

The Stage of the Velvet Curtain and the Playwright Dissident Vaclav Havel

Olivia Graham

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1. The Beginning of Communism in Czechoslovakia – 1948

In order to grasp the significance the Velvet Revolution had in the fall of communism after 41 years there must be at least a rudimentary introspection into life as it evolved for those under communism - specifically, Czechoslovakia since the communist coup d'état in 1948.

As a country belonging to the Eastern Bloc and member of the Warsaw Pact, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSC) oversaw the turnover of Czechoslovakia to a "people's republic" - a move toward socialism and ultimately communism under the dictatorship of the proletariat. All dissidents were purged from society, not excluding those in the Catholic Church. The pervasion of Marxist ideology affected every aspect of culture, including of course the education system.

Everything was submitted to the state, leaving Czechoslovakia's "multiparty state" intact merely as a puppet to "rubber stamp" the KSC programs. The KSC itself however was not exempt from Stalin's purges - in part instigated by the rise of Tito's insubordination and the insecurity it evoked. (1, 2)

Czechoslovakia mirrored the Soviet example in the emphasized rapid development of industry. This led to massive drafts of people being forced to long hours of labor. The suppression of the most experienced farmers, the Kulaks (the

wealthier peasants), combined with the marked labor diversion from agriculture to industry, and the peasantry's resistance to collectivization brought about a serious agricultural deficit. Obsolete civil rights, a listless economy, and the repression of political rights gave way to pressure from reformists who were not unaware of Khrushchev's "De-Stalinization" reforms in the Soviet. Under First Secretary Novotny, the KSC's endeavors to quell the student-led uprisings resulted in Novotny's futile appeal to Moscow, and his eventual replacement as an inept leader to a new First Secretary, the Slovak reformist, Alexander Dubcek.(3, 4)

2. The Prague Spring/Socialism with a Face – 1968

Although Dubcek was the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, he was reform minded, and his name became synonymous with the Prague Spring. (5) He sought reforms of political liberalization, partial decentralization and the extension of greater rights to the people, including a lifted censorship of media and press. Dubcek drafted the Action Program adopted by the KSC which proposed a model of socialism as one "with a face" which would reflect the people of Czechoslovakia and adapt itself to their needs nationally. The reform, while maintaining communist ideology, repudiated Stalinism as the

means to its goal. The Action Program sought to reassure the Soviet Union of its continued alliance in the Warsaw Pact even as it attempted to draft a federalized law and elect a more liberal committee.

Popular pressure for reform gave way to radical expression, including the formation of separate political clubs and polemic manifestos like Ludvik Vaculik's "Two Thousand Words" which called for the people to take part in the reforms.

Dubcek's amalgamation of greater freedom and a democratic communism rendered a political in-viability: a mother in labor ready to push, and Dubcek still thinking that a half pregnancy was possible. Anti-reformist members of the KSC reached out to the Soviet Union, and although compromise was sought, other members of the Warsaw Pact fearing challenge to their leadership garnered thousands of Soviet backed troops and invaded Czechoslovakia on August 21.

The Czechoslovakian population supported Dubcek (who called for non violence), and in opposition to the Soviet aggression, rallied through spontaneous acts of non violent civil resistance. This unanimous resistance caused the Soviet Union to forgo its initial plan to oust Dubcek entirely, though they replaced him with Gustav Husak who immediately began to reinstate all previous policies that had prevailed before the attempted reforms. In reflection and prescience, Dubcek

accurately averred that “they may crush the flowers, but they can’t stop the spring.” For it was to be his “socialism with a face” that would later inspire General Secretary of the USSR, Gorbachev, whose reforms set the stage for Czechoslovakia’s Velvet Revolution and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. (6)

3. Vaclav Havel/Socialism with a Soul

The remarkable Velvet Revolution had many converging factors, not the least of which was the contribution of Vaclav Havel. (7, 8) Havel, an essayist, poet, dissident, and playwright, would find himself in an unscripted role on the live stage of a revolution, with parts as prisoner and president. Havel was born into an intellectual and wealthy family in Prague 1936. Vaclav’s father owned the large Barrandov Film studio, while his mother’s father was a well known journalist. Vaclav bore the family phenotype and it would influence his act in the play. For political reasons he was not allowed into any humanities programs. Vaclav’s family status, his humanitarian values, and Czech cultural cohesion forced him to channel his intellectual ambitions into work that fell under the restraints imposed. He became employed in the theater world, concomitantly studying the arts at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague and writing plays. His plays brought him international recognition, but, in the aftermath of the Prague Spring in 1968, he

and his plays were banned from the theatre, leaving his plays and essays to underground distribution, samizdat form as Havel was determined to persevere, "The solution of this human situation does not lie in leaving it. ... "(9, 10)

Throughout the seventies and eighties the impositions and severe restrictions applied and maintained by the KSC led to uprisings of individual and group opposition. Any independent thinking or postulation even claiming no political agenda was deemed defiant and met with harsh response in the form of blacklisting, harassment, imprisonment, and other persecution. (11)

In 1977, Vaclav Havel cofounded Charter 77 an organized opposition to the Czechoslovak Government's failure to uphold civil rights contained in the constitution and signed under international détente with the UN, and again under the Helsinki Accords. Charter 77 was defined as "a loose, informal, and open community of people" who were "concerned with the protection of civil and human rights." (12) The Charter began with 242 signatories growing to 800 by the end of that year.

Havel and other cofounders were detained in their attempt to deliver the charter to the Federal Assembly, and while the original was seized, copies circulated through samizdat and were transmitted over banned radio broadcasts such as

Radio Free Europe. In his reflection over the current political climate, Havel stated, "As soon as man began considering himself the source of the highest meaning in the world and the measure of everything, the world began to lose its human dimension, and man began to lose control over it." (13) It was actually the government's campaign against the Charter that publicized it most effectively. Signatories were arrested and the ensuing persecution prompted Havel to cofound the Committee for the Defense of the Unjustly Prosecuted to raise awareness. Havel's essay, *The Power of the Powerless*, (14) was distributed in samizdat form following his arrest and longest imprisonment from 1979 to 1983. The essay decompounded the essence of the communist regime, divulged life within it, and explained how dissidents were created from unintended, ordinary people. The essay went on to propose "ideas and possible actions by loose communities of individuals linked by a common cause, such as Charter 77." (15) The essay itself proved appropriately named as it was a harbinger of the power possessed in the peaceful protests of the forthcoming revolution.

4. The Velvet Revolution – 1989

"Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well but the certainty that something make sense, regardless of how it turns out." (16) The Velvet

Revolution began officially on November 17 as peaceful demonstrations by students spawned further demonstrations and an assembly of 500,000 people in Prague within three days. Vaclav Havel inspired movements which petitioned for a unified society under a politically restructured state. The Socialist Union of Youth, acquiescent though oppositional to the communist leadership found its voice by using the fiftieth anniversary of students murdered by Nazi's to springboard their march. Riot police ended up beating the students at Narodni Street. Home-made posters publicized in public places and strikes by all of Prague's theatre employees and actors galvanized members of literary associations and other organizations to join strikes. The rippling effect reached the theatres in Bratislava, Brno and other towns causing similar strikes and demonstrations. A sympathetic Prime Minister Ladislav Adamec met with members and students of civic initiatives and more or less hinted their success depended on the mass numbers they could accumulate in their demonstrations.

Vaclav Havel, who had just six months earlier been released from his last jail sentence, established the Civic Forum (similar to Slovak's Public Against Violence) initiative which rallied protestors and voiced demands including the ousting of the Communist Party from the Constitution. (17) The Civic Forum was catalyst to the beginning of uncensored press, further mass demonstrations in Wenceslas

Square, and Czechoslovak Radio and TV strikes. The appearance and address of Alexander Dubcek resulted in the release of political prisoner (and Slovakia's future Prime Minister Jan Carnogursky). A two hour strike on November 27 was supported by 75% of the population attesting to the Civic Forum's "capacity to disrupt the political order and thereby establish itself as the legitimate voice of the nation in negotiations with the state." Havel's victory was captured in the following declaration, "I really do inhabit a system in which words are capable of shaking the entire structure of government, where words can prove mightier than ten military divisions." (18) On Sunday, December 10th, after swearing in the first non Communist government in forty one years, President Husak resigned.

December 28th saw Alexander Dubcek elected speaker of the parliament, and the following day, Vaclav Havel was elected President of Czechoslovakia.

The success of Havel's Civic Forum in mobilizing peaceful protests, strikes and negotiations with the state was obviously not the sole constituent in the bloodless revolution. The previous evacuation of Soviet Troops from Afghanistan, Hungary's adoption of a multi-party state, Poland's formation of a noncommunist government, and the collapse of the Berlin Wall on November 9th were precursors of hope in the palpable throb of people who took to the streets.

5. Havel's Legacy

Havel retained presidency through the first free elections in 1990, but tension between Czechs and Slovaks led to the inevitable dissolution of the country.

When the Czech Republic succeeded as one of the two states, Havel, as always- the unwilling politician, was elected as Czech's first president and then re-elected.

(19) In his 2007 memoir, Havel affirmed as his greatest feat, the dissolution of the Warsaw pact. His contributions include not only the liberation of Czechoslovakia, the organizations he co-founded, the plays he wrote, and his books including 'Letters to Olga' (written to his wife during his longest stay in prison), but most significant was his legacy of moral pursuit in the value and veneration he placed on human rights. Upon his acceptance of the Philadelphia Liberty Medal, he stated "the idea of human rights and freedoms must be an integral part of any meaningful world order..." revealing his continued concern that the fight for political freedom must outlive the fall of communism and "the old European disease – the tendency to make compromises with evil, to close one's eyes to dictatorship, to practice a politics of appeasement." (20)

He received many awards including the International Gandhi Peace Prize, the Amnesty International's Ambassador of Conscience Award and the US

Presidential Medal of Freedom. Havel remained an integral part of many things, writing plays and maintaining support for the Belarus Free Theatre; he was also Chairman of the New York Based Human Rights Foundation up until his death in December 2011. While many tributes at his death were from the notable and elite- President Barack Obama, former Polish President Lech Walesa, and British Prime Minister David Cameron, perhaps it is best to close with Vaclav's own words written in a 1975 letter to Gustav Husak, "Life cannot be destroyed for good, neither can history be brought entirely to a halt." (21)

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