

Czechoslovak way of collectivization: total annihilation of private farms

Mgr. Jiří Urban

My conference paper is concerned with the paths to the collectivization of the Czechoslovak countryside after the deaths of Stalin and Gottwald. On the process of collectivization we will look not only in terms of political development, but also from a regional perspective - we will have a look at specific impacts in a small village Svatojanský Újezd situated in the former district of Nová Paka.

Officially the collectivization in Czechoslovakia started by a new law about the unified agricultural cooperatives passed in February 1949. (In the following years the private farmers who were by the communist propaganda called “village rich” or “kulaks” began to be systematically persecuted.) But in 1953, after death of the Soviet and the Czechoslovak dictators (Joseph Stalin and Klement Gottwald) the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia had compromise on its efforts with the unified agricultural cooperatives (JZDs¹) founding.

Let us ask what led to this?

-drastic currency reform was implemented, ending the practice of a double (fixed and free) market; New prices were considerably higher than the fixed prices had been (around twice as high) and a little lower than those on the free market. The complete discontinuation of rationing occurred after nearly 14 years and, in view of the absolute nullification of savings, was welcomed by few.

-the first mass anti-Communist demonstrations took place in June; Employees at 129 enterprises took part in strikes against the monetary reform. In some cities and towns (such as Ostrava, Třinec, and Vimperk) the strikes grew into unrest and clashes with armed units; the biggest single uprising took place in Plzeň, where demonstrators briefly took control of the city.

-speech by President Antonín Zapotocký at the Klíčava dam in the Křivoklát area in August; That day Zapotocký admitted that numerous faults had become apparent in the building of a new Socialist society. He came to the issue of food supply, announcing that the violent foundation of the JZDs had given a poor example of the Socialist

¹ I will be using the Czech abbreviation JZD as “jednotné zemědělské družstvo”.

“cooperative system” and that the Communist Party would not block members wishing to leave them. The ensuing reaction came as a surprise to the Communist Party; the collectivised farmers took the president at his word and started quitting JZDs on a mass scale. Hundreds of JZDs around the country ceased to function - within 10 months of the Klíčava speech the number had reached 1532.

Spreading uncertainty supported by contradictory reports about the situation in the USSR, the regime’s financial and political crisis, and fears of further mass expressions of dissatisfaction influenced the thinking of the leaders of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and contributed to the deceleration of the collectivisation of the countryside. In September 1953, the Communist government, faced with the threat of an explosion in social unrest, reduced retail prices of consumer goods while at the same time increasing the purchase price of agricultural products. Let us consider at this point the events that unfolded in the small farming community of Svatojánský Újezd.

The local collective farm, thus JZD, established under the pressure in 1952, at the turn of 1953 and 1954 definitively fell apart. In the summer of 1954, the local farmers carried out their own harvests. Even the orthodox Communist, the local chronicler Kovanda had to admit that compared to the previous collective harvest, the farmers worked hard all the hours they could, even on Sundays. Later he wrote in the municipal commemorative book: *“From the very start of the harvest a completely different work ethic was visible compared to the previous harvest, when our farmers worked collectively. This year, when our farmers again started working individually, the harvest went more smoothly for everybody.”*

The following year the harvest again took place without any problems and many farmers exceeded their supply obligation. (According to the chronicle, the yield of all types of cereal was above average.) It may have seemed then, that there was no point in introducing any changes, that the return to private farming in Svatojánský Újezd had confirmed once and for all the failure of the collectivisation experiment. Many farmers started to hope for an end of collectivization. But they were wrong. Soon a new push for another wave of collectivization came. The aim of the communist government was to achieve uniform nature of agriculture in whole country, to "socialize the countryside" in Czechoslovakia completely...

First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party Antonín Novotný made it clear in June 1955 that the future of Czechoslovak agriculture lay in JZDs alone. He proclaimed to the comrades at a plenary session of the Central Committee: *“We wouldn’t be Communists if we weren’t permanently aware that everything new must be born in struggle... Therefore we must fight for the farmer, to persuade him and not wait for him to decide himself.”*

General Prosecutor's Office in Prague responded immediately to the course that had been set out. A national meeting of prosecutors in summer 1955 became the preparation of a final attack against the remaining independent farmers. An instruction manual issued by the prosecutor’s office entitled *“The Prosecutor in the Fight for Socialist Agriculture”* clears up any remaining doubts as to the ongoing operation and cogency of Stalin’s theory of “class struggle”: *“Another reason why to a great extent the cooperative base is not spreading in the village is an underestimation of class struggle in the village”*, was said in the introduction.

How would farmers in Svatojanský Újezd have felt in February 1956 when district secretary of the Communist Party again lectured them on the necessity of socialising the village and the advantages of collective farming? This was a mere two years after they had brought to an end an unsuccessful collectivisation experiment in the form of the first JZD. Local eyewitness Marie Machytková recalled that it took too long and hopes that *“it will fall apart”* slowly vanished, replaced by conciliation with Socialist reality. The farmers understood that despite the fact independent farming on private land was guaranteed by the constitution it did not have a future in Communist Czechoslovakia. The situation is perhaps best summed up by other witness Eva Votočková, who moved to the municipality when the campaign was culminating, shortly before the re-establishment of the JZD. *“You thought that that’s how it had to be. It wasn’t possible to protest or do anything else. Life had to be lived.”* On this witnesses concur.

Neither Khrushchev’s denouncement of the cult of personality at the 20th congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in February 1956 nor the bloody repression of the Hungarian Uprising by Soviet tanks in the autumn of that year deterred leading Czechoslovak Communists from the total collectivisation of

Czechoslovak agriculture. In June 1956, delegates at a national party conference approved a resolution on bringing about the decisive dominance of the Socialist sector in agriculture by 1960. That goal was reaffirmed at the third national JZD congress in April 1957.

The municipality Chronicle reported about the events of autumn 1957 as follows: *“A blue and white automobile with Wartburg symbols appeared in front of the Local National Committee building. The representatives of the agricultural department of the District National Committee who’d arrived in it first established the economic situation of individual farmers. They were then joined by a couple of agitators (mainly people from the factory in Lázně Bělohrad) [...] The agitation work then took three weeks or so.”* It is hard to imagine that the local farmers who already had one “cooperative” experience behind them were amenable to the black-and-white oratory (speeches) of the agitators. Apprehension and fear prevailed.

On the evening of Friday October 4, 1957 music from the local radio station blared out and the hall filled up. Forty-three farmers attended the constituent meeting of the JZD – the majority of the 59 in the municipality. In the presence of the Secretary of the District National Committee the statutes of the old-new JZD were approved and Jaroslav Bičiště, bricklayer by profession, was elected as chairman. After an intermission of four successful harvests, the local farmers – this time with final validity – had been crushed. *“In this way our village became Socialist and set off on the path to a new, happier future”*, says the Chronicle. The district village newspaper published an article with the celebratory headline *“Eighth JZD since start of year founded in Svatojanský Újezd”*.²

The final wave of collectivization in the village did not proceed without persecution of the selected farmers. A brief depiction of what befell the Kurka brothers’ farm serves to illustrate the final phase of the collectivisation drive in Czechoslovakia. Until the early 1960s, they managed to stand up to the pressure of collectivisation and to manage the farm independently. However, on their lonely path they faced all kinds of difficulties and had to fight for their existence. As “notorious

² It is significant that the district village newspaper referred about the new JZD chairman (Jaroslav Bičiště, bricklayer by profession) as “one of the best farmers”.

non-fulfillers” they were subject to official and court harassment. As the owner of the farm, Václav Kurka was sentenced four times in a ten-year period. For the first time, both brothers were arrested and sentenced to several months in prison in summer of 1953. Persistent unwillingness to join the JZD became grounds for the further criminalisation of the farm. In November 1955 and May 1959 he received suspended sentences, while in the spring of 1962 he was again handed a jail term. The official confiscation of farms in favour of the JZD meant the end of independent farming in the village as whole.

While at the end of the 1940s the Communist leadership expected agricultural production to begin increasing during the course of collectivisation, at the end of the 1950s they were forced to regard as a success the fact that it was not falling. The level of gross agricultural production seen in 1936 was not achieved again until the second half of the 1960s, nearly two decades after the end of the war.

In the period of ten years the number of private farmers was considerably reduced. Active, independent decision-making was replaced by central planning; the independent farmer with an understanding of nature became an employee working shifts. The large-capacity constructions of collectivised agriculture, similar to factory halls, became dominant landmarks but do not belong to the traditional architectural composition of the village. After 1960, the only people still carrying out private farming were unregenerate individuals who, in trying and modest circumstances, defied adversity and with the greatest of effort maintained their family tradition. In the 1960s, '70s, and '80s private farms were isolated islands pushed to the very outskirts of collectivised JZD land registers or state farms.