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## Prague Spring 1968 at 50

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Fifty years after the Prague Spring of 1968 one can notice an interesting contrast between the commemoration of the hopes of the Spring in the West and the priority given to the commemoration of the August 1968 invasion that crushed the project known as 'socialism with a human face' in the East. This may be revealing not just of different experiences with 1968 in both parts of then divided Europe as much as of the post-1989 politics of memory in the Czech lands.

Looking back fifty years on we note that there is no urgent need of a new history of the 1968 Czechoslovak experiment (the archives have been opened and much has been published) but there may be a case for revisiting the ideas associated with 1968 and their resonance (or lack thereof) in the country itself as well as in a broader European context.

Three aspects deserve to be mentioned in this respect:

1. The Prague Spring revived the debate about Czech democratic exceptionalism in the context of European socialism.
2. It was often interpreted as part of an international generational revolt against the establishments, East and West.
3. Finally, the most far-reaching reform within the Soviet sphere provided, twenty years on, a belated (and thus doomed) inspiration for Mikhail Gorbachev's attempt to save the system.

The Prague Spring did not start with the election of Alexander Dubček as Party leader on 5 January 1968 and was not concluded with the Soviet-led invasion of 21 August. Rather it should be understood as a process that started in the early 1960s with converging pressures for economic reforms, identified with the name of Ota Šik, Slovak resentment of Prague centralism (hence Dubček), and the gradual emancipation of the cultural sphere from the strictures of ideological censorship. The latter development accounts for the golden age of Czech cinema, theatre, and literature which made a significant and lasting impact throughout Europe. The culmination of this three-pronged process brought about political change that began with the abolition of censorship and the separation of Party

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and state. In other words, 1968 was not—as was often argued later—just an internal squabble within the Party elite, it was, in Václav Havel's words, 'above all a civic renewal, a restoration of human dignity, the trust in the capacities and possibilities of citizens to change society' [Havel 1999: 12; translation J.R.].

The interpretations of the democratisation process revived several versions of Czech exceptionalism. They obviously followed a reading of inter-war Central Europe as sliding towards authoritarianism with Czechoslovakia as a democratic exception. The first interpretation could be summed up as the triumph of Czech and Slovak culture over the communist structure. The emancipation of the cultural sphere from the diktat of censorship without being subjected to that of the market produced a powerful 1960s cultural background to the political and societal changes associated with 1968. A related version of the argument concerns the enduring democratic character of Czech political culture. Authors, like Gordon Skilling in his monumental study of the Prague Spring, have argued that the legacies of the pre-war democracy, followed between 1945 and 1948 by a 'democratic interlude', have left in the society (even in large parts of the KSČ membership) values and beliefs that were in conflict with the Stalinist regime. This political culture eventually resurfaced in the 1960s and helped to bring about fundamental change which represented a break with Soviet-type communism [Skilling 1976; Brown and Wightman 1977].

The third and possibly most interesting debate about the meaning of 1968, which set two leading Czech intellectuals, Milan Kundera and Václav Havel, in opposition to each other is worth re-reading half a century later [Kundera 1968; Havel 1969].<sup>1</sup> Not for the post-invasion assessment. Kundera's overstatement that 'the significance of the Czechoslovak Fall goes beyond that of the Spring itself' and the hope that the reformist project could survive the invasion were mercilessly dismissed by Havel as sheer delusion. But it is the meaning of the project of the Prague Spring that may be worth revisiting. Following on Hubert Gordon Schauer's provocative 19th-century question about what ultimately justifies the efforts put into producing a culture in the Czech language, Kundera makes a plea for the contribution of small nations to universal values and ideas:

A small nation on the other hand, if it has achieved any significance in the world, must constantly generate it anew, day in and day out. The moment it ceases to produce things of value, it loses the justification for its existence, and in the end it may finally actually cease to exist because it is fragile and destructible. The production of things of value is bound to the question of its very being ... [Kundera 1968: 5; translation Tim West<sup>2</sup>]

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<sup>1</sup> The three articles (with Kundera's reply to Havel) were reprinted in *Literární noviny* on 27 December 2007.

<sup>2</sup> The complete text of this translation of Kundera [1968] is accessible at: [https://www.academia.edu/2503513/Czech\\_Destiny\\_Milan\\_Kundera\\_](https://www.academia.edu/2503513/Czech_Destiny_Milan_Kundera_)

For Kundera the Prague Spring was of significance for Europe as a whole because, beyond Eastern Stalinism and Western capitalism, it tried to combine socialism with democracy. Not a mere remake of the 'third way' nor a blueprint for a radiant future, the Czechoslovak heresy was crushed, but the far-reaching significance of the project for the future of the European Left remains. Havel's take, in contrast, was more sober and realistic: restoring basic freedoms was no doubt wonderful, the last time we had them was thirty years ago, and indeed this is considered 'normal' in most civilised European countries:

... if we're going to imagine that a country has placed itself at the center of world history because it wishes to establish freedom of expression—something taken for granted in most of the civilized world—and to check the tyranny of its secret police, in all seriousness we shall become nothing more than self-complacent hacks, laughable in our provincial messianism! Freedom and the rule of law are the most basic preconditions for a normally and soundly functioning societal organism, and should any state attempt to reestablish them after years of their absence it's doing nothing historically momentous but simply trying to remove its own abnormality ... [Havel 1969; translation Tim West<sup>3</sup>]

For some thirty years it seemed that the outcome of the choice between Kundera's somewhat messianic vision vs Havel's lucid realism was fairly obvious to most Czechs. Yet today, half a century later, as communism is long dead and Western 'normalcy' is in crisis, Kundera's plea for the 'Czechoslovak possibility' (československá možnost) [Kundera 1969] acquires perhaps a new resonance.

Another way to highlight the European dimension of the Prague Spring is to interpret it through the prism of the youth rebellions which in 1968 shook the political establishments throughout the continent. There was May 1968 in France, the Polish events of March 1968, Berlin, Belgrade... The common denominator of these movements was the search for alternative models of society with contrasting, confusing, and often contradictory references to socialism: from self-management in the workplace to the Christian-Marxist dialogue or to discussions about the impact of sciences and technology on the evolution of modern societies East and West. And there were not insignificant Czech contributions to all of the above. Karel Kosík's Marxist humanism (influenced by Patočka's phenomenology) and his civilisational pessimism related precisely to the dehumanising role of science and technology; or, on the contrary, Radovan Richta's civilisational optimism based on the 'scientific and technological revolution'.<sup>4</sup> The former proved

<sup>3</sup> The complete text of this translation of Havel [1969] is accessible at: [https://www.academia.edu/2503514/Czech\\_Destiny\\_V%C3%A1clav\\_Havel\\_](https://www.academia.edu/2503514/Czech_Destiny_V%C3%A1clav_Havel_).

<sup>4</sup> Around the year 1968 Western Europe saw the publication of Karel Kosík's *Dialectic of the Concrete* (Dialektika konkrétního) and Radovan Richta's *Civilization at the Crossroads* (Civilizace na rozcestí).

incompatible with the 'normalisation' *Gleichschaltung* of the 1970s, the latter's technocratic faith in the progress of sciences rather easily blended in. Both were considered the most influential Czech thinkers of the late 1960s in Europe and both were thus part of what Jan Patočka had in mind in attempting to frame the Prague Spring reforms in a European context and calling for a dialogue between intellectuals East and West. Patočka himself was much more open to those debates than is usually admitted among experts in Prague. His contribution was a piece entitled 'Intelgence a opozice', a lecture given during the spring in Germany, where he states that 'the position of intellectuals in the East is better ... because they do not consider basic democratic rights as a mere means to an end but as the end in itself'. [Patočka 2006: 244, fn. 271; translation J.R.]

And that indeed proved to be the main contrast between 1968 in Prague (or Warsaw) and Paris (or Berlin). To be sure, there is a whole aspect of 1968 which can be interpreted mainly in terms of generations. There is now even a term for that, 'Youthquake', declared in 2017 Word of the Year by the experts at Oxford Dictionaries. It is defined as 'significant cultural, political, or social change arising from the actions or influence of young people'. The interesting thing about the Prague Spring was that it had indeed involved youth, particularly the student movement which formed its radical wing, but that its driving force was the previous generation, that which experienced (supported or was at the receiving end of) 1945/ 1948 and its aftermath. Antonín J. Liehm elaborated on this concept of political generations precisely in 1968 in the introduction to a splendid volume of his interviews with some of the leading intellectual protagonists of 1968 (from Ludvík Vaculík to Josef Škvorecký, from Eduard Goldstücker to Václav Havel, to mention only a few), among the best guides to the politics of culture of the Prague Spring [Liehm 1990].<sup>5</sup> Many—by no means all—among those who were twenty after the war and had backed the communist takeover in 1948, frustrated and disappointed with the results of a revolution from above, helped in the 1960s to bring about a revolution from below which culminated in 1968.<sup>6</sup>

The generational aspect as much as the political context account for the contrasts and misunderstandings of 1968 between East and West, Prague and Paris. The driving force of the Prague Spring was the aspiration for freedom, whereas in Paris the moment of emancipation combined with the myth of revolution. Milan Kundera described the contrast as follows:

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<sup>5</sup> This book, *Generace*, banned before distribution in 1969, did not appear in Czech until 1990. It was translated into several languages with an afterword by Jean-Paul Sartre, 'The Socialism That Came in from the Cold' (English edition: Liehm, A.J. 1971. *The Politics of Culture*. New York: Grove Press).

<sup>6</sup> Their radicalism in undoing what they had helped to bring about two decades earlier perplexed the non-communists and particularly those belonging to an in-between generational group: cf. *An Almanac of the Year 1956* (republished as Hiršal and Kolář [2005]) with contributions of Josef Škvorecký, Bohumil Hrabal, Emil Juliš, Jiří Kolář, Josef Hiršal, Jan Zábřana, Jiří Kuběna, and Václav Havel.

Paris's May was an explosion of revolutionary lyricism. The Prague Spring was the explosion of post-revolutionary scepticism ... Paris's May was a radical uprising, whereas what had, for many a long year, been leading towards the explosion of the Prague Spring was a popular revolt by moderates. [Kundera 1978: x; translation J.R.]

While Western radicals looked to the Third World, European identity was part of 1968 in Prague. Again in Kundera's words:

Paris's May challenged the basis of what is called European culture and its traditional values. The Prague Spring was a passionate defence of the European cultural tradition in the widest and most tolerant sense of the term (a defence of Christianity just as much as of modern art—both rejected by those in power). We all struggled for the right to maintain that tradition that had been threatened by the anti-western messianism of Russian totalitarianism. [Kundera 1978: x–xi; translation J.R.]

However, the contrast highlighted here should not make us forget the intellectually and politically important convergence between the Eastern and Western 68ers. The latter during the following decade abandoned Marxism and became anti-totalitarian liberals of different shades, and thus more in tune with the 1970s Czech dissidents around common issues concerning human rights, civil society, and the overcoming of the partition of Europe.

Finally, there is another dimension of the spring of 1968 as the 'supreme stage' of reformism in the Soviet bloc and its implications for the divided Europe. Zdeněk Mlynář, one of the architects of the political reforms in 1968 and the youngest member of the politburo, recalled the way Brezhnev and the Soviet leadership had described to Dubček and his colleagues the reasons for the invasion: 'Precisely because the territorial results of the last war are untouchable to us we had to intervene in Czechoslovakia.' The West will not move, so, 'what do you think will be done on your behalf? Comrades Tito, Ceaușescu, Berlinguer will make speeches. Well, and what of it? You are counting on the Communist movement in Western Europe? But that has remained insignificant for the last 50 years.' [Mlynář 1978: 306–307]

That part is familiar enough. Indeed Tito and the Eurocommunists in the West protested and claimed for their benefit to continue the legacy of the Prague Spring as a way to enhance their democratic credentials.

However, the real legacy came back with a vengeance twenty years on. Gorbachev, Mlynář's friend and roommate from the student days, became leader of the Soviet Communist Party and sought inspiration for his perestroika in the Prague Spring of 1968. Asked what was the difference between his reforms and those of Dubček, the spokesman for Gorbachev replied simply: '19 years'. That certainly was not good enough to rehabilitate 'socialism with a human face' in the eyes of sceptical Czechs and Slovaks twenty years on. It is not easy to identify with a defeated project with a price tag in the form of another twenty years in a

post-totalitarian dictatorship. But it did matter for what was unfolding in Moscow and its relationship to its dependencies. Jiří Dienstbier, a prominent Czech journalist from 1968, a dissident turned prisoner turned stoker, became minister of foreign affairs in December of 1989. On his first meeting with Gorbachev he referred to the 1968 hopes crushed by Moscow, to which Gorbachev replied: 'we thought we had been strangling the Prague Spring, but we were actually strangling ourselves' [Dienstbier quoted in Castellano and Jůn 2008: 18].

The Prague Spring was seen as the chance to reform the system. The crushing of it thus prevented reform at the very centre and accounts for its intractable crisis. In other words, the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia prepared the ground for the unravelling of the Soviet system. The contribution of the Prague Spring, even though crushed violently, should not be underestimated.

### **1989 as a continuation of or break with 1968?**

The Velvet Revolution of 1989 was obviously understood as the undoing of the legacy of the 'real socialism' of the Husák era, but it was not framed as a continuation of the 'interrupted revolution' of 1968. To be sure, some side-lined 68ers and a number of Western observers were inclined to point to that continuity with the aspirations of the Prague Spring. But the main protagonists of 1989 in Prague were eager to distance themselves from the 'illusions of 1968'. The aim was no longer the democratisation of socialism but simply democracy. Instead of searching for a 'third way' between capitalism and Soviet-style socialism the goal was the introduction of markets without adjectives: 'the third way leads to the Third World' said Václav Klaus, the promoter of radical free market economic reforms. And the 'return to Europe', translated in foreign policy terms, was no longer about extending the margins of manoeuvre in Central Europe between East and West, but about joining Western ('Euro-Atlantic') institutions as quickly as possible. Václav Havel rather than Alexander Dubček became the president and the embodiment of these goals [Rupnik 2018].

The reasons are understandable: it was not easy in 1989 to identify with a project that crashed tragically and was followed by twenty years of relentless 'normalisation'. All one can add is that 1968 was the last Czech attempt to propose not a blueprint but a vision (deemed utopian or inconsistent afterwards) that transcended the country and concerned Europe as a whole. In contrast, 1989 was the first revolution not to propose a new social project. A revolution without violence and utopias, but also without a strong new idea. It was, indeed, as historian François Furet called it, a 'revolution-restoration', or, to borrow a description from Jürgen Habermas, a 'nachholende Revolution'. The aim was to restore national and popular sovereignty, the rule of law, private property and imitate the Western model. For that reason the Velvet Revolution of 1989 has been considered in Prague since the 1990s an 'anti-1968' and today the commemorations focus on

the tragedy of the invasion of August 1968 rather than the hopes and aspirations of the Spring.

The distancing from the ideas and illusions of 1968 may be understandable. There are, however, two snags to this. First, if your aim is to imitate Western economic and political models you cease to be interesting for the West. And, more importantly: what if you are imitating a model in crisis? In thinking that one through, you may be forgiven for stumbling upon alternative ideas, projects, utopias associated with the Prague Spring of 1968.

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