetted the norms, their interventions resembled an arbitrary form of popular justice or settlements of personal scores. Higher authorities and the Central Committee of the Communist Party itself were then compelled to intervene and revoke some decisions, whereas the population spontaneously supplied numerous denunciations about specific cases of unfairly high pensions. The situation, which is well documented, led to meagre results – three quarters of the pensions proposed to the national committees by citizens for revision were ultimately left unchanged⁴⁰.

Even though this government decree was a one-time event, later social security regulations continued to contain similar clauses, which made it possible to penalize those deemed hostile to the regime. However, the possibility to penalize entrepreneurs, including smaller ones, was added. Under the original 1948 National Insurance, it was not difficult for former entrepreneurs to wash away their class origins by becoming employees for a few years at the end of their careers, and have then their pensions governed by employment principles. In fact, there was some justification for restrictive intervention since, as a rule, such people had paid far less in premiums than a citizen who had been employed for all his professional life. The 1956 Act, however, left no doubt that the primary reason inspiring the regulation was not the logic of the insurance system but a crackdown on former “exploiters”⁴¹. In addition, the benefits of voluntary pension insurance – which tended to affect the better-off classes, since the poorer part of the population had not, as a rule, been insured in the past – were also abolished. It was nevertheless in 1964 that the definitive abolition took place (Law 101/1964).

In addition to the discriminatory measures mentioned above, later amendments and supplements to the National Insurance introduced a system of preferences for

³⁸ K. Pinc, *Společenská spotřeba v ekonomice socialismu*, Nakladatelství politické literatury, Praha 1962, p. 69.

³⁹ J. Šlouf, *The Pilsen Revolt of 1953: kindred by currency*, Lexington Books, London 2022.

⁴⁰ J. Rákosník, *Sovětzace sociálního státu*, cit., pp. 281-291.

⁴¹ Ivi, p. 293.

those groups whose sympathies the Communist regime sought to awaken. In 1951, a special insurance scheme was introduced for cooperative peasants. From a legal point of view, peasants were self-employed. In order to stimulate them to join cooperatives, advantages in sickness and pension provision were introduced for cooperative workers. Family allowances, although legally reserved for employees, were also paid to them from 1949 onwards in order to break down resistance to collectivization (Law 242/1949).

In 1956, three categories of employees were introduced on the Soviet model, graded according to risk and, to some extent, importance to the centrally planned economy. Political preferences also played a role, though not of exclusive importance. In Category I, which included the most demanding and dangerous jobs, and often also those having particular ideological prominence, workers retired at the lowest age while enjoying the highest benefits. The vast majority of all workers fell into “residual” category III, had lower pensions, and did not retire until the age of 60 (women retired at a younger age depending on their number of children).

According to some historians, this was a return to Bismarckian principles⁴². In our view, the causes and consequences were more complex. From an economic point of view, it represented a pragmatic solution where benefits were deferred to the future and did not burden the economy in the short term. At the same time, however, these preferences, which endured until 1992, indirectly preserved the low level of occupational safety and hygiene conditions while compensating individuals from society-wide sources in the distant future⁴³. This categorization of employees was reflected to some extent in wages: employees belonging to category I were on average paid 50% more than those belonging to category III. In turn, those belonging to category II used to be paid about 30% more than those belonging to category III. The categories thus further contributed to the entrenchment of a system that produced status inconsistency on a large scale, as described in the previous section. Although Category I privileges faced criticism for their generosity soon after their introduction, whatever change was rejected by the party leadership since that it could not be implemented in the short term for political reasons⁴⁴.

Conclusion

In the period of early socialism, Czechoslovakia can be seen as a laboratory of social change. The article showed a diverse range of measures aimed at the radical transformation of social structure. Even if changes took place, they certainly did not correspond to the original intentions of the Communist party. Instead of a homoge-

⁴² T. Inglot, *Welfare States in East Central Europe*, cit., p. 136.

⁴³ Federální shromáždění Československé socialistické republiky [Federal Assembly], period 1990-1992, Print no. 1400, (<https://www.psp.cz/eknih/1990fs/tisky/index14.htm>, last contolled on 19th October 2022).

⁴⁴ Všeodborový archiv Českomoravské konfederace odborových svazů [All-Trade Union Archives], fund: Národní pojištění [National Insurance], box 75, archival unit 194-195.

neous utopian society, a social model characterized by significant status inconsistency, weak growth of labour productivity and worsening social stability – as the decades after the 1950s showed – emerged. Nonetheless, although results were very detached from expectations, one shall bear in mind that the transformation process lasted for a long time with the support – or at least neutral passivity – of a significant part of the population. The transformation of the social structure was stimulated not only through the repressive tools of the totalitarian dictatorship, but also with the help of the widely accepted institutions of the welfare state, which ensured significant popular acceptance for this process.

This article has been highly selective in its subject matter. The tools used after 1945 to transform social stratification were far more diversified. Indeed, it can be said that the most famous ones have been mentioned only in passing: collectivization, the expulsion of peasants from their land, forced labor camps, the eviction of inconvenient people from the cities to the periphery, the imprisonment of real and perceived enemies of the regime, etc. This article, however, has concentrated essentially only on the field of social law and, within it, on wage and social security policy.

This article also leaves only a passing mention of the fact that even in the darkest years of communist rule in the early 1950s, there was still a fairly strong social consensus that the changes that had taken place after the Second World War were desirable. The measures discussed in the article were not taking place against a passive and hostile society, as might appear from our temporal distance. In the relatively free elections of 1946, the Communists reached 38%. And even after several years of terror for the construction of socialism, when they announced a currency reform in 1953, the measures did not provoke a mass resistance of the population against the regime. The different behavior of Czechs and Slovaks at that time compared to Poles or Hungarians surprised contemporaries, as well as later historians⁴⁵. Certainly, when considering the conditions of a totalitarian dictatorship – as was the case of the Czechoslovak regime in the 1950s – it is not easy to find quantifiable testimony to the existence and strength of social consensus. Nevertheless, historians have many clues at their disposal. In his synthesis of Czech history between 1948-1956 published in 2022, Jiří Pernes cited one example. In the National Archives in Prague, he found one truly curious document. In December 1953, the Party commissioned a secret survey on what people wrote letters to the beloved home and abroad. Notwithstanding the constitutional guarantee of secrecy of letters, the contents of nearly twenty-seven thousand letters were thus examined. A significant proportion of them contained complaints about the difficulties of everyday life, such as the prevailing high cost of living or the frequent power cuts. At the same time, however, the censors found that the majority of the writers were optimistic about the future and believed in an imminent improvement, while only 10% of the “predominantly bourgeois classes comment ironically on these issues and express the opinion that our economic situation is about to collapse”⁴⁶.

⁴⁵ M. Blaive, *Une déstalinisation manquée: Tchécoslovaquie 1956*, Éditions Complexe, Bruxelles 2005.

⁴⁶ J. Pernes, *Velké dějiny zemi Koruny české*, v. XVII, Paseka, Praha 2022, p. 540.