

Dissident Activity in the Czech Republic and the Change It Produced

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History

Just two months before his death, Jan Patočka wrote “There are things worth suffering for” (Bolton, 2012). As a well-known philosopher and intellectual, Patočka had been chosen as a spokesperson for the well-known dissident document and movement, Charter 77. Czechoslovak citizens wrote the Charter, as it is known, as a peaceful means of speaking out against the oppressive communist regime that was in place during the time of Soviet occupation. In his piece “What Charter 77 Is and What It Is Not,” Patočka described the moral meaning behind the Charter. “Participants in the Charter do not act out of an interest, but out of obligation alone, out of an injunction that stands higher than all political commitments and rights [...]” (Bolton, 2012, p. 155). With an emphasis on the importance of human rights, Patočka’s personal interpretation of the Charter was about demanding the rights that were legally guaranteed to the Czechoslovak people in the Helinski Accords. Shortly after writing “What Charter 77 Is and What It Is Not,” Patočka was visited by the police and subjected to lengthy interrogations. Days later on March 13, 1977, Patočka passed away. As the Chartists continued their resistance, “there are things worth suffering for” would live on as a motto and a remembrance of their friend and mentor, Jan Patočka (Bolton, 2012).

The Chartists knew what they were fighting for as well as the consequences that could come from this fight. This was not the Czechoslovak people’s first attempt at calling out the government for human rights abuses. The time of the communist regime can be split into two distinct periods: 1946-1968 and 1968-1989. During World War II, the Germans invaded Czechoslovakia and occupied the nation until the end of the war. After WWII, the country was put under control of the Soviet Union and governed by Stalinist principles. With complete media censorship and consistent harassment toward any who resisted, the effects of this regime took its

toll on many. Dr. Milada Polišenská, a professor and the provost of Anglo-American University in Prague, spoke about what it was like for Czechoslovakian citizens living under this government. “The victims of communism were victims of oppression... You cannot see the Communist party... like other parties... It was complete subordination of all your thinking, and behavior, and values, and everything to the Communist principles” (M. Polišenská, personal communication, August 14, 2013).

In 1968, under the Dubcek administration, the communist party began leading reform efforts. The first of these efforts began with lifting full-state censorship, allowing the people and the media to discuss and criticize the regime. It was an exciting time for the Czech people, but the Prague Spring would be short lived as the Soviets started keeping a closer eye on the reform efforts occurring in Czechoslovakia. In August 1968, “Operation Danube” took effect and Soviet troops invaded the country. In Prague, tanks rolled through the streets while protestors continued to resist. Throughout the fall, however, it became clear that the tanks were there to stay and the Prague Spring began to smolder (Agnew, 2004). For some, this ending was simply not an option. Jan Palach, a student at Charles University, committed suicide by self-immolation on January 16, 1969 in Prague’s famous Wenceslas Square. Palach’s suicide note called for “an immediate end to censorship” and the banning of a pro-Soviet newspaper. Three others burned themselves shortly after Palach’s death, but little publicity was received due to the government censorship (Bolton, 2012).

Thus begins the second era of communism. After the Prague Spring was smothered by the regime, Czechoslovakia entered a period of what was called “normalization.” This government policy would reinstate censorship and require citizens to fully cooperate with the communist government. However, the reformists’ efforts would not be forgotten and in the end

would only fuel more resistance. In Vaclav Havel's famous essay "The Power of the Powerless," he recalled the events of 1968 and said there was still much to be learned from it. Shortly after the end of the Prague Spring, Havel would become part of something called the dissident community, and from this movement came a significant contribution to the collapse of Czechoslovakia's oppressive regime (Havel, 1978).

The Absurdity of Normalization

In Havel's "Power of the Powerless" he argues that dissent was a "natural and inevitable consequence" of the country under communism. Dissidence was not a choice, but rather a reaction to being pushed too far to fit into "the panorama," as Havel would call it (Havel, 1978). The panorama is another way to describe the everyday life of Czechoslovakian citizens living in the era of normalization. Communist slogans and propaganda were rampant, and whether or not one agreed with them, one was expected to comply by supporting it. Gustáv Husák's government was all about keeping the status quo. According to the Library of Congress Country Studies, the regime required "conformity and obedience in all aspects of life" (1987). This was not some sort of suggestion, but rather a necessary way to conduct your life, and those who did not follow it were subjected to constant interrogation and harassment from the police.

It is important to hear firsthand examples of those who lived through this period to help understand what it meant to go against the regime. Jan Urban was 26 years old when he was forced to make a decision that would prove either his support or his defiance. As a schoolteacher, he was asked to sign the "Anti-Charter," a government document that was created in response to the dissident community's Charter-77. To Urban – someone who had many close friends who had signed Charter-77 – this situation was complicated. Ten days after refusing to sign the Anti-

Charter, he was walked out of a lecture and dismissed from his job. (J. Urban, personal communication, August 16, 2013).

One thing consistently iterated by literature about dissidents or by the dissidents themselves, including both Havel and Urban, is that nobody chooses a career as a dissident. “At one point somebody on the regime side pushed too hard too fast, and you just felt pushed... rebels without reason, really. We all knew the rules of the game... once you made a mistake and showed your disagreement, you were out.” (J. Urban, personal communication, August 16, 2013). Dissidence came out of the want and need for freedom of self-expression. If you did not agree with the mainstream, there were only two options for you: You either became a liar by being silent and pretending that you agreed, or you let it be known that you disagreed, and thus became a dissident.

Charter 77 and the Rise of Dissident Media

There was not one particular way to dissent, and eventually many individual dissidents created larger networks. From many isolated citizens came a community of solidarity. Dissident media took multiple forms – from radio to music to independently published and circulated literature known as “samizdat” (a Russian term meaning “self-publishing”) – and connections between all of them were formed. Though the most famous dissidents were typically intellectuals and scholars, it was surely not limited to those with a pen and a degree.

The Plastic People of the Universe were what some may call a typical 1970s rock band. They cited Frank Zappa, The Beatles, and the Velvet Underground as musical influences, and with their long hair and generally anti-establishment lyrics, it is safe to say that the communist regime was not a fan of the message the band sent. After the government banned the Plastics

from public performances, their underground concerts became inherently political in nature. Those who attended risked being arrested or interrogated, and eventually the members of the band would be put on trial themselves. It became known as “the trial of the Plastic People” and was a point for dissidents to rally around, yet only one of the four people on this trial was actually a member of the band; two of the other three were in other underground bands, and one was the Plastic’s manager (Bilefsky, 2009).

This trial is frequently cited as the inspiration for Charter-77. In the Charter, the trial is cited as an example of the government’s human rights abuses. Havel describes this further in “Power of the Powerless.” He says, “The freedom to play rock music was understood as a human freedom and thus as essentially the same as the freedom to engage in philosophical and political reflection, the freedom to write, the freedom to express and defend the various social and political interests of society” (Havel, 1978). The Charter revolutionized the dissident movement: The manifesto rapidly gained signatories and the government quickly worked on an anti-charter campaign. Moreover, the Charter brought together many different groups into one cohesive dissident community. By citing the trial of the Plastics, the Charter bridged the gap between the underground and the intellectuals.

Samizdat publications varied in levels of production. The most common way to print relatively large amounts of copies was with carbon paper on typewriters. The thin, faded print was not ideal, but publications such as *Edice Petlice (Padlock Editions)* could type up to twelve copies at once using this method. Because it was legal to share copies of your work with a few friends but not to start your own publishing company without state permission, there were attempts to make each copy look like an original. “Each copy was marked with a formula to the effect that no further copying of the manuscript was permitted – a band that many readers, of

course cheerfully ignored. One of the standard formulae, *Výslovný zákaz dalšího opisování rukopisu* (Further Copying of this Manuscript Expressly Forbidden), was a bit of a joke since its acronym, VZDOR, means “resistance” in Czech” (Bolton, 2012, p. 100).

Near the end of the communist period, samizdat publishing became more advanced. One example of this advancement is evident in the revival of the Czech Republic’s oldest newspaper, *Lidové Noviny*. Daniel Kaiser is an Op-Ed writer for *Lidové Noviny*, where he has worked for six years – first in 1998 and then again from 2009 to the present. Kaiser focuses on politics and domestic politics in Germany and the United Kingdom. The publication, which had been shut down since 1952, was revived in 1987 under the leadership of Jiří Ruml. Ruml was a dissident and a former journalist. Kaiser said that though the equipment they used was definitely more advanced than previous publications, it was still quite modest. For instance, they had two copy machines as well as an electronic typing machine instead of typewriters, giving them the ability to easily edit. For their own safety, there were no official headquarters, and in order to increase distribution, they would pass copies to other people with access to copy machines. A fellow *Lidové Noviny* writer said that because all copy machines had to be registered with the state, it was dangerous to produce copies, and he knew someone who was put in jail for it. “The idea was there would be the most respected people from the opposition behind that, irrespective of political opinions, but as it was the mainstream of the opposition, the paper was not very radical” (D. Kaiser, personal communication, August 21, 2013). Among these “respected people from the opposition” were both Havel and Urban, and because of those types of connections, the paper began regaining popularity.

With many differing types of dissident media and groups of dissidents, creating a network between them all would be a seemingly brilliant idea – or at least an incredibly logical

one. In December of 1987, Urban attended the first independent international human rights seminar in Moscow. He was the only dissident from a satellite country that was able to get in. Through contacts he had made in Moscow, he began to create an international dissident network – the Eastern European Information Agency (EEIA). By sharing dissident news on a daily basis, they became a reliable news source and their stories were picked up by larger Western networks, such as Radio Free Europe and Voice of America.

The EEIA is a reminder that the dissidents' voices were not necessarily always limited to just the few materials they could circulate on their own. The West supported the dissidents in their cause and one example of this support is from Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL). RFE/RL aimed to provide “a ‘megaphone’ through which independent figures —denied normal access to local media — could reach millions of their countrymen with uncensored writings” (Johnson, 2008). Because RFE/RL broadcasted in multiple countries behind the Iron Curtain, RFE/RL gave citizens access to hear and share media across borders. Looking at its fate after the fall of communism can prove the importance of RFE/RL. Dissident figures, including Václav Havel at the forefront, continued to see the significance behind the organization and supported its continuation by giving it a new headquarters after the Iron Curtain fell (Johnson, 2008).

The dissidents were not just worried about the take down of communism. Although for many it was about inflicting damage to the regime, it was also largely about the importance of free expression, literature, and culture. Havel refers to culture as “the agent of self-awareness” (Havel, 1975). Without an openness to share thoughts and ideas, society suffers in more ways than one. Firstly, the people suffer personally. Culture is a very intimate part of one's life, and without the ability to share this with others some spent years trying to suppress part of who they were. Furthermore, society begins to suffer as a whole when culture is restricted. Without

scientists to advance a community's understanding of the world, without artists to express opinions of the people, and without writers to question the moral's of a nation, a society is not whole, and it rightly advance without these freedoms.

Victims of Oppression

What makes the dissidents' story so heroic and admirable is that their actions were never easy. Going against the regime was not an effortless undertaking nor was it a safe one. Dissidents did not simply speak their opinions. Instead, they suffered for speaking them. The consequences may have varied on an individual basis, but nonetheless exist in every dissident's story. Even those who were not considered dissidents felt the backlash for showing disagreement. For instance, many children were not permitted to attend schools if their parents' political views did not align with the mainstream. Others, as in Urban's case, were fired from their jobs after resisting the regime.

It often seemed that the more a dissident was perceived as a threat, the more severe the consequences became. It was common for dissidents to have their house bugged or phone lines tapped. "Many chartists were singled out for special treatment in an effort to make them emigrate, beatings became less uncommon, as did death threats and physical violence during interrogations" (Bolton, 2012). This, of course, was in addition to extensive interrogations and house searches. Urban recalled that the secret police went as far as interrogating his pregnant wife, which resulted in losing their child. His response was that his experiences told a "regular story. There were thousands of people like that" (J. Urban, personal communication, August 16, 2013).

When this lifestyle becomes normal for a dissident, the long-lasting effects become evident. For example, a large number of dissidents were intellectuals, but once they were known as dissidents, they no longer had the ability to publish their work, nor did they often have the ability to access the work of others in their field. Often times resorting to hard labor, it was common for dissidents to be forced into laborious jobs with long hours. As an intellectual, if one wanted to continue his or her research, he or she would have to work on it late at night. It is difficult to imagine being exhausted from working all day and then coming home to put all remaining efforts into a work that would never be published. Some question why they continued to go on. On top of this, even after the fall of communism these academics had to work hard to attempt to catch up in their field – a stress that was both mental and physical and could lead to forfeiting attempts to continue with a career, or even result in a heart attack (M. Polišenská, personal communication, August 14, 2013).

“You don’t calculate, you just go on,” Urban said. “It changes all your life. You distrust everybody and everything... You lie constantly because it’s the safest way to stay out of trouble. You check, recheck, everybody else. You really turn into a monster” (J. Urban, personal communication, August 16, 2013). Many say that these long-lasting effects of communism still exist today. Polišenská said that what was truly damaging to the Czechoslovakian people was the permanent anxiety it left its citizens (personal communication, August 14, 2013). Anxiety came from many sources. For some, it was the idea of impending war that the communist media seemed to advertise. For others, it was paranoia of constantly being watched and followed by the regime. Iva Skochova told a story of when she was very young – around five years old – hearing her parents discuss the corruption of communist politicians, after which they would turn to her and tell her to lie if anyone asked her what she thought of these communist leaders (personal

communication, August 16, 2013). Everyone who disagreed with the regime but could not risk facing the consequences was taught to lie, and some Czechs (including Skochova, Poliřenská, and Urban) say these character traits continue to haunt the Czech people today.

Change

The Velvet Revolution began on November 17, 1989, and by early December, Communist rule ended in Czechoslovakia. In just a few weeks, peaceful protests brought the end that many thought they might never see. It is impossible to pinpoint all of the factors that led to the government's defeat, and surely there are influences from outside of Czechoslovakia that contributed to it. However, it is important to consider how the dissidents may have assisted this cause and what their efforts mean to the Czech people.

There is no formula to calculate influence and inspiration. "I think it would be too much to say that we brought the change around, but we definitely helped," said Urban (J. Urban, personal communication, August 16, 2013). Bolton argues that no amount of statistics would be able to explain the kind of impact dissidents had on Czech society (Bolton, 2012). For instance, how does one calculate the idea that dissidents paved the way for groups that were responsible for organizing protests during the Revolution? The dissident movement is not just a political one, it is a cultural one (Bolton, 2012). The dissident community was able to promote diversity, discussion, and culture in a state that continuously suppressed these freedoms.

The dissidents were able to create culture in a society that constantly tried to banish it, and because of this they have become part of Czech culture itself. Their resistance is just one shining example of what many of Czechoslovakian citizens lived through for years. A constant struggle with the regime, the inability to express their true selves, and finally defiance have led

the people of the Czech Republic to where they are today – and their progress is astounding. In just over 20 years, the country has been able to rapidly transform into a nation and government by, of, and for the people, and it does not seem like a stretch to say that the dissidents helped them get there. Milada Polišenská said that the dissidents had “an aura around them – an aura of resistance... [they deserve a] part of our history, not a paragraph at the bottom of it” (personal communication, August 14, 2013). As time goes on and the nation continues to analyze all it has been through, surely the dissidents will show up time and time again, and their story will become a documented part of the culture they helped create.

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