

# THE COOPERATIVE POLICY OF COMINTERN IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA AND ITS LIMITS: A CASE STUDY OF THE COOPERATIVE VČELA PRAGUE<sup>1</sup>

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The Communist International (Comintern) is among the topics that are often frequented by historical science. Since the (partial) opening of Soviet provenance archives, researchers have been able to work with numerous original sources to complement our knowledge. Most works are – logically – of a synthetic nature.<sup>2</sup> A relatively large amount of work is also devoted to the Comintern's influence on individual communist parties outside the Soviet Union. Studies reflecting sub-activities and partial policies of the Comintern are significantly less common.<sup>3</sup>

The gaps in historical knowledge also apply to the Czech environment. Although work is already being done on the relationship between the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (CPC) and the Comintern<sup>4</sup>, it does not address the issue of the cooperative movement. Cooperatives, as “mass organizations”, played an important role in the policies of the Comintern and CPC. Moreover, they were

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  - 2 From the recent literature esp. James, C. L. R. – Høgsbjerg, Christian (ed.): *World revolution, 1917–1936: the rise and fall of the Communist International*. Durham 2017; Firsov, Fridrich Igorevič – Klehr, Harvey – Haynes, John Earl: *Secret cables of the Comintern, 1933–1943*. New Haven 2014; in Czech esp. McDermott, Kevin – Agnew, Jeremy: *Komintern: dějiny mezinárodního komunismu za Leninovy a Stalinovy éry* [The Comintern: A History of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin]. Praha 2011.
  - 3 E. g. Hájek, Miloš – Mejdrová, Hana: *Vznik Třetí internacionály* [The Birth of the Third International]. Praha 2000.
  - 4 Nechvátal, Martin: *15.5.1921 – založení KSČ: ve službách Kominterny* [15th May 1921 – The Founding of CPC: In the Service of Comintern]. Praha 2002; Voráček, Emil: *Die historiographische Erforschung der kommunistischen Bewegung in der Tschechoslowakei in den Jahren 1918–1948. Zu den Forschungsergebnissen in der Tschechischen Republik und im Auslad seit dem November 1989*. In: *Schlaglichter auf die Geschichte der böhmischen Länder vom 16. bis 20. Jahrhundert*. Berlin 2011, pp. 279–315.

very important players during the first Czechoslovak Republic, with great economic and social influence.

The study focuses on an analysis of the cooperative strategy of the Comintern and CPC from 1918–1938. It does not aim for an overall analysis – the limited scope of the study does not allow for this. Instead, it focuses on key areas of the CPC’s cooperative policy (tasks and activities of communist factions in cooperatives) and its effects on inter-war cooperatives. In addition, using the case study method, it examines specific events in the cooperative Včela (“the Bee”) Prague that were dealt with up to the Comintern level.

The basic questions asked by the study are: 1. When and by what procedure was the communist cooperative group in Czechoslovakia established? Was this process different from other party-related social organisations (e. g. trade unions)? 2. How big was the role played by the communist group of cooperatives in the Czechoslovak cooperative industry and how important was the Včela cooperative to CPC? 3. How did the Communist Party control these cooperatives? Was it done by force, by manipulation, or perhaps by classic democratic instruments? Was it possible for the cooperatives to stand up to the CPC’s (or possibly even up to the Comintern’s) decisions and to win such a clash?

The study is based mainly on sources of a primary nature, in particular the Central Committee of the CPC (CC CPC) fund and the file of the Včela cooperative in the register of the Commercial Court. It also draws on the available period literature, the remembrance publications of later prominent communist politicians, and, last but not least, modern scholarly works. I have not had a chance to study the Comintern archive, but I believe that the CPC’s archive can largely make up for the absence of this source. Nevertheless, it cannot be entirely ruled out that future research may call into question some of this work.

### **The strategy of the Comintern and CPC in the 1920s and 1930s**

The general strategy of the Comintern evolved in the 1920s and 1930s in the context of the changes in Soviet leadership and in its ideology. Since the aim of this study is not to analyse these developments in detail, only the most important factors will be mentioned. The first period was characterized by the expectation of a global revolution that, in the view of the Soviet leadership (especially of Lenin, but also Trotsky and others), would sweep away imperialism and create a dictatorship of the proletariat throughout the world. When the global revolution failed to materialize, the rhetoric of the Soviet leadership changed radically. The theory of the victory of socialism in one country was preferred, and was vigorously pushed through by J. V. Stalin. Later, in the mid-1930s, there was another striking change, and the Comintern began to promote the politics of the Popular Front (Front populaire).

Either way, individual communist parties were adapting to and taking over the Comintern's overall strategy. After hopes faded of a (quick) victory for the global revolution, their primary task was always to act in the interests of the "homeland of the revolution" – the Soviet Union. The task of communist parties was thus, among other things, to undermine the (liberal) democratic foundations of their countries. This was matched by their distinctive form, which largely referred to the Leninist legacy of the "Party of professional revolutionaries". They were usually relatively weak, "cadre" parties, often operating more on the basis of revolutionary cells – after all, they were banned in most Central and Eastern European countries sooner or later. However, the CPC (as well as the Communist Party of Germany) was a notable exception in this respect. Indeed, it was a mass party – at the height of its popularity in 1928 it had around 150,000 members. Such numbers were quite unimaginable at the time outside the USSR and Germany. Although its membership fell to around one-sixth that size after the so-called Bolshevization (establishment of a radical pro-Soviet leadership headed by Klement Gottwald) of 1929, it was still a big number.<sup>5</sup>

The relatively more moderate politics of the CPC (at least compared to other communist parties) also matched the relatively large membership base, even in the years of Bolshevization. For example, as Bohumil Melichar or Martin Dolejský demonstrated, the CPC had to act relatively "restrained" at the municipal level. Its politicians tried to merge the seemingly incompatible: on the one hand, they had to follow the party's ideology (and/or Soviet/Comintern ideology). This stated, in simplistic terms, "the worse – the better". In other words, the more the general living standards of the lower social classes deteriorated, the closer was the social revolution, which was to establish a new, just social order – entirely within the logic of Bolshevik Marxism-Leninism. On the other hand, these politicians had to consider the interests of their electorate and the CPC's "clients", who, understandably, wanted to improve their living situation. So they zigzagged between theory and practice, and, according to a number of research studies, they were able to bridge that seemingly insurmountable gap fairly successfully.<sup>6</sup>

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5 Rupnik, Jacques: *Dějiny Komunistické strany Československa: od počátků do převzetí moci* [The History of Communist Party of Czechoslovakia from its Origins to the Seizure of Power]. Praha 2002, pp. 85–86.

6 Melichar, Bohuslav: *Rudá Praha: O příčinách volební úspěšnosti meziválečné KSČ* [Red Prague: Causes of High Electoral Success Rate of CPC between Two Wars]. Diploma of Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague, 2017, pp. 160–161; Dolejský, Martin: *Opozice v meziválečné KSČ v letech 1925–1929* [Opposition within the interwar CPC between 1925 and 1929]. *Moderní dějiny* [Modern History], vol. 27, 2019/1, pp. 103–122; Melichar, Bohumil: *Komunisté v Praze. O příčinách volební úspěšnosti meziválečné KSČ*. [The Communists in Prague. The causes of interwar CPC's electoral success], *Moderní dějiny* [Modern History], vol. 27, 2019/1, pp. 123–146.

## **Cooperative politics of the Comintern and KSČ**

The totalitarian communist regime in the Soviet Union seized control over all social organizations very quickly. Cooperatives were also affected, as they played an important role in the state-controlled centrally-planned economy, whether in the form of kolkhozes (since collectivization in the second half of the 1920s), or of urban production and consumer cooperatives. In addition to economic tasks, cooperatives also played an important role as “mass organizations” (as did trade unions, youth unions, etc). They were one of the regime’s “transfer levers”, helping to advance its objectives, and acting as a communication and mobilization tool, a “cadre reservoir”, etc.<sup>7</sup>

The roles of communist-party-bound social and economic organizations were formulated differently outside the Soviet Union. Their task was to support the communist parties and class warfare by all means. So, even in this case, the “mass organizations” became de facto satellites of the communist parties; however, these parties did not control their states. Therefore, the organizations were expected to join the party’s fight to seize control of its country.

Soon after its creation in 1921 (by breaking away from social democracy), the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia built its network of satellite organizations. These included, for example, the Red Unions, the Sport Union, the Youth Union, and the Women’s Union. A notable exception was the cooperative movement – in this one case there was no break from the original structures for a long time. So communist cooperative members remained part of social democratic (or otherwise politically oriented) cooperatives. In addition, cooperatives that were fully controlled by the CPC (such as the Včela cooperative) remained part of the social-democratic Central Union of Czechoslovak Cooperatives (Ústřední svaz československých družstev, CUCC).<sup>8</sup>

The main guidelines for communist members of cooperatives stayed virtually unchanged throughout the period of the First Republic. Their primary task was to create communist factions within the cooperative. These were created either in individual stores or, in the case of greater communist influence, in the cooperative as a whole. Once established, they mainly carried out the following activities:

1. They spread communist propaganda within the cooperatives. This was done both through the distribution of the party press and through the organization of various meetings. But the most effective way, as the memoirs of communist

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7 Stalin, J. V.: Concerning Questions of Leninism. In: Stalin, J. V.: Problems of Leninism, Moscow 1954, pp. 164–166.

8 Slavíček, Jan: Spotřební družstvo Včela mezi podnikáním a politikou v letech 1905–1938, aneb, Pevnost proletářů v Praze [Včela Consumers’ Co-operative between Business and Politics in 1905–1938: The “Proletarian Fortress” in Prague]. Praha 2019, pp. 91–97.

officials attest, was simple “small talk” and the persuasion of small groups of members. It was all done in a non-forced way, and it was not unpleasant for those involved.<sup>9</sup>

2. They tried to control the other statutory bodies of the cooperative (the executive board and the supervisory board) through the general meetings, and therefore tried to take control of the cooperative’s activities. Everything was done legally, through voting at the general meetings. The aim was therefore to gain a majority in the cooperative. If that failed, the communists sought to become at least a significant minority, so that they could not be ignored. And if they failed to do that (which was most of the time), they could at least try to fight the social-democratic leadership of the cooperative and complicate its activities in all sorts of ways.
3. Further factional activity was directed outside the cooperative. Communist cooperatives sought to support all the CPC’s activities in the class struggle. Importantly, those activities may not have been (and mostly were not) organized directly by the CPC, but rather by other, party-affiliated organizations (e. g., trade unions). If communist members managed to win a majority, not only the individual members but often the cooperative as a whole was involved, and vice-versa: the cooperatives or communist factions within them were used to disrupt the activities of social democracy or its associated “mass” organizations.
4. Finally, the task of the cooperatives or communist factions within them was also to financially support the class struggle, i. e., events organized directly or indirectly by the CPC.<sup>10</sup>

### **Interwar Czechoslovak cooperative movement**

Czechoslovakia had one of the most advanced cooperative movements in Europe. It drew on successful traditions, particularly from the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. In the interwar period, cooperatives were already an integral and firmly established component of the economy, but they were also important institutions of social life and fulfilled important social functions. Their economic strength was huge: in 1930, according to official figures, there were 14,110 cooperatives in Czechoslovakia and their assets were worth CZK 67.7 billion (equivalent to about the annual GDP of the whole country!). The cooperative movement was

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9 The propaganda activity was really huge in the communist cooperatives. During a single year of 1936, only in Včela (with ca. 80 000 members), several thousand (!) such events took place. They were meetings of members (ca 2 000) and members-women (ca 1 400), children meetings (ca 400) etc. The total numbers of participants were ca 85 000 children, 200 000 women and 179 000 men. See Výroční zpráva družstva Včela za rok 1938 [Annual Report of the Cooperative Včela for the Year 1936]. Archiv Muzea družstevnictví, Družstevní asociace České republiky [Archive of the Cooperative Museum, Cooperative Union of the Czech Republic], non-inventarized fund.

10 Slavíček, J.: Spotřební družstvo Včela, pp 108–110.

a mass affair, with a total membership of about 3.5 million. Considering the fact that the membership share – associated with the necessary economic costs – was usually held by only one family member (although all of them were clients of the cooperative), then even taking into account the possibility of one person having membership in multiple cooperatives (e. g., credit and warehouse), we can estimate the number of cooperative clients at around 10.5 million people, or about three-quarters of the country's population.<sup>11</sup>

As already indicated, most of the cooperatives were linked to political parties. The cooperatives thus formed a kind of “affiliated organisation” of political parties. This was done through a number of cooperative unions of the larger parties (Czech and German Agrarians as well as Social Democrats, Czech Christian Party, German Christian Socialist Party, Czech National Socialists). It is conceivable that some unions were linked to smaller parties (e. g. National Democrats), although the research on this subject is still at an early stage and this hypothesis cannot yet be confirmed. But the fact that the cooperatives were linked to political parties did not mean that they were political organizations. On the contrary, within the cooperatives, the emphasis was on political neutrality in practical actions. Their activities were seen as exclusively economic-social and therefore apolitical, despite their unquestionable connection to a particular party.<sup>12</sup>

Logically, agrarian cooperative unions dominated the countryside, uniting primarily credit cooperatives and agricultural ones (of various types). In contrast,

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11 Slaviček, Jan: Družstva jako kolektivní aktéři ekonomického, sociálního a politického života [Cooperatives as Collective Players of Social Life, Economics and Politics]. In: Kober, Jan et al.: Kolektivní aktéři na prahu nové republiky [Collective Players on the Threshold of the New Republic]. Praha 2019, in press; Neuvěrní družstva v republice Československé v roce 1930 [Non-credit Cooperatives in the Czechoslovak Republic in 1930]. Praha 1935, pp. 2–63; Kubů, Eduard et al.: Mýtus a realita hospodářské vyspělosti Československa mezi světovými válkami [The Myth and the Reality of Economic Advancement Level of the Interwar Czechoslovakia]. Praha 2000, p. 43.

12 Slaviček, Jan: Von der Nachkriegsbegeisterung zu dem Vorkriegsselfbewusstsein: Konsumgenossenschaften in den Böhmisches Ländern 1918–1938. Prager wirtschafts- und sozialhistorische Mitteilungen/Prague economic and social history papers, vol. 25, 2017/1, pp. 59–71. The principle of political neutrality can be demonstrated on the book *Družstevnictví a jeho sociální poslání v Republice Československé* [Cooperative Movement and its Social Mission in Czechoslovak Republic]. It has been published in 1931 and includes ten speeches of top Czechoslovak cooperative managers (as well as of a former social-democratic prime minister of Austria Karl Renner). In all those speeches, the ultimate goal of socialism and change of social order is mentioned, however through a parliamentary way. The concept of proletarian revolution is strictly refused, which is very important especially regarding to the date of publishing (1931), i. e. during the Great Depression. See *Družstevnictví a jeho hospodářské a sociální poslání v Československé republice: Cyklus deseti přednášek, uspořádaných Sociálním ústavem ČSR v říjnu 1930 až únoru 1931 o teoretické podstatě, historickém vývoji, síle, výkonnosti a cílech družstevního hnutí*. Praha 1931.

the cooperatives of socialist parties were concentrated in cities. This was matched by the structure of the CUCC, which was dominated by building, production, and especially consumer cooperatives. While the CUCC was the second largest cooperative union as a whole (after the agrarian Central Union of Economic Cooperatives – Ústřední jednota hospodářských družstev), it played a major role in the mentioned cooperative sectors.<sup>13</sup>

### The Včela cooperative and the communist cooperatives

The consumer cooperative Včela was a phenomenon of its kind, both among consumer cooperatives and in general. Although it was founded significantly later than many other cooperatives (in 1905), it became the largest cooperative in inter-war Czechoslovakia in the 1930s thanks to a very capable and expert leadership. It was a real colossus – at its peak in the second half of the 1930s, it had over 80,000 members (which means an estimated quarter of a million clients, including family members). In 1938, it had some 480 outlets as well as a number of warehouses and factories, and its retail sales reached 186 million crowns.<sup>14</sup> However, its significance lay not only in those numbers, but also in symbolic terms. As the largest cooperative, it was an object of significant public attention, all the more so because of the fact that it had been a cooperative controlled by the CPC since the mid-1920s. Moreover, these factors were multiplied by the fact that Včela operated in and around the capital city. In other words, the Včela cooperative was a kind of “point of reference” for the entire cooperative movement in Czechoslovakia.<sup>15</sup>

Včela was founded in 1905 by a group of social democrats that included some who would become the party’s greatest cooperative experts.<sup>16</sup> The cooperative grew successfully, and by 1914 it was already among the largest enterprises of its kind. But the real boom came after the war, during the rapid growth of 1918–1921. Its expansion continued even after this period, albeit more slowly. It was undoubtedly an extremely successful company in economic terms.<sup>17</sup>

13 Smrčka, Ladislav et al.: *Vývoj družstevnictví na území ČSFR* [Development of Cooperative Movement in the Area of Czechoslovakia]. Praha 1992, p. 35.

14 Protocol of General Meeting of Včela, 11th December 1938. Státní oblastní archiv v Praze [State District Archive Prague, SDA], fund Krajský soud obchodní Praha [District Commercial Court Prague, DCC], file DR VIII-165, boxes 2694–2695.

15 Slavíček, J: *Spotřební družstvo Včela*, p. 87.

16 Among the most important founders were: Jan Havránek (1869–1933), later the long-time director of the General Cooperative Bank (Všeobecná družstevní banka); Ferdinand Jirásek (1871–1931), the long-time president of the CUCC; František Modráček (1971–1960), who was repeatedly elected as a member of parliament and later as a senator for social democracy, he was the party’s most important cooperative theorist as well.

17 Slavíček, J: *Spotřební družstvo Včela*, pp. 41–49.

Until the end of World War I, the principle of political neutrality was fully respected within the CUCC. This was (temporarily) breached in 1919 under pressure from the left (communist) wing of the Social Democratic Party. At the congress of the CUCC in August 1919, the communist wing advocated the direct involvement of cooperatives in class struggle, particularly in support of the strike movement. The group around František Modráček was strongly against this; however, they were defeated and subsequently left the party (temporarily). But this involvement of cooperatives in direct political activities was short-lived. At the height of the struggle within the Social Democratic Party in 1921, the leadership of most cooperatives (including Včela at that time) opposed the left wing, which had to leave the party and formed the CPC. Similar splits followed in all affiliated social-democratic organizations (labour unions, etc.), but not in the CUCC. After the communists left the Social Democratic Party, the political mood in the republic and in the party began to calm. As early as in 1922, the CUCC fully reverted back to political neutrality.<sup>18</sup>

But the communist influence within Včela was considerably stronger than in the vast majority of social-democratic cooperatives. In the first half of the 1920s, the battle for this largest cooperative erupted between the two groups. In the next half-decade, it was decided in favour of the communists. Včela came under communist leadership in the mid-1920s and was tied to the CPC. It also became active politically. It took the lead in the so-called “cooperative proletarian opposition” (CPO), a group of communist cooperatives within the CUCC. There was almost a war between that group and the union leadership. Communist cooperatives refused to respect the union’s instructions, sabotaged the union’s activities, intervened in the affairs of other cooperatives, etc. The dispute eventually resulted in the exclusion of Včela and several dozen other cooperatives from the union at the turn of 1932 and 1933. The CPO continued to act independently, but did not set up its own union for a variety of reasons. Following the adoption of the Popular Front strategy by Comintern, the CPO under the leadership of Včela sought a way to reach an agreement with the CUCC, but was unsuccessful.<sup>19</sup>

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18 Dvacet let Ústředního svazu československých družstev [Twenty Years of Central Union of Czechoslovak Cooperatives]. Praha 1928, pp. 94–97, 101–103, 114–122, 148–152, Reich, Andreas: Von der Arbeiterselbsthilfe zur Verbraucherorganisation: die deutschen Konsumgenossenschaften in der Tschechoslowakei 1918–1938. München 2004, pp. 404–414; Šorm, Vladimír – Pernica, Karel Martin – Větvička, Miloš: Dějiny družstevního hnutí, díl 3 [History of Cooperative Movement, vol. 3]. Praha 1961, pp. 40–43, 51–52; Slaviček, Jan: Mezi hospodářstvím a politikou: Ústřední svaz československých družstev v prvních poválečných letech [Between Economy and Politics: The Central Union of Czechoslovak Cooperatives in the First Years after the Great War]. In: Na prahu nové doby [On the Threshold of the New Era]. Praha: Ústav státu a práva AV ČR, in press.

19 Slaviček, J: Spotřební družstvo Včela, pp. 91–100.



Včela was crucial to the CPC on at least three levels:

1. Political: Like the former communist factions, the entire cooperative now supported the activities of communist organizations (trade unions, sports unions, etc.). Inside the cooperative, relatively strong communist propaganda was circulated among the members.
2. Economic: The CPC found a background for its events in Včela, and the cooperative took an organisational role in securing the aforementioned activities (which cut costs). In addition, there is evidence that Včela also supported these actions financially. Although direct evidence is scarce, in at least two cases this support is indisputable. It reached almost 700,000 crowns in the single business year of 1931–1932. This was an almost astronomical amount at a time of economic crisis (one which could have easily undermined the cooperative's economy but did not, and Včela continued to prosper even during the crisis).
3. Symbolic: Control of the Prague cooperative was of crucial symbolic importance for the CPC, corresponding to Včela's position in the Czechoslovak cooperative movement. This was compounded by the fact that the CPO was otherwise more or less negligible in size and importance (besides Včela, there was just one large cooperative in COP, the rest being medium-sized or overwhelmingly small ones).<sup>20</sup>

### **Včela vs. Comintern**

From the preceding text, it could seem that after the seizure of control by the CPC, the Včela cooperative followed its instructions and became its obedient satellite. However, the following text aims to disrupt this image. Indeed, relations between the cooperative and the CPC were clearly considerably more complicated than they might appear at first glance.

The link between Včela and the CPC can be demonstrated by several important personnel interconnections. Some members of the cooperative's leadership were also very prominent CPC politicians (deputies, senators, party officials) or were active in the leadership of other communist "mass" organizations.<sup>21</sup> The most famous of these persons was a man who embodied the phrase "Red Včela". This was the long-time director of the cooperative, Antonín Zmrhal.

Zmrhal was born in 1882. He was apprenticed as a sales clerk and worked for the vast majority of his life in consumer cooperatives. Before the First World War, he had already worked his way up into the management of the West Bohemian Consumer Cooperative (Západočeské konzumní družstvo, WBCC) in Pilsen, one

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20 Ibid., pp. 110–112.

21 Esp. Václav Nosek (1892–1955), Minister of the Interior from 1945–1953, Marie Stejskalová (1879–1953), from 1929–1935 a Senator for the communist party, Václav Šturc (1858–1939), a Senator and the first Chairman of the CPC.

of the largest and most successful cooperatives in the Czech Lands at the time. During the First World War, he was active in the attempt to create the Free Association of Managers of Cooperatives in Prague, and his proposals, although not implemented, were retroactively appreciated by the social democrats in their jubilee publication, which was published after the final rift between the CUCC and Včela (i. e., at a time when they had no reason to praise him<sup>22</sup>). After the war, Zmrhal, as a director of WBCC, along with his group, tried to seize control of this cooperative for the CPC in 1921. However, he was defeated and left Pilsen soon after. He moved to Prague and joined the management of Včela. Here he again rose very quickly and was elected to be director of the cooperative in 1923.<sup>23</sup>

Antonin Zmrhal was an important person for the CPC, as he was clearly the party's greatest expert on cooperative affairs. There is a general tradition in the literature of Zmrhal's absolute obedience and devotion to the CPC.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, he was a truly committed, staunch communist. Nevertheless, he was still, above all, a cooperative leader who understood cooperative leadership very well and knew that reality could sometimes diverge significantly from communist ideology. More recent research has shown that in 1951–1953, Zmrhal (as the highest cooperative authority of the CPC and the chairman of the superordinate cooperative organization in Czechoslovakia – the Central Council of Cooperatives, Ústřední rada družstev) was opposing the communist leadership's decision to reorganize consumer and manufacturing cooperatives along Soviet lines.<sup>25</sup> So there were clearly limits to his loyalty to the CPC. Another such case was the events in the late 1920s and early 1930s in Včela, which are analysed in the following lines.

In the second half of the 1920s, the battle for control of Včela between the social democrats and communists peaked. As early as 1921–1923, the CPC had managed to secure the majority in the leadership of the cooperative. However, the social demo-

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22 Täufer, František (ed.): *Dílo družstevní svépomoci: Jubilejní spis k 25. výročí založení Ústředního svazu československých družstev v Praze* [Cooperative Work: Jubilee Work to the 25th Anniversary of the Central Union of Czechoslovak Cooperatives in Prague]. Praha 1933, p. 129; Slavíček, J: *Spotřební družstvo Včela*, p. 119.

23 Tomeš, Josef et al.: *Český biografický slovník XX. století, díl 3* [Czech Biographic Dictionary of 20th Century, vol. 3]. Praha 1999, p. 573; Štverák, František: *Schematismus k dějinám Komunistické strany Československa (1921–1992): základní informace o ústředních orgánech a biografické údaje o vedoucích představitelích strany* [A Schematization to the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia's History: Basic Informations about Central Bodies and Biographical Informations about Leading Representatives]. Praha 2010, p. 425.

24 Smrčka, Ladislav et al.: *Vývoj družstevnictví*, p. 21.

25 Slavíček, Jan: *Ze světa podnikání do světa plánované distribuce: proměny spotřebního družstevnictví v letech 1945–1956 na příkladu severních Čech* [From the World of Business to the World of Planned Distribution: Czech Consumer Cooperatives between 1945 and 1956 (Northern Bohemia Region)]. Praha 2017, pp. 69–106.

cratic officials still represented a significant minority who put up a lot of resistance to the leadership's decisions. The last big clash was at the general meeting in 1930. Communist cooperative members were very well prepared, and the general meeting ended as a complete debacle for the social democrats, with the communists seizing 9 of the 12 executive board seats and 19 of the 27 supervisory board seats.<sup>26</sup>

As archival sources show, Zmrhal considered the communist strategy for the general meeting to be too radical. He had no doubt of victory, but he feared that a too-big triumph of the CPC would be counterproductive and drive out social-democratic officials, and especially members, from the cooperative. And as a cooperative leader, he understood that this would be a significant problem for Včela.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, he took action himself. Although sources do not allow for a full reconstruction of events, it seems likely that Zmrhal was trying to recruit his "own" delegates to advocate more of a compromise method at the planned general meeting. However, his activity was discovered and stopped by the CPC leadership. Zmrhal was forced to submit to the party's decision, and the general meeting was held in a confrontational manner.<sup>28</sup>

It doesn't matter how Zmrhal's activity turned out. What matters is that it happened at all. There is no doubt this was not just a toothless attempt, for his activity even became a topic addressed by the Comintern. In fact, over the next few months, the leadership of the CPC negotiated with Comintern representatives in Prague about Zmrhal. The Moscow leadership of the Third International repeatedly called him a "factionalist" (a deadly sin in communist terminology) and a "weak link" in the CPC class struggle.<sup>29</sup>

26 Zpráva družstevnímu oddělení Ekki [Report for the Cooperative Department of Comintern], 9th September 1930. Národní archiv Praha [National Archive Prague, NA], fund Ústřední výbor KSČ [Central Committee of CPC, CC CPC], box 80, signature 1100.

27 For the record, he was right. In response to the CPC's triumph and after the failure of subsequent negotiations between the cooperative and the union, the management of the CUCC called for the creation of its own social-democratic consumer cooperative, competing with Včela in Prague. The cooperative Rovnost (Equality) was established in 1931. Although it never reached the size of Včela, it ranked among the large cooperatives in the second half of the 1930s, with its approximately 20,000 members and dozens of outlets (the second largest cooperative in Prague after Včela). See Protokol z ustavující valné hromady družstva Rovnost Praha [Protocol of Founding General Meeting of Cooperative Rovnost], 14th May 1931. SDA Prague, fund DCC Prague, file Dr XXXV-228, without signature; Täuber, F. (ed.): Dilo družstevní svépomoci, p. 220; Právo lidu [People's Truth, daily newspaper of social-democratic party], 4th October 1938, vol. 45, Nr. 281.

28 Report for the Cooperative Department of Comintern, 9th September 1930. NA Prague, fund CC CPC, box 80, signature 1100; Neuwahl des Aufsichtsrates im Konsumverein Vcelle [New Election of the Supervisory Board in the Consumer Cooperative Včela], without date, 1930. Ibid., sign. 1098–1099.

29 Nachtragliche Niederschrift über die Aussprache der Genossenschaftsabteilung der EKKI mit

As a solution to the situation, Comintern “recommended” the removal of Zmrhal from the leadership of Včela. It also proposed to divide Včela into a number of smaller cooperatives so that, if the social democrats were successful in retaking control, they wouldn’t get Včela as a whole (there was clearly a fear that the social democrats might succeed in doing something similar to what the communists had managed just a few months previously). Finally, the Comintern also criticised the excessively large assets of the cooperative, which were not immediately available for the class struggle (especially those in real estate).<sup>30</sup> Understandably, both of the latter proposals attracted a lot of opposition from Včela’s management, and especially from Zmrhal himself.<sup>31</sup> Comintern’s “recommendations” went directly against the economic interests of the cooperative. And it’s obvious that the membership felt the same way – supportive of the director.

The chairman of the CPC, Klement Gottwald, personally addressed the “Zmrhal case” with Comintern. Although in a number of other cases the Comintern’s “recommendations” were more or less binding for the CPC, this time it supported Zmrhal and the leadership of Včela in all three cases. Gottwald argued, quite literally, that the change “would cause us great problems in the cooperative”. In addition, according to him, the CPC simply did not have an expert with comparable experience and expertise, as well as the confidence of the cooperative’s members.<sup>32</sup> The replacement of Zmrhal could lead to the complete loss of CPC’s influence in the whole cooperative movement, Gottwald said.<sup>33</sup>

Although the Comintern’s reservations about Zmrhal continued for some time, the director of Včela was apparently able to defend his actions to the CPC leadership – or, at least, he proved irreplaceable. The whole thing didn’t do much damage to his career. In 1935 he was elected a senator for the Communist Party, and during World War II he was in exile in the USSR. After the war, his career peaked: in 1945 he became a chairman of the newly formed Central Council of Cooperatives, which he remained until his death in 1954. He also held the post of

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den Genossen Gottwald und Hruska über tschechische Genossenschaftsfragen [Additional Report about the negotiations of the Cooperative Department of Comintern with comrades Gottwald and Hruska about the Czech Cooperative Problems]. Without date, prob. from winter 1930/1931. *Ibid.*, sign. 1100.

30 *Ibid.*

31 It is a question of whether Zmrhal knew about the „recommendation“ for his appeal. While this is highly likely, we have no documents about his reactions.

32 The Včela’s membership base was fundamental to the CPC. For comparison, during the VI. General Meeting of CPC, the party had ca 40 000 members. In the same year, Včela had 47 242 members. See 30 let bojů a práce Včely: zprávy za třicátý jubilejní rok činnosti 1935 [30 Years of Work and Fights of Včela: Reports for the 30th Jubilee Year 1935]. Prague 1935, pp. 32–33.

33 Nachtragliche Niederschrift, NA Prague, fund CC CPC, box 80, sign. 1100.

Minister of Internal Trade from 1946–1947.<sup>34</sup> His position as the CPC's top cooperative expert remained unchallenged until his death, though his personal qualities and manner of leadership were sometimes criticized.<sup>35</sup>

### **In conclusion**

The CPC's cooperative policy was closely tied to the Comintern strategy. Communist ideology saw cooperatives as important "mass" organizations that helped to wage class warfare against the bourgeois political system. At the same time, the CPC was geared toward inciting a social revolution that, according to theory, was preceded by the deterioration of the proletariat's standard of living and the intensification of class struggle. All these visions were contrary to the interests of cooperatives, whose primary task was to carry out activities of an economic and social nature in order to improve the living conditions of their members. This contradiction of theory and practice was particularly fraught in the CPC, one of the two truly mass communist parties outside the USSR. The CPC had to consider its electorate and members, as well as communist cooperative members, for whom an instant improvement in living conditions was, of course, more important than the proletarian revolution.

The Communist Party formed factions within the cooperatives, mainly of the social-democratic Central Union of Czechoslovak Cooperatives (CUCC). Their tasks ranged from supporting CPC's activities (in both an organisational and financial way; in the early 1930s there is a reliable record of almost 700,000 crowns being transferred from the cooperative to CPC-affiliated organizations) to trying to control the cooperative and bring it into the Communist Party's sphere of influence. Only in a few dozen cooperatives (out of a total of around 14,000 in the whole republic) did the communists manage to carry out this last task. But this fiasco was mitigated to some extent by the fact that among the controlled cooperatives was Včela Prague – the largest cooperative in Czechoslovakia. For the CPC, Včela had great political importance as a symbol of communist influence.

The personification of the "Red Včela" phenomenon was its director, Antonín Zmrhal. He was an undisputed expert with great experience, as evidenced by the extremely successful development of the cooperative under his leadership. Zmrhal, though a convinced communist, was above all a cooperative leader. The study

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34 Tomeš, J. et al.: *Český biografický slovník*, p. 572.

35 On the IX. General Meeting of CPC in 1949 was Zmrhal criticized for his "autocratic and dictatorial" leadership. See *Rozsah a organizace našeho družstevnictví* [The Extent and Organization of our Cooperative Movement], pp. 3 and 8–9. NA Prague, fund Archiv Ústředního výboru KSČ – IX. sjezd [Archive of the Central Committee of CPC – IXth General Meeting], sign. 0-5-156.

showed that his depiction as a communist fanatic, shared in the literature to date, is at least partly incorrect. At a key moment, he opposed the CPC's overly radical action against social democrats in Včela. However, he was defeated and Comintern subsequently "recommended" his dismissal as well as major changes within Včela. While these changes (division, disposals of assets) would have made it easier to use the cooperative for class struggle, they were clearly contrary to the interests of its membership. The CPC stood up for Zmrhal against Comintern. Klement Gottwald personally rejected the Comintern's "recommendation", saying that its implementation would lead to the collapse of all communist influence in cooperatives, and, moreover, admitted that Zmrhal was irreplaceable as a cooperative expert. The political career of Včela's director within the CPC continued successfully, despite the Comintern's objections.

The analysis carried out by this study confirms that the control of Včela (or cooperatives in general) by the inter-war CPC was of a completely different nature than the post-war one. Very spontaneous and spirited discussions can be documented at general meetings. In some cases, the management of the cooperative was unable to impose its will, or came under heavy criticism from the members for enforcing it. Včela never deviated from the principle of superiority of the general meeting under the First Republic, even during periods of strongest dependence on the CPC.<sup>36</sup> All this demonstrates that the support of the communist leadership by the members of the cooperative was spontaneous and genuine. Communist ideas and actions apparently found authentic support among the cooperative's members – mostly Prague workers. On the other hand, the management of the cooperative – and, subsequently, the management of the CPC – had to take into account the interests of the cooperative's members. Včela was thus able to impose its will in the event of clashes, and even in the event of contradictions with instructions coming directly from the Comintern.

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36 Slavíček, J: Spotřební družstvo Včela, p. 128.

### ***Družstevní politika Kominterny v Československu a její limity: Případová studie družstva Včela Praha***

Studie analyzuje družstevní politiku Kominterny a KSČ (resp. „levice“ v sociální demokracii) v letech 1918–1938. Zaměřuje se na klíčové oblasti (komunistické frakce v družstvech a jejich úkoly) a efekty komunistické strategie na meziválečná družstva. Metodou případové studie se poté zabývá družstvem Včela Praha, jehož záležitosti byly řešeny dokonce na úrovni samotné Kominterny.

Základní otázky, které si studie klade, jsou: 1. Kdy a jakým postupem došlo k etablování komunistické skupiny družstev v Československu? 2. Jak velkou roli hrála komunistická skupina družstev v československém družstevnictví a jak důležité bylo pro KSČ právě družstvo Včela? 3. Jakým způsobem probíhalo ovládnutí těchto družstev (resp. Včely jako případové studie) komunistickou stranou?

Studie dokládá, že úkoly komunistických frakcí uvnitř družstev byly velmi rozmanité, vždy však byly podřízeny zájmům a cílům KSČ. V některých případech se dokonce KSČ podařilo ovládnout celé družstvo – spektakulárním příkladem byla právě Včela Praha (s cca 80 000 členy!). I poté však Včela zůstala uvnitř sociálně-demokratického družstevního svazu. Skupina komunistických družstev se vytvořila až v roce 1933. Byla však velmi slabá – kromě Včely, která tak měla pro KSČ klíčový, i symbolický význam (největší družstvo v ČSR, navíc v hlavním městě).

Cíle KSČ a komunisty ovládaného vedení družstva se však mohly rozcházet (cílem KSČ byla proletářská revoluce, cílem družstva zlepšení ekonomické situace členů). Výsledkem byla tzv. „kauza Zmrhal“ (podle komunistického družstevního experta a ředitele Včely), ve které se KSČ postavila proti „doporučením“ Kominterny a na stranu Včely, což dokládá limity komunistického ovládnutí družstev.





**ROZPUŠTĚNÍ KOMINTERNY  
A JEJÍ REINKARNACE**

