

New steps to tame the Czech writers

Guardian

5 December 1949

By a Special Correspondent

The main attack, long expected against the unbiddable artists' and writers' unions in Czechoslovakia seems to be getting under way at last. Unlike almost every other official body in Czechoslovakia, the Writers' Union and the Union of Film and Television Workers have refused to rewrite history by repudiating the defiant resolutions they passed in the week after the Soviet invasion, and now they have been accused by the chairman of the Czechoslovak National Front, Josef Korcek, of "artificially prolonging the ideological disorientation."

There has been a good deal of criticism of these two unions in recent weeks, especially by the Czechoslovak Minister of Culture, Miloslav Bruzek and other lately reinstated cultural apparatchiks like Jiri Hajek, the editor of *Tvorba*. What makes their latest attack significant, however, is that it suggests that the party may have decided how to get rid of the troublesome writers' leaders, who were so inconveniently elected to office with large majorities less than six months ago.

'Moral terror'

Important unions, like this one, have to belong to the National Front, the Communist-dominated alliance in Parliament of the other rump parties, unions, and other representative organisations; they are not allowed to exist outside it. Mr Korcek, however, dropped a heavy hint that the creative unions might be expelled from the National Front if they did not toe the line soon.

By sticking to their position, he said, the writers' and film workers' leaders were "coming into conflict with those basic principles whose maintenance is a condition of membership of the National Front."

Bruzek in his speeches and Hajek in his articles have both been increasing the pressure lately. Writing in the last issue of *Tvorba*, Hajek produced the old cant about the "Right-wing" leaders of these unions exercising "physical and moral terror" against those writers and artists who disagreed with

their loyalty to last year's reformation, and added:

"Nothing will change while all honourable artists, closely linked by their work with Socialist Society, remain enslaved by Right-wingers who continue to hold a monopoly of power in the sphere of artistic creation, and who decide whose books are to be published . . . whose plays should, and whose should not, be put on the stage, whose scripts may, and whose must not, become film subjects."

The process of unitting "the positive forces of our Socialist arts," he went on, "must for the time being proceed without the artistic unions, outside them and against them"—and an official announcement later in the week said that Bruzek had set up a new "advisory body" to ensure "a unified course of action in carrying out the State's cultural policy."

Calculated risks

It was hard to believe that the hard men of the Czechoslovak Communist Party Bureau, so sensitive to the prevailing winds from Moscow, would allow the cultural life of the country to continue as nearly normally as it has been doing even up to a month ago. For example, although Milan Kundera—with Václavík, one of the literary "saints" of the reformation—was frequently attacked for that rôle, a play of was recently done at the Zabrádli Theatre, and a film of his novel, "The Joke," has been running at a cinema on the outskirts of Prague.

Generally, editors and producers have been their own

censors and have taken a good many calculated risks. The theatre especially has remained a sounding-board for popular feeling. When Marcel Marceau was in Prague recently, for example, his famous sketch of David and Goliath was received with meaningful roars of rapturous applause. Short of shutting the theatre down or making them so boring that no-one will go, there is no way of stopping this.

How far?

This leads one to the heart of the matter. How far are the party leaders prepared to go in calling their artists and writers to heel? A long way towards a Soviet-style direction of cultural policy, it seems, if one is to judge by things in Bruzek's recent speeches:

"It is necessary to take a stand against negative tendencies, liberalist tendencies, the uncritical taking-over of various trends in bourgeois ideology. . . . The Ministry cannot wait for another six months or so, until people's opinions on these matters are clarified; cultural policy must be directed today. . . . The Ministry will direct the use of money from artists' funds, and will see that they are allocated to those who support the cultural policy of the State. . . . The entire agenda of foreign contacts of the artists' unions, including passport formalities, will be transferred to the Ministry. . . ."

It sounds very much like the programme of "Sovietisation" which is so feared not only in Czechoslovakia but throughout the Communist block.