

The Czechs and their Communism, Past and Present

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One must first know one's past well to be able to reflect on it or adjust to it. Not only is today's Czech Republic lacking the means to get to know its own past well, there is no political or social consensus for it to even start doing so. In fact, a political scientist has observed that if one looks at today's Czech society, "It looks as if Czech communism had never existed."^[1] Contemporary history, including communist history, is marginal in the Czech Republic. It is barely taught in the universities, let alone in high schools, and the activities of the Prague Institute of Contemporary History remains rather modest in scope.

Dealing With the Past and Mastering the Past: Two Examples of a Difficult Exercise

Some of the historical theses developed during the communist era have not really been challenged yet, especially where the 1950s are concerned. A first example of this inability to challenge history is the case concerning one of the most famous sentences written by the regime historian Karel Kaplan. In the summer of 1968, Karel Kaplan wrote, "One fact is particularly important: in Czechoslovakia, the great political show trials started in 1950, at the time where they had elsewhere already reached an end ... [t]hat is why the first court sentences already resulted in more deaths than the trials in all the popular democracies put together."^[2] This sentence was quoted by nearly every book on the subject written since then. This belief became almost mythical, and systematic distortions credited Karel Kaplan with stating that Czechoslovakia (not just the Czechoslovak communists but the whole population) has more suffered from *terror* (not just from political trials) than all the other popular democracies put together for the whole communist period (and not just in 1950).^[3] Ever since the archives opened in former satellite countries, it has become clear that neither the political trials against communists nor the politics of terror as a whole have resulted in more casualties in Czechoslovakia than elsewhere – let alone than in all the other communist countries put together. Yet this theory has not been clearly challenged by Czech historians and is still regularly quoted in works relating to the communist era – albeit mostly by non-Czech historians.^[4]

A second example showing the Czech difficulty in dealing with the communist past is the aborted project to create an institute to document the totalitarian regime. One of the purposes of this proposed law, started in 2001, was to overcome the unwillingness of the archivists. Considering their patent hostility expressed in public statements[5] toward any measure which would favor greater access to archive materials, it was said that the members of Parliament feared that the archivists would “sabotage by any possible means the communication of the files to the public”[6] after opening the Secret Police files. The introduction of this proposed law explicitly refers to the Gauck Institute and the Institute for National Remembrance (IPN), which were similar to institutions in Germany and Poland that were to serve as models. Interestingly, the preamble of the proposed law states: “Any people who is not familiar with its own past is doomed to see it repeat itself. The Parliament of the Czech Republic, aware of the necessity to deal with its communist past, expresses its will to study and to remind the existence of the criminal and reprehensible organizations based on the Czechoslovak Communist Party’s ideology, which aimed at repressing human rights and democratic principles between 1948 and 1989.”

This institute had a two-fold task. The first one was to supervise the research, collection and analysis of data concerning the communist regime. Special attention was to be dedicated to the “analysis of the internal and external factors which made possible the settlement and preservation of the totalitarian regime” (although the term “totalitarian” was never defined). This statement constituted in itself quite a scathing criticism of the historians’ work, since it implicated that this work, *their* work, had not yet been completed. It is therefore not very surprising that they collectively opposed its creation. The institute’s second task was to centralize, manage and open to the public the files of the Secret Police (StB.) All the local depositaries were to transfer their archival funds to this central institution before March 31, 2003. In reality, this project was so hotly debated that the Parliament failed to reach an agreement and it never came into being. The Czech Republic, unlike Germany and Poland, failed to set up a structure capable of managing or dealing with its national collective memory of communism.

Faced with this unwillingness to reopen certain chapters of Czechoslovak history, this problematic relationship to the past can only be explained by this in-itself-problematic past. It is precisely because Czech society has entertained an ambiguous relationship with communism that it has problems dealing today with its communist past. This ambiguity is reflected in the political landscape since 1990, which more than one observer has described as “paradoxical.”[7] On the one hand, an unreformed and proud Communist Party not only still exists, but still receives around 20% of the votes (it is now ahead of the Social Democrats in terms of voters’ preferences for the next elections). On the other hand, the rest of the political elites paid lip service to a rather primitive anti-communism, especially in the 1990s, and for a long time pretended that they would never work together with the communists (although things are actually quite different at the local level). “Neither a hero, nor an executioner,’ but firmly decided to escape this unpleasant collective past,” could have been the slogan of Prime Minister Václav Klaus.

There is indeed an apparent paradox between this haughty surviving symbol of the past – the Communist Party – and the parallel willingness of the Czechs to turn their back on the past. I will solve this paradox by exploring two theses. First, the Czechs define themselves culturally and politically as a democratic nation, but socially and economically as an egalitarian one, which rendered them particularly pervious to the Communist ideal. Second, many associated the communist period with great stability in the Czech standard of living. The quality of life and personal comfort communism ensured, even if modest, was unquestionable, and therefore certain nostalgia for the communist past still exists.

The ambiguity of the expression “dealing with the past” in Czech (*vyrovnávání se s minulostí*) reflects this duality. It refers to either something like an acquittal, or to something like a settlement of accounts. One would then either acquit himself of, or adjust to, his or her own past or, on the contrary, settle his or her accounts with it. On one hand, the individual is somehow guilty – for instance, guilty of having done little or nothing against the regime. On the other hand, he is somehow a victim – either a direct political victim or a victim of the circumstances – of the fate which forced him to live in this country at that time. There is a certain vacillation between anger and shame.

So what describes the current Czech mindset – shame, anger, a mixture of the two, or something else? A tour of the past is necessary in any case. I will show how the Czech communist regime found a solid basis in the country and was able to attract a sizable portion of the population. I will illustrate using two perspectives: an ideological (or at least political) one between 1945 and 1948 – that is, at the time when the post-World War II regime settled down – and an economic one in 1956.

Czechs and Communism: A Glorious Beginning

It is useful to first examine the historical context in which the Czechoslovak Communist Party took its dominant position on the political scene in 1945. As reminded by the Czech-born American political scientist Edward Taborsky, conditions in Czechoslovakia in 1945 were particularly favorable to communism. Czechoslovakia was a highly industrialized country – indeed, it was the least rural of all Moscow’s satellites. Furthermore, the state had traditionally owned part of the business enterprises and there was no hostility from the population toward public intervention in the economy. Therefore, even the private entrepreneurs were used to relying on state support. The Communist Party was a legally formed and powerful party between the two world wars, and a social ideology was firmly established among workers and intellectuals. Indeed, social egalitarianism was a prevailing ideal at the time, and a certain Russophile sentiment (against the “German danger”) was widespread. Last, but important to note, religion exerted a small influence only in two provinces – in Bohemia, and a bit stronger influence in Moravia.[8]

Moreover, a series of factors relating to the settlement of the Second World War quite clearly distinguished Czechoslovakia from its Polish and Hungarian neighbors. First and foremost, Czechoslovakia was considered a victor of the war. In actuality, the Red Army freed Czechoslovakia, and it was not even a disguised occupation -the Red Army left the Czechoslovak territory together with the American forces on December 1, 1945. The Soviet

secret police (the “NKVD”) didn’t behave as if on conquered soil, however, and the country did not suffer deportations of its citizens to the USSR, or massive plundering, looting or raping.[9] It also did not have to pay war reparations; on the contrary, it received some reparations from Germany and Hungary. Lastly, its infrastructure was not dismantled and shipped to the USSR, as in the cases of Poland and Hungary.

Furthermore, the Czech population was not nearly as Russophobic as the populations in Poland and Hungary (even though the Czechs’ alleged Russophilia was exaggerated). More accurately, the few skeptical currents which existed in the Czech culture towards the Soviet Union were not in the least likely to offset the haunting fear of Germany which prevailed at the time. Finally, Czechoslovakia was the only one of the three countries which never had any important territorial conflicts with the USSR (Subcarpathian Ruthenia, which went to the Ukraine in 1945, had never been a historical land of the Bohemian crown and its loss was in no way a tragedy). Quite the opposite was in fact true. Thanks to the Red Army, Czechoslovakia recovered, without any strings attached, the territories it had been deprived of in 1938 and 1939 by Germany, Poland and Hungary (i.e., the Sudetenland, the Tesin region and Southern Slovakia, respectively). To sum up, Czechoslovakia was all the more predisposed to enter the socialist camp in 1945 because of the prevailing traumatic memory of the Munich Agreement, when the Western democracies France and Great Britain abandoned their ally Czechoslovakia to Hitler’s armies. Most importantly, the USSR opposed Czech nationalism on almost no grounds, thus rendering the latter exceptionally compatible with communism (the situation was not as “favorable” in Slovakia but Slovakia didn’t have much to say in the post-war Republic.)

Under these circumstances, it is not really surprising that the Communists largely won the free elections of 1946. The Communist Party polled 38% of the votes in the whole country, but actually won up to 40% in the Czech lands and even 43% in Bohemia. Considering the proportional electoral system, this constituted a really high score and the Czechoslovak Communist Party (the KSC) was by far the most popular political party. This, however, was not enough. Klement Gottwald, the President of the Communist Party and Prime Minister of Czechoslovakia, declared that he wanted the absolute majority of votes at the next elections, scheduled for May 1948.[10] To succeed in this “conquest of 51% of the electorate,” as the slogan went, Gottwald based his political campaign on the pragmatic assumption that Party members would vote for the Party. The detailed results from 1946 showed that the KSC even received approximately two votes per member.[11]

After 1945, all the new “popular democracies” implemented a policy of massive recruitment on Stalin’s orders, the common purpose being to gain the support of the population. But Czechoslovakia distinguished itself in this matter. The doors of its Communist Party were open to all, particularly to all social classes. Restrictions were placed only on so-called “Trotskyites” (without any further definition), collaborators of the Nazi regime imposed on Bohemia and Moravia between 1939 and 1945, and Sudeten Germans, while candidates suspected of “careerism” were to undergo a six-month trial period.[12] With the explicit aim of getting at least three million votes (i.e. approx. 60% of the national vote) at the May 1948 elections, Gottwald ordered at the summer of 1947 to

carry on with the campaign and to recruit up to 1,500,000 members.[13] Surprisingly, after February 1948 and the *coup* which left the Communists alone in power, the campaign sped up. On February 29, 1948, the target was raised to recruit two million members before the May elections.[14] The scores of those newly accepted shareholders of victory rose at a breathtaking speed: the numbers rose from over 147,004 in March 1948 to more than 188,398 in April, rose yet again to more than 235,146 in May, and then increased by more than 175,378 in June. Ten thousand membership cards were issued daily.[15] The principle of free elections was officially discarded on April 5, 1948 with the setting up of a single list,[16] but this apparently had little or no influence on the recruiting policy.

At the end of 1948, the KSC reached a pinnacle in the history of Communism, if not in the history of political parties, in achieving two and half million party members from a total population of eleven million. This represented an incredible 23% of the total population, or one out of every three adults. In fact, because the members were mainly concentrated in the Czech lands, it actually represented 49.2% of the active Czech population.[17] The Czechoslovak Communist Party thus had twice as many members as the total population in Hungary, and almost four times as many members as in Poland's total population.[18]

The Middle Class Integration Strategy

At this stage in the analysis, two questions come to mind. Were people forced to enter the Party, or did they join voluntarily? Secondly, why did the KSC pursue its recruitment policy after February 1948, in direct contradiction to Stalin's doctrine that "the class struggle intensifies with the building of socialism?"

The answer to the first question can be found in the reaction of an interesting group of the population to the KSC recruitment campaign between 1945 and 1948 – the so-called "employees." In the Czechoslovak case, this category had a very wide meaning, since it included professions such as professors, physicians, lawyers, engineers, technical workers, teachers, nurses, and any profession where a person was in an employer's (particularly the State's) pay. This group therefore included most of the "intelligentsia." In 1946, this group was the least represented in the KSC. It represented 9.2% of all party members, although it represented 16.7% of the active population.[19] In February of 1948, despite Gottwald's repeated efforts to seduce the "bourgeoisie,"[20] the percentage of "employee" Party members had sunk to 5.6%.

The situation started to change only after February 1948. The middle class indeed became the most zealous subscribers to the Communist Party between February and December 1948. First and foremost were the State employees – with 6.3 times more entries to the Party between February and June than before February, and 8.7 times more entries between June and December. Next were the regional and local public administration employees.[21] This massive entry brought their representation in the Party practically up to a level proportionate to their weight in society.

Their integration strategy was obvious. Since the Communist Party was meant to rule over the State after the *coup* of February 1948, the middle class made its own provision for the future by taking the side of the victors as long as there was still time. Indeed, they didn't have much of a choice if they wanted to avoid being ostracized by the new regime. But direct coercion cases seem to have been relatively sparse,[22] which confirms the hypothesis that the public's acceptance of the Communist Party was a partly forced but also partly voluntary "compromise." It might be useful here to remind that the Communist Party's pressure was at least as strong in Poland and Hungary in inciting the people to become members, but that it never succeeded in convincing those much more reticent populations. What could be called a certain Czech "opportunism" (the Slovak numbers remaining very modest) reveals a different adaptation strategy. In this strategy, the Czech public didn't differ in any way from its political elites. Both President Benes and the National Assembly, although democratically elected, surrendered to the Communists without the faintest show of resistance. Only nine representatives of the democratic camp renounced their parliamentary seats between February 25 and March 10, 1948, when the Parliament met for the first time since the Communists took over. During this meeting, Gottwald was greeted with loud applause and a standing ovation from the members of Parliament, and his speech received 230 votes in favor of his programs and 0 votes against.[23]

Let us not forget that if the Communists failed to bump up against any ideological obstacles on their road to power, it is in part thanks to the Democrats, who let themselves be hoaxed by the promise of a "socialist democracy" utopia. As Minister of Commerce Hubert Ripka put it, "We want to ... create a new social order, which means to radically change the economic structure according to socialist principles. We are perpetuating the constructive energy and the creative spirit of our people because it is a way to offer a real hope that our political democracy, which showed its value under the First Republic, will be sustained and strengthened by the economic and social democracy. ... I am convinced that we will succeed within a few years to build an efficient socialist democracy in Central Europe." [24] Between the "democratic socialism" of the Communists and the "socialist democracy" of the Democrats, the country was decidedly – and dangerously – sliding down the slope of socialism.

As for the potential recalcitrants who would possibly have voted for democracy without socialism, the Democrats came to a direct understanding with the Communists to exclude them from the political game. The right-wing political parties were nothing short of ousted in the name of their alleged collaboration with the Nazis. Three basic principles were adopted before the May 1946 elections by all authorized government parties: 1) no party may criticize the government's policies; 2) no party may question the government's pro-Soviet orientation; and 3) all parties shall make publicly clear that they intend to pursue the National Front policy after the elections.[25] If all political parties belonged to the government, all intended to remain in it after the elections, and all agreed to refrain from any criticism of its policies, one might as well wonder what the sense of these elections was. If the Communists undermined democracy, the Democrats definitely didn't adequately stand up to it either.

Coming back to the end of 1948, if such a high proportion of the adult population was enrolled in the Communist Party, and if we take into account the 150,000 or so persons who are said to have been informers of the Secret Police (StB) between 1948 and 1968, [26] we must conclude that the Communists concentrated an impressive amount of power in their hands. The system sustained this so-called “popular support,” meaning that when one became a Party member, one was under a considerable amount of pressure to support its policies. All members had to attend demonstrations, “voluntary” socialist brigades, and militant meetings, or even “offer” to work extra hours for causes like the Korean War or the fight against American barbarism.[27] Fear, opportunism and conviction were the mixed feelings which constituted the cement of a finely supervised Communist “popular enthusiasm.” Moreover, just as it became very difficult to get into the Party in the 1950s, it was just as hard to get out of it (unless one was purposefully excluded from it). Despite the purges which affected the KSC like all other Communist Parties, its membership rate remained far higher than those of any other “popular democracies.”[28] In 1962, Czechoslovakia retained the world’s highest percentage of Party members, with 17.8% of its adult population enrolled in the party, compared to 7.6% in Poland and 7.1% in Hungary.[29]

The way the KSC membership was constructed between 1945 and 1948 practically doomed its stability, owing to the fact that the regime structures were not challenged either from “above” (as was the case in the 1960s, a process which eventually led to the 1968 Prague Spring) or from serious social pressure, as in 1989. The case of the “employees” illustrates the ambivalence of Czech society toward communism. Surely none of them supported the dictatorship, but very few were willing to resort to violence or other risky means to challenge a regime which did offer serious social and ideological benefits.

The “Czechoslovak Path to Socialism”

Let us now turn to our second question. Why did the KSC pursue its recruitment policy after February 1948, even though Stalinism famously disregarded popular support in favor of a preventive terror policy? Again, my point here is to emphasize the extent to which communism was rooted in Czech society.

The KSC leaders intended from 1945 onwards to promote a form of socialism which would be specifically Czechoslovak, based on a genuine popular support. This objective, confirmed by all testimonies, was widely shared by the KSC’s core members. The “Czechoslovak path to socialism” was a path which appreciably differed from the Soviet form of communism in its inclusion of the local democratic tradition. Even though they were sincere advocates of this customized path to socialism, Klement Gottwald, Rudolf Slánský (respectively the President and Secretary General of the Party) and other Communist leaders were entirely devoted to Stalin. As long as Stalin, who had initiated this policy,[30] was backing it up or at least tolerating it, the KSC generated the support of the great majority of Czech intellectuals and of a sizable part of the population. From the moment Stalin switched tactics, which was roughly at the time when Central Europe

became firmly anchored in the Eastern bloc, the “Czech experience” came slowly to an end. Towards the end of the year 1948, even the Czech recruitment policy left the stage for a more classical “search for the enemy.”

The major part of reformist (Communist) historiography insists on sympathetically depicting Gottwald’s supposed issues of conscience.[31] He is said to have drowned his sorrows in alcohol after realizing that he had no other choice but to sacrifice his country’s hope in his project linking democracy and socialism. This alleged despair of Gottwald’s is questionable for a few reasons. For one, Gottwald was already an alcoholic long before this episode, and secondly, no one forced him to sign the disgraceful death warrants of his opponents as well as of his former colleagues. It is true, however, that many people who believed in and supported communism were disappointed. They reminded themselves of the actions of the communist leaders in 1968 – the Prague Spring did not come out of the blue. The leaders maintained it only recaptured the long heritage of Czech communism in the perspective of a so-called “third way,” of a democratic socialism or, as it was named at the time, of a “socialism with a human face.” A good part of the Czech population again showed massive support for the renewal of the special relationship between Czech culture and communism, even though this popular support could not tell the difference between the advocates of simple liberalization of the regime from the true believers in a “third way.”

Now that I have examined the specific roots of Communism in Czech society, I shall deal with the question of the standard of living under Communism. I will use a corpus of archive materials from the year 1956 to illustrate. I will not go into as much detail on the economic aspects of this part of Czech history, because statistics about standards of living are somehow less appealing than discussions on ideology and on the cultural identity of a nation. I do, however, consider the economic aspect of Czech history to be even more important than the ideological perspective.

The Economic Background of Political Docility

In 1956, the Czechs and Slovaks watched their Polish and Hungarian neighbors rebel against the Communist regime, but showed no eagerness to join them. This apparent docility is first and foremost a political translation of a relatively high standard of living. People were surely not in favor of the Communist regime;[32] but they were just as surely pacified by relatively satisfying conditions of life.

After World War II, Czechoslovakia was one of the ten richest countries in the world. Its high industrial potential had not been very damaged by the war, and if it did suffer under Soviet rule between 1948 and 1953, the situation steadily improved. American diplomats also noticed the extent to which the regime was willing to compromise with the population to maintain its standard of living. After 1953, the regime increased the tempo of price reductions, maintained salary raises and showed other efforts to keep shops well supplied.[33] The economic expert from the French embassy confirmed a positive economic outlook for Czechoslovakia: shops had been “better and better supplied” since 1955, the quality of goods was “improving”, employees’ birthdays and namedays were

celebrated with wine and pastries at work, the population was better-groomed, automobile traffic had densified to the point of creating a few traffic-jams at the end of week-ends, and the population had some meager savings. Even before the 1956 Hungarian revolution and Czechoslovakia's show of passivity, he concluded: "These various aspects tend to prove that the population is not 'unhappy.'"[34]

Czechoslovakia's relatively privileged economic situation was mentioned a good hundred times by the citizens themselves in the Secret Police's accounts of the year 1956, as an explaining factor of the prevailing "calm" in their country. If the standard of living was much higher in Czechoslovakia than in Poland or Hungary, was it worth the fight? A so-called "kulak" believed that this regime was "bad" but that it was not worth a fight similar to the one that took place in Hungary. A priest preferred a "bit of repression" to "glory on corpses" in the streets and in the fields. A small private farmer commented that freedom of expression meant nothing for him if it meant he wouldn't have anything to eat anymore. One of his friends claimed the Czechoslovaks had a much higher standard of living than the Poles and the Hungarians, and that they had more culture as well, which is why the situation was so different in their country.[35]

Although I will not take the time to study the history of the whole Communist regime through 1989, it would not be difficult to show that even after 1968, even in the morose atmosphere of the "normalization" regime, the standard of living was always kept at a decent level. Life was perhaps not very glorious, but for the people who didn't get involved in politics, it was not difficult and it was full of certainties. As a consequence, the dissidents were not very numerous and they were completely isolated from the rest of society, which differed greatly from the situation faced by dissidents in Poland. The memories of that time are also not so bad, if one takes into account the number of films or TV serials dating from the 1970s and 1980s which are currently being rebroadcast. A number of showmen, as well as movie and music stars, began their career under the Communists and remain popular today.[36]

Solving the Paradox

Let us now go back to our starting paradox: why are the Czechs, who were the most "communist" of all the nations that submitted to the Soviet diktat, apparently the most anti-communist since 1989? The explanation lies in the fact that the post-1989 anti-communism was mainly a façade. This has been made quite clear by the French sociologist Françoise Mayer. Mayer shows that the political elites who drafted and voted in the laws were mainly trying to earn a solid democratic reputation for themselves.[37] The privileged form of Czech nationalism has always been, at least since the twentieth century, the feeling that the Czechs are more cultivated and more democratic than their Central European neighbors. It was true under Masaryk, it was true under the Communists and it remained true under Prime Minister Václav Klaus in the 1990s, when he advocated a rather individualistic policy and pleaded for an earlier entry of the Czech Republic into the European Union. Under these circumstances, it was very easy for the Czechs to convince themselves that the Czech nation was the most democratic because the break with the Communist regime had been the most peremptory. As Françoise Mayer

puts it, the past was “most often convened in the shape of innuendo and denunciation, much more rarely in the aim to reflect on and understand what the Communist regime had truly meant.”[38]

Practically all the great episodes of managing of the communist past testify to a firm and swift will to condemn the old regime and its champions on the matter of principles. Conversely, these examples also point to a slowness and carefulness approaching on total idleness when it came to establishing concrete and personal responsibilities. Let us review some of them.

First was the law 119/1990, which rehabilitated by principle all citizens who were condemned as “anti-democratic.” This law exonerated also by principle certain groups of the population, mainly farmers and former Democrats, which had been particularly oppressed under the preceding regime.[39] Ninety-nine percent of the people were thus rehabilitated without even having to make a request at a tribunal. In a way, this is of course very positive, but one can also remark that it is convenient to show a large number of “victims” without having to clarify in any way how much political oppression they faced. In concrete terms, it is not known whether the judgments were death penalties, long term sentences or simple fines.

A second example, a 1993 law which designated the former Communist regime as globally “illegal” and “criminal,” touches on the regime itself and not just on the victims. Certain intellectuals, notably Václav Zák, saw this law as the application of a *collective guilt* on the former members of the KSC.[40]

The “purification” laws of 1991 and 1992 are our third, very controversial example of the hesitancy to take responsibility for the Czech communist past. Again, a group of citizens was collectively designated as guilty. Collaborators of the StB, militia, police and secret police starting at a local executive level of the Communist party, were banned for five years from working in certain public administrative agencies. These public departments included the army, the defense and other ministries, the secret services, the President’s office, the Supreme Court, the State radio and television services, the national press agency (CTK), public enterprises, state railways, and more. The proof of guilt or innocence was to be found in the State archives, among other records in the Secret Police files.

The critics of this law are so numerous that they could not all be quoted here. Petr Uhl stated that the law was a form of “unacceptable judiciary barbarism which only betrays a thirst for revenge.”[41] In response to the fact that this law did not apply to the president of Parliament, the MP Pavel Dostál commented that Alexander Dubcek was allowed to preside over the Parliament but couldn’t run a local post-office.[42] The Communists were naturally outraged and claimed that the law went “against all international settlements on human rights.” The Communists were equally outraged by the activities of MP Jan Sokol, who had voted for the law, but evidence from a Viennese canteen supposedly documented the espionage activity of the few MPs positively “purged.”[43] The World Labour Organization, the Council of Europe and the European Parliament criticized these laws and explicitly recommended to abrogate them. President Havel, who

had signed the law, publicly regretted it. No one has yet to conclusively analyze the mark that these laws left on Czech society. The one thing that remains for certain is that many of those who were “purified” went to court to defend themselves and usually won their cases. The former dignitaries, however, most of whom were the intended targets of the law, did not bother to petition for a job in public office and spared themselves any harmful publicity.

The last example is not a law, but aptly symbolizes the poisonous atmosphere of the 1990’s when it came to dealing with the Communist past. The Cibulka List^[44] was allegedly a list of former Secret Police (StB) agents made public by Petr Cibulka, a former dissident and fanatical anti-communist.^[45] How Cibulka got access to the list is unknown. No executive or legislative office gave him any authority to publish it, and thus it had no official status. Nevertheless, this did not prevent it from creating a major social uproar. What is truly remarkable about the list is that it fails to give any details about the nature or duration of the alleged collaborations with the Secret Police. It features only the names, dates of birth and code names used by the alleged agents. The list did, however, serve up approximately 160,000 citizens supposedly “compromised” for public consumption. Many of those whose names or whose relatives’ names are listed deny having had anything to do with the Secret Police.^[46] This was possible, as some StB professionals tended to purposely exaggerate the number of “agents” they had in their employ in order to satisfy their superiors.^[47] Rumors flew concerning the circumstances surrounding the list. It was uncertain who made the list and how, and what the possible manipulations of the StB were around and after 1989, not to mention how Cibulka got hold of the list.

Outside of those “technical” considerations, the timeliness of such a publication was largely questioned on a moral level. Many of those who had been forced to collaborate under threat, sometimes while doing their best not to endanger anyone, found it difficult, seeing their name on the list, to take it philosophically or at least with a certain detachment. If the degrees of personal tragedy can vary, an example which caught the public’s attention was that of the novelist Zdena Salivarová. Her husband, Josef Skvorecký, described in one of the most touching novels of the post-communist era the ordeal she went through.^[48] She sued the Ministry of Interior and won her trial but this victory didn’t erase the years of suffering and disgrace she went through.

In 2002, an official version of the list was made public for the first time by the Ministry of Interior. It is extraordinary that after all the time that had past, and after all the scandals and controversies which had followed the first list, that the second list failed to give any additional details on the persons’ alleged collaborations. The second list still does not describe any details besides the name, the date of birth and the code name of the alleged agents. On the other hand, more than half the names of the alleged conspirators disappeared from the list without explanation. The press also reported a number of preposterous cases. For instance, a notorious agent who was so unconcerned with disguising his activities that he wrote a novel describing them is not on the list.^[49] On

the other hand, certain present-day spies of the Czech Republic have been mistakenly included in the second list.[50] In short, the archives of the Secret Polices have yet to be rigorously managed.

The Deeds Are More Telling Than the Discourse

The wave of massive indictments against particular individuals has not come yet either. At the end of 2001, the Bureau of Investigation against the Crimes of Communism, which was created in 1991, recommended the examination of only 71 persons. Out of these 71 persons, 51 were indicted, a mere nine were sentenced, and only a few were actually imprisoned. The longest sentence was seven years. In addition, 64 were still being processed at the time. In the time that has passed, the death of many witnesses and even the unwillingness of certain judges have proven to be considerable obstacles. An example is the case of the judge Radomíra Veselá, which raised much interest. Judge Veselá was a member of the KSC until 1990, and displayed a surprising lack of firmness when it came to holding Alois Grebeníček's trial. Alois Grebeníček was the father of Miroslav Grebeníček, the President of today's Communist Party. This trial was put off multiple times, after Grebeníček, one of his co-defendants and even his lawyer complained about "health problems." [51] Thanks to this "strategy" and the lost years which ensued, Grebeníček senior died before his trial ever began.

If some judges' unwillingness is patent and established, the same can certainly be said about some archivists. The first law which offered a Czech citizen the possibility to consult her StB file, if she had one, was first passed in 1996. The opportunity for a person to consult someone else's file was first granted in 2002. In both cases, the archivists made their opposition to this policy known. This reticence might account for the numerous administrative "mistakes" reported in the press, particularly the official refusals to grant file access on the pretext that a file did not exist, an unfortunate excuse when the person happened to have had access to it on a previous occasion.

Worse yet are other attitudes toward opening of the archives. In the spring of 2002, I conducted an interview with the Director of the Ministry of Interior Archives, Jan Frolík, who has the StB archives under his command. He strongly disagreed with opening up the StB archives and expressed his deepest skepticism that this could help historians in any way proceed with their work. According to him, historians should concentrate on "significant events" rather than "revel in the study of other people's misery." In his eyes, microhistory is not a valid methodological approach. Historians should concentrate on oral history and collect spoken evidence rather than study people's files. He sustained the opinion that the archives opened in Eastern Germany hadn't resulted in any major historical work. All in all, his hostility might even be directed to the very notion of historical work: at the end of the interview he confessed that he believed it was too early to write the history of Communist Czechoslovakia, that the current research works were useless and that he deemed it necessary to wait for another couple of decades before the "passion settled down."

Conclusion

Some observers have remarked that the return to democracy in 1990 had to find an expression in the formal opening of the archives of the former communist regime. I think that in the Czech Republic, and probably the other former satellites, this moral obligation did not coincide with the need to understand and accept the past, in the sense of a true *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* of Communism. To understand and to accept the past it would have been, and still is, necessary to study and to support with documentary evidence the way in which the Czech population either “compromised itself with”, or “let itself be compromised by” or “invested itself in” or “purposely abstracted from resisting to” the Communist regime. The only real way of dealing with the past was to strongly condemn the old regime and to draw a thick line between the present and the past, so as to not have to deal with it anymore.[52]

In my opinion, this policy only demonstrated that democracy does not consist of paying lip service, but consists of a series of concrete actions. To come back to the Czech expression of “dealing with the past” (“vyrovnávání se s minulostí”), the thesaurus refers to the words “payment” and “reimbursement” but as well to “liberation” when it comes to “acquittal” and “settling accounts.” Must a person acquit oneself of or settle his accounts with the past to be able to liberate himself from it? An adequate and systematic policy of dealing with the past would definitely and positively assist with such an endeavor.

Notes:

1. Marcin Frybes, as quoted by Françoise Mayer, *Les Tchèques et leur communisme* (Czechs and Their Communism), Paris, EHESS, 2003, p. 11.

2. See Karel Kaplan, “Zamyslení nad politickými procesy” (Reflections on the Political Trials), *Nová mysl*, (7), 1968, p. 915.

3. See Muriel Blaive, “Le régime de terreur tchécoslovaque” (The Czechoslovak Terror Regime) in *L’année 1956 en Tchécoslovaquie* (The Year 1956 in Czechoslovakia), Paris, EHESS (PhD thesis), p. 236-259.

4. See for instance Patrick Michel (ed), *Europe centrale: la mélancolie du réel*, Paris, CERI/Autrement, 2004, p. 7.

5. See for instance Antonín Slavíček’s address at the General Assembly of the Historical Club, “Institut pro dokumentaci totality” (The Institute for Documenting the Totalitarian Regime), Prague, 6 September 2001, www.phil.muni.cz/hist/sdruzenihistoriku/forum.htm.

6. See Jaroslav Spurný, “Archivy StB se otevírají” (The Secret Police Archives are Being Opened), *Respekt*, 11 March 2002, p. 4.

7. See for instance Jacques Rupnik, “Politika vyrovnávání s komunistickou minulostí, Česká zkušenost” (The Policy of Dealing with the Communist Past, The Czech Experience), *Tr@nsit-Virtuelles Forum*, Nr. 22/2002. Rupnik even speaks of a double paradox. The first paradox is that the “decommunization” policy has supposedly not gone as far anywhere else as in the Czech Republic, even though it is the only country where the Communist Party is not only present, but unreformed and yet still relatively popular. The second paradox is, according to Rupnik, that even though the historical discipline has been subjected to the harshest purges of the region, Czechs carefully avoid discussing the specific place of Communism in their recent history and politics.

8. Edward Taborsky, *Communism in Czechoslovakia 1948-1960*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1981, p. viii.

9. At least some cases were reported, however, especially in Moravia under General Malinowski’s command.

10. Klement Gottwald, *O politice komunistické strany Československa v dnešní situaci* (On the Policy of the Czechoslovak Communist Party in the Present Day Situation), Prague, ÚV KSC, 1945, p. 16.

11. Prior to the elections, approximately 20% of the Czech electorate was members of the KSC (1,124,902 members for 5,622,079 electors), and the Party polled approximately 40% of the votes. See *Archives of the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party*, Fond 100/4, sv.5, aj.26, listu 1-106, p. 40.

12. Idem, p. 19.

13. See Jiri Manak, *Komunisté na pochodu k moci* (The Communists on the Road to Power), Prague, Studie ÚSD, 1995, p. 24.

14. Idem, p. 47.

15. See *Archives of the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party*, Fond 100/4, sv.6, aj.29, l.33, p. 93.

16. See Jiri Slama, Karel Kaplan, *Parlamentní volby v Československu v letech 1935, 1946 a 1948* (Parliamentary Elections in Czechoslovakia in 1935, 1946 and 1948), Prague, FSÚ, 1991, p. 67.

17. See Jiri Manak, p. 57.

18. They were 1 200 000 Party members in Hungary in 1948 for a total population of nine millions, i.e. a proportion of 13.33% and 1 420 000 Party members in Poland for a total population of twenty-five million, i.e. a proportion of 5.68%. See Branko Lazitch, *Les partis communistes d'Europe 1919-1955* (The European Communist Parties 1945-1955), Paris, Les Îles d'Or, 1956, p. 88 and p. 95.

19. See Jiri Manak, p. 26.

20. See for instance his speech of 3 May 1946 at a public meeting of the KSC for the private sector employees: Klement Gottwald, *Spisy XIII 1946-1947* (Complete works, Volume XIII 1946-1947), Prague, SNPL, 1957, p. 37.

21. Idem, p. 54.

22. See Jiri Manak, p. 54.

23. See *Tesnopisecké zprávy o schůzích Národního shromáždění republiky Československé Schůze 80-96 Od 29. října 1947 do 11. března 1948* (Shorthand Accounts of the National Assembly of the Czechoslovak Republic Meetings From October 29, 1947 to March 11, 1948). Prague, 1948, in particular Meeting n° 94, p. 3 and Meeting n° 95, p. 2-3.

24. As quoted by Gustav Beuer, *New Czechoslovakia and Her Historical Background*, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1947, p. 41. He made this interview with Ripka in 1945 or 1946.

25. See *Lidová demokracie*, 26 March 1946, p. 1.

26. See Frantisek Koudelka, *Státní bezpečnost 1954-1968 Základní údaje* (The State Secret Police 1954-1968 Basic Figures), Prague, ÚSD, 1993, p. 68.

27. See for instance Rosemary Kavan, *Freedom at a Price: An Englishwoman's Life in Czechoslovakia*, London, Verso, 1985, p. 68.

28. In 1954, for instance, the Polish Party reckoned 1,296,938 members while the KSC, for a total population inferior by 50%, reckoned 1,489,234 members. See Branko Lazitch, *Les partis communistes d'Europe 1919-1955* (The European Communist Parties 1919-1955), p. 96 and p. 110.

29. See Jan F. Triska, "Czechoslovakia and the World Communist System", in Miloslav Jr. Rechcigl (ed), *Czechoslovakia Past and Present I*, The Hague, Mouton, 1968, p. 376. Due to the extreme difficulty, to obtaining access to reliable sources, the membership figures mentioned above are possibly not completely accurate. Nevertheless they give us a sufficient estimate for us to be able to establish a comparative pattern.

30. Stalin formulated the concept of the “national specific path to socialism” during the British MPs’ visit to Moscow in the summer of 1946. Gottwald’s first reference to this notion is dated October 4, 1946 in his speech “On our Czechoslovak Path to Socialism.” See Klement Gottwald, “O naší československé cestě k socialismu“, *Spisy XIII 1946-47* (Complete Works 1946-1947), Prague, SNPL, 1957, p. 230-231.

31. See for instance Josef Smrkovský, “Experiences of the Past and of the Present“, *Rudé právo*, 9 October 1964, as quoted in *Czechoslovak Press Survey*, n° 1554 (237, 238), October 20, 1964, p. 5 ; Jirí Pelikán, *The Czechoslovak Political Trials*, London, MacDonald, 1971, p. 16 ; Pierre Daix, *Prague au coeur* (Prague at Heart), Paris, Julliard, 1968, p. 86-87; or Karel Kaplan, *Dans les archives du Comité Central* (In the Archives of the Central Committee), Paris, Albin Michel, 1978, p. 57.

32. I even calculated that approximately two-thirds of them hoped or expected its imminent collapse in 1956.

33. See General Records of the Department of State, 1955-59, File 749.00/10-156, Box 3300, Report from the American Embassy in Prague, 13 December 1956.

34. Archives of the French Embassy in Prague, Box 357, File 29b, 30, “Evolution de l’économie tchécoslovaque au cours de l’année 1955” (Development of the Czechoslovak Economy During 1955), 21 September 1956, p. 33-34.

35. See Archives of the Czechoslovak Federal Ministry of Interior as deposited in the archives of the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Budapest. XXXII – 16 I (2), XXXII – 16 II (3), XXXII – 16 III (4) and XXXII – 16 IV (5). For a discussion of these archives documents and their meaning, see Muriel Blaive, “La police politique communiste en action: les Tchécoslovaques et la révolution hongroise de 1956” (The Communist Political Police in Action: The Czechoslovaks and the Hungarian Revolution of 1956), *Revue d’histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 49-2, avril-juin 2002.

36. See Françoise Mayer, p. 266.

37. Idem, p. 15.

38. Idem, p. 12.

39. See Frantisek Gebauer, “Základní zásady zákona o soudní rehabilitaci č. 119/1990 Sb.” (The Main Provisions of the Judicial Rehabilitation Law No. 119/1990), in Frantisek Gebauer, Karel Kaplan, Frantisek Koudelka, Rudolf Vyhnálek (eds), *Soudní perzekuce politické povahy v Československu 1948-1989* (The Judicial Persecutions of a Political Nature in Czechoslovakia 1948-1989), Prague, ÚSD, 1993, p. 54.

40. See Václav Zák, “Kdo kontroluje Ústavní soud?” (Who is Exerting Control over the Constitutional Court ?), *Politologická revue*, 1 (July 1997), p. 131.

41. See Jan Brabec, Jaroslav Spurný, “‘Lustrace’: pro a proti” (The “Purification”: For or Against), *Respekt*, 4 November 1991, p. 6.

42. Idem, p. 6.

43. Idem, p. 6.

44. See *Rudé krávo*, 2, (13), 1992, *Rudé krávo*, 2, (14), 1992, *Rudé krávo*, 2, (15), 1992, *Rudé krávo*, 2, (32), 1992, *Rudé krávo*, 2, (33), 1992 and *Rudé krávo*, 2, (34), 1992. A total of 160,261 citizens were named.

45. See this book of interviews with the suggestive title: Petr Cibulka, *Odpověď vládnoucímu komunistickému dobytku* (Answer to the Communist Ruling Cattle), Praha, Votobia, 1999. His vision of his country’s Communist past turned into a pathological fear of a “Bolshevik conspiracy” after 1989, which would have spared neither his closest associates nor President Havel.

46. See the collection of testimonies from approx. a hundred persons who felt unjustly ostracized by this list, be it that they claim not to have signed any engagement with the StB or that their signature was extorted under threat: Zdena Salivarová -Skvorecká (ed), *Osocení. Pravdivé příběhy lidí z „Cibulkova seznamu“* (The denigration. The true story of the people on the “Cibulka list”), Brno, Host, 2000 (1st edition 1993.)

47. See Frantisek Koudelka, p. 48. It is not known, however, how many of those “exaggerations” did occur.

48. See Josef Skvorecký, *Two Murders in my Double Life*, Toronto, Key Porter Books, 1999.

49. See Jaroslav Spurný, “ Proc schovali Marák“ (Why Did They Spare Marák), *Respekt*, 24 March 2003, p.5.

50. See *Respekt*, 7 April 2003, p. 24.

51. See Erik Tabary, “ Disident s StB“ (The dissident from the StB), *Respekt*, 7 July 1999, p. 5.

52. Françoise Mayer, p. 10.

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