

TODAY ABROAD

by Joseph Clark

In Czechoslovakia They Go Slow

THE CORRECTION of legal violations and of undemocratic methods in the socialist countries of Eastern Europe goes on at an uneven pace.

In Poland, as we've noted, there is vigorous discussion and criticism. Freedom becomes reality from the parliament to the college campus, from the union hall to the law courts.

Czechoslovakia, however, offers a decided contrast. True, the Communist leaders of Czechoslovakia have also taken steps to review unjust legal procedures and remove some restraints on freedom of expression. But they have been terribly cautious about it. So much so that the London Daily Worker correspondent who covered the recent Conference of the Czechoslovak Communist Party frankly expressed his disappointment. The London DW headlined its story from Prague last Saturday: "Czech Communists Lack Bold Criticism."

THE CORRESPONDENT, Armour Milne, wrote:

"With certain exceptions, disappointing lack of wide criticism has been a marked feature of the National Conference of the Czechoslovak Communist Party.

"Perhaps the biggest disappointment was the fact that, in the main, those responsible for the mistakes and shortcomings made no attempt, in their self-criticism, to say exactly what their errors were."

The dispatch says, with a touch of bitterness, "Perhaps the Czechoslovak public expected too much. There was a tendency to expect it to act like a full-scale congress, which represents the rank and file of the Party."

Among the mistakes admitted

by the Czech Communists was tardiness in informing the public about what was happening in the government. "A case in point," Milne writes, "was the dismissal of the Minister for National Defense, Dr. Alexej Cepicka, the reasons for his exit from office never having been fully stated till now."

CEPICKA, a son-in-law of the late President Gottwald, said he was removed because he fostered a "personality cult" round himself as army chief. He said he had been "impatient with comrades and unheeding of advice."

The good side of the conference, Milne found, was the discussion of the five-year plan and also the strong speech by speaker of the Assembly, Fierlinger, a former Socialist, on the need for harmony between the world's Socialists and Communists.

TO ME THE MOST serious shortcoming of the present Czech Communist leaders is their attempt to whitewash the execution of Slansky and other former Communist leaders.

Only under considerable prodding, and not till three years after Stalin died, did they review the Slansky case. They admitted that anti-Semitism was used against the accused. They admitted that the charges of a "Titoite conspiracy" were false. And finally they released and exonerated those members of the Slansky group who were condemned with him but were imprisoned, not executed. However, they continued to insist that Slansky and the others executed were "guilty."

How illogical this is can be seen in the recent statement of

Czech Communist Party secretary Novotny on Noel and Herman Fields. Novotny said that the Fields were innocent of any charge of conspiring with Slansky. But at the trial the charge was just the opposite. Slansky was accused of conspiring with the Fields, who were allegedly "American agents." How in the world can Slansky still be considered guilty under such circumstances?

MANY ARE the achievements of Czechoslovakia during the past 10 years. Slovakia, which was once the more backward part of the country, has been industrialized. Social insurance, free medical care, child health and guidance programs have flourished. Many children of workers and farmer have received the opportunity to pursue higher education.

And it is among Czech students today that there is considerable protest against the continuing bureaucracy. The voice of these students will in time be heard; they must indeed be heard under a socialist regime.

When Vice-Premier Vaclav Kopecky said recently that the enemies of socialism "misuse the word freedom," he was a thousand times right. But Kopecky also said: "When we hear this word (freedom) we grow suspicious. It begins with a demand for freedom of the press and ends with freedom for capitalism."

That, we'd say, helps no one but the enemies of socialism. That is a horrible example of how the errors of the past continue to weigh like a mountain on some leaders today.