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The final decade of the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia

To tell the truth, I would hesitate to call the last decade under the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia a “dark decade”. Maybe this view of things is influenced somewhat by the advantage of hindsight, but it seems to me that the “light at the end of the tunnel”, that is, the fall of the regime in November 1989, is so strong that it sheds some light on the era before it as well. In other words, it seems to me that the regime’s last ten years were in fact years of gradual erosion of the regime and its machinery for controlling society, at the same time as they were years of growth and strengthening of the opposition and civil society. In following the process in Czechoslovakia, what is interesting and instructive is that these events were, happening for the second time. One can compare the 1960’s and 1980’s, and in both cases follow how the regime lost the strength, determination, and ability to impose discipline on society; and also how, at the same time, the size grew of those segments of society outside the regime’s control – segments that could in fact present a coherent political alternative to the regime.

In the era of so-called “normalization in the 1970’s and 1980’s, the leadership of the CPCz was very sensitive to the legacy of the 1960’s. This sensitivity took the very official form of a document called “Lessons of the Crisis in the Party and Society after the XIIIth Congress of the CPCz”, which the Central Committee issued in late 1970. The document analyzed and passed judgment on the events in Czechoslovakia during the Prague Spring. Right up to the end of 1989 the leadership of the CPCz refused to change so much as a word. The impact of an experience during which the regime had practically ceased to exist, and was saved only by massive military intervention from without, was the basic formative element of political thinking in the CPCz leadership during the Husák era. The principle of their very simple strategy was: never ever repeat the mistakes that, according to the leadership, caused the catastrophe of 1968. This meant preventing at all costs any disruption of Party unity, preventing intra-party disputes over future tactics or the evaluation of past mistakes – and avoiding all thought of reform. If necessary to maintain stability, apply a measured dose of repression. Work as closely as possible with the Soviet leadership (in other words get in line behind Moscow and never stray). Allow no room for the rise of any kind of independent social structures or movements – not only political, but in economic, cultural, anything. The Party must never communicate with any other social entity except from above in its position in the “leading role”. Maintain constant monitoring and oversight of the big social organizations. If it was no longer possible to keep Czechoslovak society in complete isolation from the West (in the case of contacts in culture and the arts, sciences, and to a certain extent tourism), at least keep foreign contacts to a minimum and under control. Secure a mild increase in living standards, and maintain social contentment for the most important social strata, that is, the workers. In short, no reform, no liberalization, no risk, maintain the status quo.

How well was the *dèjà-vu*-plagued Husák regime was able to accomplish its goals? This angle of analysis provides a very important perspective on events. Of course the regime’s final period of erosion cannot be mechanically confined to the last ten years – but in reality it more or less fell into that time frame. The period of immobility – the era of success for the “normalization” concept of running Czechoslovakia – came to an end sometime around the beginning of the 1980’s. The circulation of Charter 77, which was in effect the creation of a new opposition, was indeed a milestone. Even more of a milestone was the wave of repression against the opposition in the late-1970’s – for this repression was basically unsuccessful, and

failed to reverse the situation of open social and political polarity that now remained, although to a lesser extent than in Poland, a permanent feature of the internal political landscape. This period saw the rise of a new generation of independent political and (especially) cultural groups. This generation was no longer marked by the trauma of the defeat of the Prague Spring. Another important factor is the influence of events in neighboring Poland, where the struggle of Solidarity, and of the opposition after the imposition of martial law, were followed by both the regime and society with great interest – in either hope or fear. Poland continued to influence the situation in Czechoslovakia, in the sense of providing a model, as well as through direct contacts between the two oppositions. The regime's last decade, then, is of fundamental importance in our research. Let's examine a few aspects of it in more detail.

1. The continuity of personnel in the CPCz leadership, and the stability (or sterility) of conditions within the Party, were long maintained successfully. Among the Party leadership there were few changes except for those brought on by the gerontology factor, and at the end of the 1980's the Party was headed by the same inner team that had taken power after the Prague Spring. Beginning in late 1987 there were a few changes, when Gustáv Husák stepped down after nearly twenty years¹ as head of the Party, but he stayed on as President. In 1988 the normalization regime's number two man, Vasil Biľak, went into political retirement; Antonín Kapek left his old position as head of the CPCz municipal committee in Prague, and so on. The names changed, but the politics stayed the same, mostly. Some hopes were placed in younger officials like Miroslav Štěpán, the new first secretary of the CPCz municipal committee in Prague, if only because they were a generation younger – but this soon proved wishful thinking. The constantly recurring question of who would be the “Czechoslovak Gorbachev” was never answered.

The only significant attempt at a change of course was launched in the spring of 1987 by Premier Lubomír Štrougal, who – backed by the model of Soviet *perestroika* – and using rather daring rhetoric, attempted to bring up some urgent themes as part of his move for the highest position of power. He was more or less easily repulsed. Štrougal was outmaneuvered in his bid to become General Secretary after Husák (with the post going to the even more rigid and conservative Miloš Jakeš in late 1987), and he lost his job as Premier in 1988.² Some inclination to reform pertained to the office of Premier even afterward, but its new occupant Ladislav Adamec never did bring himself to act independently, and negotiate with the opposition, until the week after November 17, 1989. As the architect of a new system that would integrate at least part of the opposition, Adamec was unsuccessful: events were moving too fast. In his negotiations with an opposition backed a mobilized society, Adamec was the weaker party, and his role lasted for only a few days after that. By the end of December 1989 he, too, had disappeared from the scene.³

2. The regime of “normalization” did not hesitate to take repressive measures against its opponents. The repression in the 70's, though, was far from having the broad, mass character it did in the early 1950's, and it was less severe. The reasons for this were varied: the necessary consideration of international reaction, as well as the fact that far-reaching repression in reaction to intensifying opposition criticism in the late 1980's would be an admission of failure by the regime. Husák was able to apply broad repressive measures at the beginning of his rule – and

¹ Cf. František KOUDELKA, Husákův pád 1987 [Husák's Fall, 1987], in: *Soudobé dějiny* 7 (2000), p. 473-525.

² Cf. e.g. Oldřich TŮMA, Poslední léta komunistického režimu v Československu ve zprávách velvyslance NDR v Praze (1987-1989) [The Czechoslovak Communist Regime in the Reports of the GDR Ambassador, 1987-1989], in: *Soudobé dějiny* 3 (1996), p. 350-380.

³ Cf. e.g. Jiří SUK, *Labyrintem revoluce. Aktéři, zápletky a křížovatky jedné politické krize* [], Prague 2003.

did. But after two decades in power, a junta that thought of the general calming of the situation as its greatest achievement, it was psychologically difficult to admit that things had once again gone out of control, and reach for harsher measures. Instead the regime gave preference to methods of economic or social persecution, or tried to pester inconvenient activists into leaving the country, sometimes – especially with some of the internationally lesser-known people – by means of rather crude methods. Not that they refrained in some selected cases from legal persecution. Especially in the late 70's/early 80's there were a series of trials, and most of the protagonists of Charter 77 found themselves in jail for a shorter or longer time, Václav Havel four times.⁴ The regime found itself with even less room for maneuver in the second half of the 1980's. Now it had also to worry about possible negative reaction from Moscow, Warsaw, or Budapest. Thus in 1988-1989 the regime found itself in a paradoxical situation. It certainly disposed of enough technical means of forceful persuasion to break the resistance within society. It would probably have been no problem to crush the street demonstrations in Prague that from mid-1988 on become a regular part of public life⁵, in the same way they had suppressed them in 1969, when gunfire in the streets, several dead and injured, and thousands of arrests succeeded in intimidating society, and began the years of “law and order”. But the determination was lacking.

An ideal example of the counterproductive effect of repressive half-measures is Václav Havel's last spell in prison. Havel had been imprisoned several times (several months in 1977, again in 1978, and from mid-1979 to the end of 1983). He was arrested for the last time in January 1989 during the so-called Palach Week, on the twentieth anniversary of the self-immolation of Jan Palach, when a weeklong series of demonstrations in the streets of Prague shook the regime's self-confidence quite perceptibly.⁶ At that time Havel was sentenced to eight months, and released in mid-May after serving half the time. His imprisonment sparked a wave of protest not only abroad but within Czechoslovakia as well. It became a kind of catalyst, as the protests were joined by thousands of important people who had never spoken out before in support of opposition issues.⁷ A few months of incarceration failed to intimidate Václav Havel, nor anyone else for that matter. The image of a regime that does not hesitate to resort to harsh means of repression was even further weakened. In contrast, Havel came out of prison with his reputation significantly enhanced both at home and abroad, and he became the unquestioned leader of the Czech opposition.

3. A very uncomfortable set of circumstances for the Czechoslovak regime was provided by the course the events in the USSR after the rise of Gorbachev, especially from early 1987 when the perestroika rhetoric began coming out of Moscow began to intensify. Suddenly, events in the Soviet Union were providing the domestic opposition a reservoir of ideas and phrases that could be drawn upon again and again to confront the regime with a question that was hard to answer: “Why aren't we going along with the Soviet Union anymore?” To repress or not to repress? The complexities of that question have already been described. Primarily, however – and this was a fundamental difference as opposed to the 1960's – it was ever more apparent that the Soviet Union was no longer there looming as a last resort if bad came to worse. This had an important effect on the thought processes and behavior of the opposition. The range of the possible and imaginable had begun to expand toward the horizon.

⁴ Cf. e.g. John KEANE, *Václav Havel. A Political Tragedy in Six Acts*, London 1999.

⁵ Cf. e.g. Oldřich TUMA, *Zítřa zase tady. Protirežimní demonstrace v předlistopadové Praze jako politický a sociální fenomén* [“Same place, tomorrow!": Anti-regime demonstrations in Prague before 1989 as a political and social phenomenon], Prague 1994.

⁶ Cf. Jan VLADISLAV - Vilém PREČAN, *Horký leden 1989 v Československu* [Heat in January: Czechoslovakia 1989], Prague 1990.

⁷ Cf. e.g. Milan OTÁHAL, *Podíl tvůrčí inteligence na pádu komunismu* [, Brno 1999.

On the other hand, however, the influence of the USSR and Gorbachev on the changes in Czechoslovakia was less direct than many imagine. In short, Gorbachev respected the situation in the country, did not wish to interfere in it, and never lost his good opinion of Husák (he speaks of him in his memoirs with remarkable respect)⁸; he had illusions about the real influence and popularity of the CPCz. Also important was the fact that right up until December 1989 (and by then it didn't matter anymore), the leadership of the CPCz was successful in preventing Gorbachev from revising the Soviet public position on the intervention of 1968 (which would have had an immediate and devastating effect on the legitimacy of the Jakeš-Husák team. Gorbachev did nothing to either initiate or force the issue of change in Czechoslovakia, much less organize the November revolution.⁹

4. An almost identical pattern can be detected when tracing the gradual withering of CPCz influence on the social organizations during the 60's and 80's. This is especially noticeable in the case of the youth organizations – for the Czechoslovak Union of Youth in the 1960's, as in the 1980's with the Socialist Union of Youth, as the former organization was restored and renamed after the Prague Spring. After the regime assumed power in 1948, as well as during the early normalization, the effort on the part of the regime was to liquidate all other social youth organizations, and to as great an extent as possible, to achieve unification of all activities with a single authorized organization of the Komsomol type. In both cases this was basically achieved over the course of several years, but with the effect that after a certain time organizations that were originally supposed to be a “control mechanism” and the “party reserve” sometimes began to take on, at least at the local level, the character of an authentic young people's organization, which people took advantage of to conduct activities in their area of interest. The leadership of the basic grass-roots organizations would often gradually come into the hands of people who were really elected, who enjoyed true respect and authority among their peers.

This was flagrant in the case of the universities. As early as 1965 leadership of the majority of faculty organizations was taken over by radical students very critical of the regime. The Student Union, which was established after the August invasion, became the most radical opponent of the return of the return of former conditions, and the student group with the best-prepared opposition political program.¹⁰ Likewise, in the 1980's, faculty-level posts began to be occupied by people who would sometimes use them to produce very daring student magazines, organize critical debates on topics until recently taboo – and they did so, unlike the dissidents, on an unimpeachably legal platform.¹¹ It was precisely these circles that organized the student manifestation of November 17, and supplied most of the student leaders. The students, as everyone knows, played a crucial role in the “Velvet Revolution”.¹²

The twice-lived history of the youth organizations in Czechoslovakia in the 60's and 80's shows that though the regime could control society (or its individual segments) for a certain time through force and by organization, it could not control minds, and that to demand complete control and one hundred percent organization would be in and of itself contradictory and counterproductive.

⁸ Michail S. GORBAČOV, *Žizň i reformy*[Life and Reforms], Moscow 1995, vol, II, p. 352.

⁹ Cf. e.g. Karel DURMAN, *Některé negativní mezinárodní faktory ovlivňující demokratickou revoluci 1989-1990* [negative International Factors Influencing the Democratic Revolution, 1989-1990] , in: *Soudobé dějiny* 6 (1999), p. 308-320.

¹⁰ Cf. Milan OTÁHAL, *Studenti a komunistická moc v českých zemích 1968-1989* [], Prague 2003, .esp. pp. 23-56.

¹¹ Ibidem, esp. pp. 80-102.

¹² Cf. Milan OTÁHAL – Miroslav VANĚK, *Sto studentských revolucí. Studenti v období pádu komunismu – životopisná vyprávění* [A hundred student revolutions: students during the collapse of Communism: biographical narratives], Prague 1999.

5. Similarly identical were attempts in the 60's and 80's to control and manipulate academia, culture, and art. These could be limited in one huge sweep; disobedient individuals deprived of the chance to present their work to the public, they could be fired from their jobs, their books removed from the libraries, films banned, and so on. Even so, many individual artists and academics whose works were by nature original, authentic, and resistant to manipulation, tried in thousands of instances over the years to reconquer at least a tiny piece of the public sphere. The Czechoslovak regime founded its legitimacy on having pacified the situation in the country. It was trying to simulate normalcy before the domestic and international public opinion, and therefore it was reluctant to mobilize the masses once again and start a new campaign à la some kind of Cultural Revolution. Thus it was unable to resist the constant pressure for change. Demand for access to (from the regime's point of view) unorthodox intellectual goods of either domestic or international provenience, was part of the demand for an improved living standard. What's more, this demand was often raised by the strata that were most politically loyal to the regime, by its main pillars of support. And these strata the regime had to appease.

A special subtopic of comparison is the issue of individual travel abroad or to the West. After 1948 the regime tried to isolate the Czechoslovak population almost completely from the West, and with few exceptions made travel almost impossible. After 1969 it tried to keep travel under strict control. A complicated system of authorizing trips and rationing foreign currency was also an excellent opportunity for bringing people to heel and manipulating them. The opportunity to travel to the West, however, was a privilege very much in public demand; actually it is one of the basic attributes of a decent standard of living. In the end the regime was forced to retreat, individual travel abroad was gradually liberalized in the mid-60's and again in 1987.

6. In the late 70's/early 80's the repression against the dissidents reached its peak. Many people found themselves in prison, many more decided to go into exile. Right when the opposition seemed on the edge of elimination, the independent scene in Czechoslovakia instead began to grow with new energy. The infusion came from a new generation of young adults. These people often made no attempt to negotiate the complex and difficult system of authorizations and bans, instead addressing the public outside the official structures, such as through amateur theater, or amateur music groups. Many young people published their first works underground (*samizdat*) before they could even be banned. Beginning in the early 80's the number of samizdat periodicals grew quickly (along with their quality, whether artistic, technical, and editorial).

The number and spectrum of independent initiatives also grew (although the majority of these were related in some way to Charter 77, and acknowledged its role as leader. In the mid-1980's the phenomenon of anti-regime demonstrations began to reappear in the streets, though only in Prague for the time being. Even if the Czech opposition was much weaker compared to its Polish counterpart, it now became difficult or impossible for the regime's repressive organs to consistently control. And a lack of information about opposition circles (or the ability to manipulate them) led to incorrect analysis and mistaken strategy by the regime. In the late 80's the StB was best informed of the activities of Klub Obroda (Rebirth), an association consisting mostly of former Communists trying to achieve a kind of socialist renaissance along the lines of an (updated) Prague Spring.¹³ The secret police and regime long regarded Obroda and their expelled former Party colleagues as their most dangerous opponents. They had much less

¹³ *Obroda, klub za socialistickou přestavbu. Dokumenty* [Obroda (Rebirth), the Club for Socialist Restructuring: Documents], (ed.) Zdeňka KOKOŠKOVÁ – Stanislav KOKOŠKA, Prague 1996.

information about student circles, and focused less attention on it. In 1989 this turned out to be a fatal mistake.

7. The normalization regime in Czechoslovakia made not the slightest attempt at reforming its economy as did Poland or Hungary. Any consideration of freeing up room in the economy for private initiative and business remained taboo right up until 1989. The other side of the coin, naturally, was an enormous growth in the underground economy and the gradual creation of relatively well-placed groups that profited from their behind-the-scenes activity. These groups, too, gradually ceased being dependent on the regime, and on the contrary had an interest in legalizing their status.¹⁴

The Czechoslovak communist regime may not have been totally unsuccessful (at least compared to those of some of the other communist countries, Poland or Romania for example) in its effort to maintain living standards one way or another. It focused special attention on the workers. Premier Štrougal summed it up vulgarly, but tellingly: “Just don’t piss off the workers”. And in fact, through all the trials and tribulations, there was no socially motivated unrest in Czechoslovakia in 1989. The Czechoslovak working class enjoyed – in relation to the rest of Eastern Europe as well – a uniquely privileged social status.

Even so it was not enough to save the regime, which failed to retain the workers’ support. On November 23, 1989 the leading secretary of the Prague municipal committee of the CPCz Miroslav Štěpán was whistled down by workers of ČKD, the biggest factory in Prague, when he tried to agitate them against the striking students. Meanwhile, a crowd of tens of thousands of laborers reached the center of town to join the now-daily demonstrations against the regime. These were among the decisive moments of the Velvet Revolution.¹⁵

Developments in Czechoslovakia during the 1980’s precisely illustrate the conclusions arrived at by Václav Havel in his legendary essay “The Power of the Powerless” at the beginning of the regime’s last decade in power. He characterized the existing situation in the country’s society as a conflict between the intentions of the regime and the intentions of life. By this he meant not so much the conflict of the political opposition with the regime, but instead, mainly, the everyday collision between the immovable and all-encompassing nature of regime ideology on one hand, and the diversity, plurality, and varying individual interests of individuals and local social entities on the other.¹⁶ Noted American scholar Martin Malia, in one of the best works on the nature of communist regimes – “The Soviet Tragedy” – writes that the attempt to implement the Communist concept of organizing human society is an attack on human nature and on reality itself; it is an attempt to create a surreal world, and as such that attempt is condemned to failure.¹⁷ The twice-told history of the erosion of the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia is, I believe, a very strong argument in support of Malia’s interpretation.

¹⁴ Cf. Ivo MOŽNÝ, *Proč tak snadno... Některé rodinné důvody sametové revoluce* [], Prague 1999.

¹⁵ Cf. Milan OTÁHAL – Zdeněk SLÁDEK (coll.), *Deset pražských dní (17.-27. listopad). Dokumentace* [Ten days in Prague: 17-27 November 1989: Documents], Prague 1990, p. 393f.

¹⁶ Václav HAVEL, *Eseje a jiné texty z let 1970-1989* [Essays and other Texts, 1970-1989] (=Spisy, vol. 4), Praha 1999, s. 224-330, in English *Václav Havel or Living in Truth*. Twenty two essays published on the occasion of the award of the Erasmus Prize to Havel, ed. by Jan VLADISLAV, London 1987, pp. 36-122.

¹⁷ Martin MALIA, *The Soviet Tragedy. A History of Socialism in Russia, 1917-1991*, New York-Toronto 1994, p. 225.