

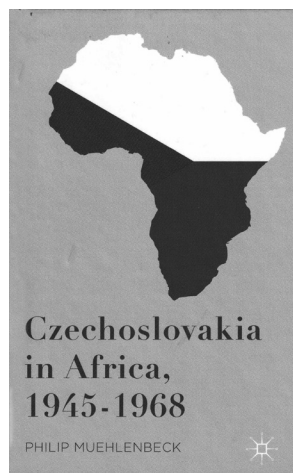


On Asymmetries of Scholarship and the Subalternity of Scholars from East-Central Europe

The Case of Philip Muehlenbeck's *Czechoslovakia in Africa*

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MUEHLENBECK, Philip:

Czechoslovakia in Africa, 1945–1968.

Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan 2016, xii + 271 pages,
ISBN 978-1-137-56144-2.

In 2016, the American scholar Philip Muehlenbeck published his book entitled *Czechoslovakia in Africa, 1945–1968*. A 283-page book covering an under-researched topic, coming at a timely moment. The field of research concerning relations between the Central and Eastern European socialist countries and the so-called “Third World” was developing fast, offering a new contextualization of the state socialist countries in global history. Muehlenbeck’s book applied the so-called junior actor theory previously developed by such scholars as Tony Smith or Piero Gleijeses.¹ According to this approach, the socialist countries

¹ SMITH, Tony: New Bottles for New Wine: A Pericentric Framework for the Study of the Cold War. In: *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (2000), pp. 567–591; GLEIJESES, Piero: *Conflicting*

were pursuing their own interests and policies to a much greater extent rather than being just puppets of the almighty Soviet Union. In fact, it was often the “satellites” who pulled the strings in the hands of the puppet master and by their course of action drew him into a conflict. In this regard, *Czechoslovakia in Africa* was considered a timely and very welcome contribution to the field; after all, the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, of whose activities we had heard little until then, was a very agile actor across Africa. It is no surprise, then, that the book was well received by reviewers.

Not that it was seen as flawless. The most criticized aspect of *Czechoslovakia in Africa* proved to be its structure; the division of African states into two groups – conservative and radical regimes – was challenged by Sergey Mazov,² Alanna O'Malley,³ Sue Onslow.⁴ But otherwise, it was praised as a fascinating unknown history filled with revelations, backed by thorough and respectable research in Czech archives and with a sizeable list of secondary literature.⁵

Why even bother doing another review now, eight years after the book was published? The main reason why we should return to Muehlenbeck's book and examine it once more is not to repeat the already stated arguments nor to write another laudation. One fact that slipped most reviews (apart from one, written in Czech)⁶ is that the “extensive research in Czech archives” was to large extent not original. This has been rumoured in the Czech academic environment ever since the book came out, but until now, nobody has actually crosschecked all the book's citations and references.

A decade before Muehlenbeck, Czech historian Petr Zídek published a book entitled *Československo a francouzská Afrika 1948–1968* [Czechoslovakia and

Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959–1976. Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press 2002.

² Review by Sergei Mazov. In: *H-Diplo: H-Net Network on Diplomatic History and International Affairs* [online], Vol. 18, No. 19 (2017), pp. 8–12. H-Diplo Roundtable XVIII, 19 on Czechoslovakia in Africa, 1945–1968, 20. 03. 2017. [Accessed 2024-01-15.] Available at: <https://networks.h-net.org/node/28443/discussions/172079/h-diplo-roundtable-xviii-19-czechoslovakia-africa-1945-1968>.

³ Review by Alanna O'Malley. In: *Ibidem* [online], pp. 13–15.

⁴ ONSLOW, Sue: [Untitled review]. In: *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (2016), pp. 583–585.

⁵ Review by Maxim Matusевич. In: *H-Diplo* [online], Vol. 18, No. 19 (2017), pp. 5–7. H-Diplo Roundtable XVIII, 19 on Czechoslovakia in Africa, 1945–1968, 20. 03. 2017. [Accessed 2024-01-15.] Available at: <https://networks.h-net.org/node/28443/discussions/172079/h-diplo-roundtable-xviii-19-czechoslovakia-africa-1945-1968>; LARON, Guy: [Untitled review]. In: *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (2017), pp. 258–259; URBÁŇSKI, Filip: [Untitled review]. In: *Stosunki Międzynarodowe / International Relations*, Vol. 53, No. 3 (2017), pp. 212–217.

⁶ HULEC, Otakar: [Untitled review]. In: *Český časopis historický*, Vol. 114, No. 2 (2016), pp. 512–514.

French Africa, 1948–1968], followed by two more books, *Československo a subsaharská Afrika v letech 1948–1989* [Czechoslovakia and Sub-Saharan Africa, 1948–1989] and *Československo a Blízký východ v letech 1948–1989* [Czechoslovakia and the Middle East, 1948–1989], co-authored with another Czech scholar, Karel Sieber. The authors also published several journal articles on the subject.⁷ These works became the ground on which Muehlenbeck built his book. Muehlenbeck recognizes Petr Zídek's formative impact in his acknowledgments and points out the numerous references to these works – even though he does not mention Sieber, misspells Zídek's name consistently as “Zidek” and even uses a wrong first name to refer to him (p. 37). The formulation of the acknowledgement, however, seems to suggest that the Czech texts served merely as an inspiration and obscures the true nature of the relationship to them.

The two books by Zídek and Sieber and one book and one journal article by Zídek alone are referred to one hundred and sixty-eight times in *Czechoslovakia in Africa*. The extent is definitely curious – but it is no crime. But that is not all. Out of one hundred and twenty-five references to Czech archival sources, there is not a single one that has not been previously referred to in one of Zídek and Sieber's books. And not for the lack of sources – there are thousands of documents that Muehlenbeck could have used, but he only chose the very same ones as the duo of Czech authors. And not only does he draw from the same documents – he extracts the exact same information from them. In many cases, he even uses the very same quotes to demonstrate the very same thing – without referring to anything but the documents. Just a few examples: The judgement of the Senegalese African Independence Party (*Parti Africain de l'Indépendance*) as the “only progressive force”, although with a minimal influence in the country (p. 36).⁸ On the next page, Muehlenbeck quotes a statement from a Czechoslovak politician about Senegal that “political power in the country is in the hands of collaborators. In the state administration the French are in every important position.” (p. 37) The same quote is in Zídek and Sieber: “Politickou moc má v zemi úzká vrstva kolaborantů. [...] Ve státní správě jsou všude na důležitých místech Francouzi.”⁹ Muehlenbeck is using the exact same quote, only omitting the ellipsis (which is a mistake in itself). On page 107, Muehlenbeck says that the communist party

⁷ ZÍDEK, Petr: *Československo a francouzská Afrika 1948–1968*. Praha, Libri 2006; ZÍDEK, Petr – SIEBER, Karel: *Československo a subsaharská Afrika v letech 1948–1989*. Praha, Ústav mezinárodních vztahů 2007; IDEM: *Československo a Blízký východ v letech 1948–1989*. Praha, Ústav mezinárodních vztahů 2009; ZÍDEK, Petr: *Československo v konžské krizi 1959–1961*. In: *Historie a vojenství*, Vol. 55, No. 3 (2006), pp. 23–33; SIEBER, Karel: *Československo a občanská válka v Nigérii (1967–1970)*. In: *Historie a vojenství*, Vol. 51, No. 2 (2002), pp. 267–302.

⁸ Cf. ZÍDEK, P. – SIEBER, K.: *Československo a subsaharská Afrika v letech 1948–1989*, p. 190.

⁹ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 189.

leadership decided to “inform the general [Czechoslovak] public through press, radio and television of the development of the national liberation movement in Angola and to allow publishing activity of the MPLA in Czechoslovakia”. Precisely the same quote is in Zídek and Sieber, even with the quote starting mid-sentence.¹⁰ And there are many more examples like that.¹¹ Of course, two historians using the same quote can be a coincidence. But the chances of them using the exact same quotes several times over and over coincidentally are minimal. Muehlenbeck also repeatedly paraphrases entire paragraphs, referring to documents in the exact same order as the Czech authors. For example, when he describes the amelioration of Czechoslovak-Ghanaian relations and the exchange of delegations, he follows the same structure of the text, presents the same information and cites the same sources in the same order – and that is only one case among many.¹² This alone is a serious offence against academic ethics and a practice that could be interpreted as plagiarism in a broad sense.

The selection of the Czech archives itself raises questions. All the documents come from the National Archive (*Národní archiv*) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archive (*Archiv Ministerstva zahraničních věcí*) in Prague. The Military Archive (*Vojenský ústřední archiv – Vojenský historický archiv*, VÚA-VHA), although used by Zídek and Sieber, is omitted, despite the fact that the author deals with the arms trade. And there is one more archive that Muehlenbeck does not use – the Security Services Archive (*Archiv bezpečnostních složek*, ABS), a very valuable source of information for every researcher dealing with Czechoslovak relations with the “Third World” countries. The Czechoslovak secret service was a very active player in Africa and the key co-former of foreign policy. It is necessary to study its records to comprehend the whole context of the Czechoslovak approach to the newly decolonized countries. Zídek and Sieber were unable to use the ABS material as it had not yet been declassified by the time they wrote their books. On the other hand, this material had already been available for a couple of years by the time Muehlenbeck wrote his.

As for the literature, Muehlenbeck does not use any other Czech or Slovak language secondary sources (except for mentioning a couple of travelogues). A historian who aspires to write a book on Czechoslovak history should surely

¹⁰ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 20.

¹¹ Cf. for example MUEHLENBECK, P.: *Czechoslovakia in Africa, 1945–1968* v. ZÍDEK, P. – SIEBER, K.: *Československo a subsaharská Afrika v letech 1948–1968*, pp. 41 v. 213, 109 v. 23, 112 v. 125, 115 v. 207.

¹² Cf. MUEHLENBECK, P.: *Czechoslovakia in Africa, 1945–1968* v. ZÍDEK, P. – SIEBER, K.: *Československo a subsaharská Afrika v letech 1948–1968*, pp. 75 v. 69. For other cases like that, see for example pp. 79–80 v. pp. 142–143, 106 v. 96, 118 v. 166.

acquaint himself with the state of art in historiography. It is true that the field of Czechoslovak relations with Africa was full of blind spots before Zídek's and Sieber's publications. But there is a large number of books that relate to the topic indirectly – on Czechoslovak internal political and social development, the history of the Czechoslovak economy and foreign trade, Czechoslovak orientalism. Unfortunately, from the choice of the literature it even seems that Philip Muehlenbeck does not read Czech. Misspellings in references to Czech archival sources indicate that the original texts by Zídek and Sieber were probably scanned and converted into a text by an imperfect machine reader that had problems with the Czech alphabet.¹³ If this is true, firstly, it is an odd choice to publish a book on Czechoslovak history without understanding the language of the territory. Secondly, it implies that the references were indeed copied from somewhere else.

Even structurally, *Czechoslovakia in Africa* resembles its Czech preimage. Each chapter also concerns relations with individual African states. Even though the African countries are organized by the criterion of whether they were radical or conservative, while in Zídek and Sieber they are organized alphabetically, still, the template of the chapters is very similar. How could it not be, when they are based on the same sources. Even the introduction is strikingly similar. Modelled after first Zídek's book, *Czechoslovakia and French Africa*, Muehlenbeck's introduction also first summarizes Czechoslovak and Soviet mutual relations and responses to decolonization, before serving the reader an analysis of institutions that formed Czechoslovak policy towards Africa. The content is, needless to say, the same – or, more precisely, the introduction to *Czechoslovakia in Africa* reads like a résumé of the introduction to *Czechoslovakia and French Africa*.

That being said, we have to acknowledge that Muehlenbeck indeed interpreted the same facts in a novel way. He put the subject of the book into the context of his previous work, built on research in the US archives. Using the junior actor theory, his work is more innovative than the earlier Czech books. But this cannot outshine the fact that, for a large part, the book is based on someone else's work, while claiming to be based on original research. One of the important parts of a historian's job is indubitably the selection of sources. It is not enough to take the archival documents gathered by someone else and reinterpret them; if so, the predecessor should probably be acknowledged as a co-author. A historian has to assess for himself what is important and what is not, and not resort to the dubious ethic of taking someone else's selection of documents. We can even surmise that Muehlenbeck has never visited a Czech archive himself – how else

¹³ See for example note 167 on p. 223 – “Příloha” (Czech word for “attachment”) misspelled as “Pffloha”; note 125 on p. 243 – “Šalговиč” misspelled as “Salgoviee”.

could we explain that he took someone else's references and used only the same information as the original books? Had he actually come to the archives, he would have seen the documents himself and he would have diverged, at least slightly, from the selection made by Zídek and Sieber.

In some respects, the whole history of *Czechoslovakia in Africa* could be seen as only a symptom of a broader problem – the provincialization of East European scholarship. The fact that historians writing in the languages of East-Central Europe do not reach a broader readership, even though their work is innovative and based on a vast array of primary sources, is a reality that we cannot disregard. In smaller countries, historians have to publish in their own languages to be a part of the national historiographical debate and to be seen and read. But at the same time, they have to publish in English to stay relevant in the international arena. With English having become the global academic *lingua franca*, English-speaking scholars who learn East European languages have a comparative advantage. It is naturally easier for an American or British scholar to publish a book or an article that is ranked well by the bibliometric criteria – all the more while the highest ranked universities and journals lie in the Anglophone world. If we look at the most successful, most cited, most translated historians in the world – be it global history or history of any particular world region – the Anglo-Saxon historians hold prominent positions. A lot has been written on Eastern Europe and the Cold War, but local scholars still stay somewhat on the side-lines of the debate. It is hard for an Eastern European to become an internationally recognized author – there is truly only a handful of them (apart from those who are affiliated to British or US universities). Of course, American and British historians cannot be blamed for this! Many of them have conducted extended research and delivered valuable accounts of Czech, Hungarian or Polish history.¹⁴ And this asymmetry of scholarship is

¹⁴ To mention just a few of many, see for example APPLEBAUM, Rachel: *Empire of Friends: Soviet Power and Socialist Internationalism in Cold War Czechoslovakia*. Ithaca (NY) – London, Cornell University Press 2019; BREN, Paulina: *The Greengrocer and His TV: The Culture of Communism after the 1968 Prague Spring*. Ithaca (NY), Cornell University Press 2010; MARK, James – BETTS, Paul (eds.): *Socialism Goes Global: The Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the Age of Decolonisation*. Oxford, Oxford University Press 2022; KRAPFL, James: *Revolution with a Human Face: Politics, Culture, and Community in Czechoslovakia, 1989–1992*. Ithaca (NY) – London, Cornell University Press 2013; JOHNSTON, Rosamund: Listening in on the Neighbors: The Reception of German and Austrian Radio in Cold War Czechoslovakia. In: *Central European History*, Vol. 54, No. 4 (2021) pp. 603–620; PUCCI, Molly: *Security Empire: The Secret Police in Communist Eastern Europe*. London – New Haven (CT), Yale University Press 2020; McDERMOTT, Kevin: *Communist Czechoslovakia, 1945–89: A Political and Social History*. New York, Palgrave Macmillan 2015.

by no means limited to Eastern Europe – in African studies, for example, this problem is even more substantial.

Muehlenbeck's case is, of course, different – it is not the same thing to use one's advantage in language or institutional background and to consciously appropriate someone else's work. But perhaps through this comparative advantage of English language, his approach can be explained. From his point of view, it might seem normal for an American historian to go scouting for under-researched topics in Eastern Europe. The histories are rich and many of them are published only in some "obscure languages" that no one knows. The archival policies are often quite liberal. Why not popularize such a topic internationally by dressing it in well-crafted academic English? Muehlenbeck may have just seen a blind spot in the international field that seemed easy to fill. He perhaps did not even think that he was doing something wrong. We can guess this from the fact that he is trying to get his book published in Czech translation. It is hard to imagine an American scholar who would publish a book on the history of France without knowing the French language or French scholarly literature, and without having been in French archives. Reviewers of such a book would probably not have been as kind as they have been to Muehlenbeck. Meanwhile, Muehlenbeck reaps the fruit of the book's success, having earned dozens of citations. Zídek and Sieber, on the other hand, remain internationally almost unknown.

Muehlenbeck's research ethics were clearly questionable at best, as he pretended that the research was his own. Fortunately, not everyone does the same. But his case can raise more questions. Is it normal to write a book on the history of another country without knowing its language? Without being familiar with its historiography? Is it acceptable to send a local assistant to do the archival research for you? How much of the work should the assistant do to be acknowledged as co-author? Why did the journals not invite any Czech or Slovak scholars to review his book? Was there really no one who could write in English and assess the book's originality? In thinking about these questions, we can also start talking about the intellectual subalternity of East-Central Europe in world historiography.

Abstract

The essay explores the complexities of academic asymmetries, focusing on the subaltern status of East Central European scholars within global historiography. The author examines the case of Philip Muehlenbeck's 2016 publication Czechoslovakia in Africa, 1945–1968, which aimed to shed light on the under-researched Czechoslovak-African relations during the Cold War. Although Muehlenbeck's work was timely and well received for its application of junior actor theory, the author is highly critical of his research practices. He shows how Muehlenbeck relied heavily

on, and closely mirrored, the earlier work of Czech historians Petr Zídek and Karel Sieber, without giving them sufficient credit. The review highlights how Muehlenbeck's references to Czech archival sources are exclusively those already cited by Zídek and Sieber, suggesting that original archival work was minimal or absent. Furthermore, Muehlenbeck's structural and textual parallels to Zídek's and Sieber's work raise ethical concerns of unacknowledged dependency.

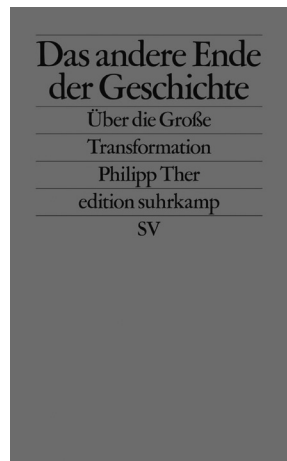
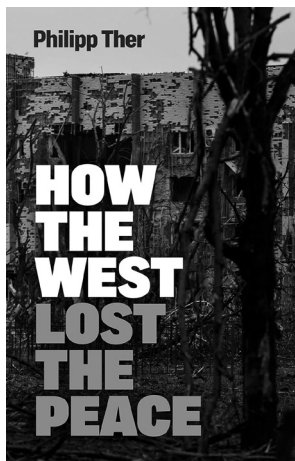
Keywords:

Czechoslovakia; Africa; Czechoslovak-African relations; Cold War; Czechoslovak foreign policy; "Third World"; academic ethics

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Three Voices on One Book

Contrasts – Contexts – Confrontations



THER, Philipp:

How the West Lost the Peace: The Great Transformation since the Cold War.

Translated by Jessica Spengler. Cambridge (UK) – Hoboken (NJ), Polity Press 2023, 276 pages, ISBN 978-1-509-55060-9.

THER, Philipp:

Jiný konec dějin: Eseje o velké transformaci po roce 1989.

Translated by Zuzana Schwarzová. Praha, Karolinum 2022, 238 pages, ISBN 978-80-246-5402-7.

THER, Philipp:

Das andere Ende der Geschichte: Über die Große Transformation.

Berlin, Suhrkamp 2019, 198 pages, ISBN 978-3-518-12744-5.

Abstract

*In the section “Three Voices”, Václav Rameš, Matej Ivančík and Jóhann Páll Árnason discuss a book of essays on post-communist transformations and neoliberal hegemony by the German-Austrian historian Philipp Ther, published in English under the title *How the West Lost the Peace: The Great Transformation Since Cold War*. Ther’s essays are a blend of historical analysis and contemporary insights, offering an interpretation of how neoliberal policies, economic upheavals and political reactions have collectively shaped modern Europe. Using Karl Polanyi’s concept of the “double movement” of the pendulum of history as a lens, Ther links the past to the present, highlighting the effects of unregulated capitalism and the recurrent social need for protection, emphasizing the interplay between domestic developments and global trends, and the intricate balance between national policies and international pressures.*

*Rameš situates Ther’s work within the broader European historiography after the fall of communism and emphasizes the author’s shift from the data-centred analysis he presented in his 2016 publication *Europe since 1989: A History* to a more interpretive and politically engaged approach. While he appreciates Ther’s historicizing emphasis, comparing post-communist changes with long-term developments since the Industrial Revolution, he draws attention to his ambivalent and inconsistent definition of neoliberalism. He also reveals several translation errors in the Czech edition that misinterpret Ther’s arguments. Ivančík approaches the book from a social-historical perspective and focuses on the question of how far Ther’s theses can be applied to the Central and Eastern European experience. While he agrees with the author’s application of Polanyi’s concepts and his critique of neoliberalism as an ideological force characterized by the “mobilization of poverty”, he also suggests that Ther’s reference to the global movement of the “political pendulum” seems somewhat forced at times. Finally, Árnason reflects on Ther’s analysis of neoliberalism and its global implications within a broader historical and geopolitical framework. Although he identifies with his critique of neoliberalism and defence of Polanyi’s theories, he pleads for a deeper examination of geopolitical dynamics. Ther, he argues, deals only marginally with the role of a major power such as China, leaving aside the complex interplay between ideology and geopolitics. He questions the cyclical nature of social development assumed by Polanyi’s “double movement” and suggests that historical events – from the interwar era to the present – require a more varied and less deterministic analysis. He finds Ther’s interpretation of political populism somewhat vague and notes that its multifaceted nature goes beyond anti-liberal and protectionist promises.*

Post-Communist Transformation under the Pendulum of Big History

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German-Austrian historian Philipp Ther, an expert on the modern history of Central and Eastern Europe, is the director of the Research Centre for the History of Transformations (RECET) at the University of Vienna. He founded this centre after having received the Wittgenstein Award, the highest Austrian science award, in 2019. He is also a professor at the Institute for Eastern European History (*Institut für Osteuropäische Geschichte*) at the University of Vienna. After having published monographs on the history of Central European operatic culture¹ and ethnic cleansing in twentieth-century Europe,² his research focus in the past decade has been the post-communist era. Within this research, he has published his most successful book so far, *Europe since 1989: A History*,³ which was perhaps the first comprehensive synthesis of the post-communist period in Europe in the contemporary history field – until then, research on this period was dominated by works on economy and sociology, or by historical studies analysing particular fields. In the subsequent years, Ther studied, among other

¹ THER, Philipp: *In der Mitte der Gesellschaft: Operntheater in Zentraleuropa 1815–1914*. Wien, Oldenbourg 2006. In Czech translation: *Národní divadlo v kontextu evropských operních dějin: Od založení do první světové války*. Praha, Dokořán 2008. In extended English version: *Center Stage: Operatic Culture and Nation Building in Nineteenth-Century Central Europe*. West Lafayette (Ind.), Purdue University Press 2014.

² IDEM: *Die dunkle Seite der Nationalstaaten: „Ethnische Säuberungen“ im modernen Europa*. Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2011. English translation: *The Dark Side of Nation-States: Ethnic Cleansing in Modern Europe*. New York – Oxford, Berghahn 2014. Czech translation: *Temná strana národních států: Etnické čistky v moderní Evropě*. Praha, Argo 2017. The book was also published in Polish.

³ IDEM: *Europe since 1989: A History*. Oxford – Princeton, Princeton University Press 2016. In German original: *Die neue Ordnung auf dem alten Kontinent: Eine Geschichte des neoliberalen Europa*. Berlin, Suhrkamp 2014. The book was also published in Czech, Polish, Bulgarian, Finnish, Chinese, Ukrainian and Russian.

things, changes in Central European labour between the late 1980s and the period when new member states joined the European Union. He took as an example the transformation of shipyards in the Polish town of Gdynia and the Croatian town of Pula.⁴ In his most recent book, *Das andere Ende der Geschichte: Über die Große Transformation* [The Other End of History: Essays on Great Transformation after 1989], published in English under the title *How the West Lost the Peace: The Great Transformation since the Cold War*, Philipp Ther does not hide his ambition of bringing into the otherwise fragmented research on the post-communist era an integrating perspective which, instead of following partial areas, focuses on general phenomena and trends. The essays were published together for the first time in German in 2019, followed by a Polish translation.⁵ The Czech translation was published in an updated version, complemented mainly by chapters on the Covid-19 epidemic and Russia's war against Ukraine. The English translation came out last, under a different title, *How the West Lost the Peace*. This review is based on both the English and the Czech editions of the book. Taking into account the latter will allow me, among other things, to point out some errors in the Czech translation, which otherwise could be erroneously ascribed to the author by an uninitiated reader.

In a previous thematically related monograph, *Europe since 1989: A History*, the author worked with large sets of statistical data and focused on several crucial moments of the post-communist transformation (economic development of major Central European cities, reforms of social security systems, and the crisis in southern Europe). In contrast, *How the West Lost the Peace* is a book of essays. This entails a less factual account, bolder theses as well as a certain political engagement. For anyone who has not read either of the two books, it would almost be better to read them in reverse order than in the order they were published – first to learn about Ther's main theses in the newly published essays and only then to read the statistical material that provided the basis for the theses presented. Moreover, the account in *Europe since 1989* rarely goes back to before the Second World War, whereas comparing European development after 1989 with the entire modern period after the industrial revolution is crucial for *How the West Lost the Peace*. In this sense, the new title is much more historicizing and will compel the reader to think about the development of the past three decades from the perspective of the long duration of industrial society.

⁴ THER, Philipp – BRUNNBAUER, Ulf – FILIPOWSKI, Piotr – HODGES, Andrew – PETRUNGARO, Stefano – WEGENSCHIMMEL, Peter: *In den Stürmen der Transformation: Zwei Werften zwischen Sozialismus und EU*. Berlin, Suhrkamp 2022.

⁵ THER, Philipp: *Inny koniec Historii: O wielkiej transformacji*. Poznań, Nauka i Innowacje 2020.

Ther's main inspiration for reflecting on times when neoliberal policy dominated (or still dominates) was the famous book *The Great Transformation* by Hungarian-Jewish economist, historian and philosopher Károly Polányi (who was naturalized in Canada as Karl Paul Polanyi)⁶ and his metaphor of the "big pendulum", that is, "the dialectic between the principle of the free market and society's need for protection" (p. 6 of the English edition).⁷ The political and economic development of an industrial society has, in his view, a pendulum action: for a certain period, it creates space for private entrepreneurship, then it compensates for the lost equilibrium by regulating it in order to preserve social relations, which are often destructively affected by the market. Therefore, if the action of the first half of the nineteenth century consisted of an industrial revolution with massive development of industry and capitalist entrepreneurship, the second half of the century saw a reaction in the form of the birth of trade unions and the workers' movement. Polanyi saw the most important negative consequence of the free market in "the uprooting and destruction of social communities" and "the feeling many people had of no longer being up to the demands of the economy" (p. 7). According to Polanyi, a self-regulating free market on the one side and the need for social protection on the other form two poles, between which modern industrial society oscillates.

Phillip Ther states that he is more inclined to "a more abstract interpretation" of this double movement of Polanyi, which he interprets as a study of the movement of the "political pendulum" (p. 8). His work is therefore primarily focused on the changes in political representations and the different forms and aims of their economic policies, rather than on the changes in the entrepreneurial environment or in the organization of economic subjects to interest groups. Ther considers the period after 1989 the period of the onset of a neoliberal policy, which, in line with the common use of this term, he defines as "liberalization, deregulation, privatization, the reduction of state influence on the economy, and global financial capitalism" (p. xviii). Apart from this, his definition of neoliberalism in different parts of the book also includes some aspects of political thought of the period and the present – for example, conflicting promises related to globalization (p. 4), which, according to Ther, offered the consumers of post-communist countries a greater supply of goods, but at the same time exposed them, as employees of bankrupting enterprises, to growing insecurity and to a greater need for flexibility. Along similar lines, "the essentials of neoliberalism" consist, according to

⁶ POLANYI, Karl: *The Great Transformation*. New York – Toronto, Rinehart & Company 1944. (See also Czech edition *Velká transformace*. Brno, Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury 2006.)

⁷ Unless otherwise specified, all quotations below are from the English edition of Ther's book.

him, in mobilizing for work under the threat of poverty (p. 23) and the related social stigma of being a beneficiary of state support. The former was also a motive and the latter a consequence of state employment policy after 1989 in countries which did not form part of the post-communist world. According to Ther, “social distinctions and punching down became systemic” (p. 24)⁸ in the period of neoliberalism. However, the author’s attempts at categorizing neoliberalism do not end here. On page 96, he proposes differentiating between “situational neoliberalism” (he gives the example of the sale of state enterprises with the aim of stabilizing public budgets) and “neoliberalism by conviction”. However, he only distinguishes between the two when analysing neoliberal reforms in Italy, whereas in other essays this differentiation plays no role.

With regard to the present, Ther expresses a thought which draws on his interpretation of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries: the swing of Polanyi’s pendulum toward the free market resulted in its swing back to the social protection of the past decade. As Ther claims, out of the two options – a shift to either “democratic socialism” or “fascism” – the pendulum has had a tendency to move toward the second pole in the past few years. But Ther’s sympathy clearly lies with the first alternative, that is, with the regulation of the market economy in the spirit of “democratic socialism” (which is not defined in detail in the book, but by implication is similar to the post-war policy leading to Western Europe’s “economic miracle”, which in France, for example, is called *trente glorieuses*). In this respect, Ther’s essays call to mind another book of historicizing essays entitled *Ill Fares the Land*, published by British historian Tony Judt shortly before his death.⁹ Unlike Judt’s book, however, *How the West Lost the Peace* has a markedly less programmatic character and, instead of Judt’s big theses, Ther prefers specific facts on the development of selected European countries in the last thirty years. Where Judt presents a mobilizing vision, Ther prefers factual description, occasionally spiced by personal recollection. Consequently, Ther’s book is not as captivating as Judt’s book, but it contains more factual data and partial conclusions with a looser relation to the central thesis. The difference between the books *How the West Lost the Peace* and *Ill Fares the Land* (the British historian’s works are acknowledged by Ther as having inspired him) therefore lies in the overall picture: while Ther provides an array of details, proving his insightful knowledge of the national contexts of the countries he writes about, complementing them

⁸ Here I must also mention Polanyi’s criticism of nineteenth-century British labour laws, especially the so-called New Poor Law of 1834 (see POLANYI, K.: *The Great Transformation*, pp. 77–85).

⁹ JUDT, Tony: *Ill Fares the Land: A Treatise on Our Present Discontents*. London, Allen Lane 2010.

with his critical thoughts rather as an appendix, Judt is a more engaged historian and his account is rife with criticism about neoliberalism.

To understand Ther's position on the issues of economic policy one sometimes has to read between the lines. Whereas in some parts of the book he denounces the neoliberal policy of fiscal restrictions, in others, by contrast, he criticizes politicians who refuse budget restrictions for "extravagant spending" (p. 100).¹⁰ His position regarding the unconditional basic income, "a pet subject of the global Left", also remains unclear (p. 105). It is a pity that among the countries he pays special attention to (apart from the Visegrad countries, Germany, Austria and the United States, the examples are mainly from Russia, Italy, Ukraine and Turkey) more space was not devoted to Great Britain, or, rather, to the development of Britain's Labour Party in the past fifteen years, when confrontation with the legacy of Blair's *New Labour* policy was significant. For an author who more or less openly advocates a liberal left orientation, it would be suitable to take a stance on the conception of the left that was represented in recent years by Jeremy Corbyn, a successor to Tony Blair as Labour Party leader. This would have allowed the reader to get a better notion of the kind of "progressive politics and society" (p. xxviii) Ther aims to shape with his book.

The book is composed of seven essays plus an afterword dedicated to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In the first essay, "From Neoliberalism to Antiliberalism: The Enduring Relevance of Karl Polanyi", Ther summarizes his notes on Polanyi's work and recapitulates his own conclusions from *Europe since 1989*. He also interprets the development after 1989 as a swing of the pendulum of economic policy toward free markets, which was followed in 2008 by the global financial crisis and in 2016 (which he calls an *annus horribilis*) by an opposition in the form of Brexit and Trump's victory in the US presidential elections. Even though the author refrains from using Immanuel Wallerstein's terms of "centre" and "periphery", he in fact applies this division, for example, in his account of labour migration from the East to the West: "While Eastern European countries exported their social problems, the UK imported a political problem." (p. 20) Ther therefore makes a connection between the consequences of the neoliberal social policy of the post-communist states and shifts in the position of the British public toward membership of the European Union. Similar situations where the author links different events from the recent past, which had previously been rather interpreted in separate contexts, and then attaches them to his central thesis of

¹⁰ However, in contrast to this, on page 207, Ther appreciates the fact that within the EU's Covid recovery plan "for the first time in EU history, financial aid is being provided not only in the form of loans, but largely as direct grants to member states". It is not clear from these quotes how the author understands the differences between "giving", meaningful investment, neoliberal austerity and budget frugality.

the impact of neoliberal economic policy on the political and social reality of the countries of the European nucleus and semi-periphery represent the strongest moments of his essays.

The second essay, “Lost Social and Political Equilibrium: The USA after the Cold War”, which in its opening directly reacts to the attack on the Capitol by Donald Trump’s supporters in January 2021, focuses on developments in the USA after the end of the Cold War. By criticizing the predominance of identity politics (the focus on balancing the inequalities of ethnic, sexual and other minorities) over the politics representing the interests of the economically weak, Ther emphasizes the issue of the proportionality of different kinds of disadvantages. He then postulates that social democracy, which was historically based on representing the interests of others, fails in fulfilling this task today. According to Ther, the neoliberal reforms of the Clinton administration (in this essay, Bill Clinton plays a much more important role in establishing American neoliberalism than does Ronald Reagan, who is usually mentioned in this regard) demobilized American workers, who stopped participating in the elections and voting for the Democrats (p. 57).¹¹ In Ther’s view, the degradation of public services accelerated as the situation of the American middle class started deteriorating, large economic interests acquired more power, and the differences between thriving economic centres and collapsing old industrial peripheries increased.

Philipp Ther describes similar development trends, only with a different emphasis in each case, in the next three essays on the unified Germany, Italy, Turkey and Russia. A reader like myself who is unfamiliar with the details of developments in these countries in the past three decades is hardly fit to debate all the issues with Ther. Still, it makes the reader raise his or her eyebrows incredulously at times when reading sharp, but unreferenced claims on the role that mutual competition between Brussels and Washington played in NATO’s enlargement in the first decade of the present century (p. 143). Unfortunately, in the Czech version the passages on Russia contain several incorrect claims, which, on closer examination, seem to result from a misunderstanding during the translation. It erroneously states that “the NATO borders are now [in 2022] at a distance of more than 2,000 kilometres from the Russian Federation” and describes Ukraine as

¹¹ It is not clear here which data Ther draws on. On the quoted page he claims that in 2000, voter turnout in the US presidential elections was less than one half of the total electorate. This is not, however, a deviation from the long-term trend in election turnouts, which has oscillated between 50% and 65% since the 1930s. Moreover, various available public sources give different turnout rates, with the United States Census Bureau stating that over one half of voters turned out for the elections of 2000. (See Historical Reported Voting Rates. In: *United States Census Bureau* [online], 26. 10. 2021. [Accessed 2024-10-06.] Available at: <https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/time-series/demo/voting-historical-time-series.html>.)

“an EU member state” (pp. 162 and 165 in the Czech edition). In both cases, these parts of the text were not included in the original German version and were added only after the expansion of the text for the Czech and English editions.¹² Comparison between the Czech and English versions shows what was the likely intended meaning of these claims: the distance did not refer to that between the NATO borders and Russia, but to their total length (p. 147); and the author was comparing Ukraine with Hungary, which is one of the EU members states (p. 151). A shift in meaning also occurred in the first essay of the book, where the author argues that nationalist propaganda “deliberately fabricates crises at borders and in migrant camps to attract public attention” (p. 31). In the Czech edition this sentence sounds much sharper due to the translation of the word “fabricate” with the Czech word *produkovat* (in English “produce”), and the reader unaware of the mistranslation might question the evidence supporting this kind of statement (p. 56 of the Czech edition).

The penultimate chapter, “Systemic Competition during the Covid-19 Pandemic”, develops the ideas explained in the previous parts of the book, that is, primarily the importance of functional public services for maintaining the stability of a democracy and preserving social peace. In the final chapter, “Afterword: A Bad End. The War against Ukraine”, the author reflects on the future development of the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine.

How the West Lost the Peace is an extraordinary work mainly because it offers both the expert and the layman an easily understandable historical account of the post-communist era, especially in Europe, with particular reference to an interpretative framework that accents cyclical shifts between the liberalization of the economy and a strengthened extra-market allocation of means by the state. In this way, it goes beyond a sarcastic interpretation of the contemporary history of Central Europe as a “detour from the periphery to the periphery” (as a famous bon mot by Hungarian historian Iván T. Berend puts it)¹³ and finds a functional link between developments in Central and Western Europe, which are often discussed separately or one-sidedly. Whether or not Ther’s depiction of post-communism as a period of double movement of Polanyi’s pendulum (first to economic liberalization, followed by a political reaction accenting identity) becomes a dominant reference for experts and laymen in the future, it is likely that it will not be possible to ignore his theses going forward as currently no other comparably sweeping and detailed historical work exists. To historians, it offers primarily an easily understandable and practical link between the most recent

¹² See THER, P.: *Das andere Ende der Geschichte*, pp. 155–158.

¹³ BEREND, Tibor Iván: *Central and Eastern Europe, 1944–1993: Detour from the Periphery to the Periphery*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1996.

period of contemporary history and previous developments, and can therefore help them to overcome obstacles in researching different periods of history, which are seemingly naturally separated by the events of big political history. In this sense, *How the West Lost the Peace* may be valuable even for authors who do not share Ther's liberal left orientation. Although his orientation is perceptible from his writing, in the text itself it mostly takes a back seat. The reader therefore has enough "food" for thought on the discussed events from a viewpoint other than the normative.

Translated by Blanka Medková

Keywords:

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A Post-Socialist Revision of Neoliberal Hegemony

Why the Experience of Central and Eastern Europe Matters beyond Its Borders

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Philipp Ther's latest book, a collection of essays published in English under the title *How the West Lost the Peace: The Great Transformation Since the Cold War*, openly acknowledges its inspiration from the French philosopher and historian Didier Eribon and the German sociologist Steffen Mau and their "personal sociology" approach. The founding director of the Research Centre for the History of Transformations (RECET) at the University of Vienna selects his perspectives on various countries based on his own experiences, a combination of personal encounters and the analytical insight of a contemporary historian. These two aspects are inevitably difficult to separate, but Ther's style does not come across as invasive or artificial. The reader does not feel that Ther is leading them to places they would rather not see. The "research visits" he is offering to discuss, though with an activist flavour, target audiences who cherish liberal democracy in order to leave them facing a choice: if we want to save liberal democracy, we must be able to criticize it. At times, the collection of essays feels a bit rushed and as though diverging from the unifying narrative, particularly in the cases of the Russian war against Ukraine and the Covid-19 pandemic. Ther's contribution to the Central European historiography is a strong demonstration of why this region's experience matters beyond its borders, however. Herein lies its greatest selling point and appeal to readers.

The central question of the book is: How has the West, after winning the Cold War, lost its leading global position and, more importantly, its internal peace amid an increasingly dense series of crises? As Ther emphasizes, the term "crisis" should not be used to accentuate the urgency or dramatic nature of the problem, as has been the case with various financial crises since the mid-1980s, the so-called refugee crisis of 2015/2016, or the much-discussed crisis of liberal democracy. Ther understands crisis as a situation where the political system hits the limits of its ability to develop or transform itself, i.e. where politics merely

reacts to changes instead of actively creating them (p. x-xi). Therefore, the concept of “losing internal peace” gains meaning within a social-historical framework through which the political-economic entanglement goes beyond both political and economic explanations of what Ther would perhaps call a neoliberal limbo. That his book is relevant can be demonstrated by its “communication” with other books of the “what went wrong” genre, such as Samuel Moyn’s more intellectual-historical account *Liberalism against Itself*, or John Ganz’s recent study *When the Clock Broke*, which focuses on the 1990s “Clintonian hype”, to name but a few.¹

The main thesis of the book challenges the discourse of the euphoric mood of the 1990s, arguing that the economic policies of countries like Germany or Italy were not ideal even during this period. On the contrary, Ther posits, though not entirely innovatively, that the so-called golden nineties were not golden at all and even had negative impacts on certain social groups, sustainability, and the environment. To better explain his complex, long-term approach, he calls upon the Hungarian-Jewish economist, historian and philosopher Karl Polanyi (1886–1964), particularly in a metaphorical debate with Francis Fukuyama and his thesis on the liberal-democratic order as the end of history.²

Polanyi’s concept of the “double movement”, societal and political pressure, a reaction that global capitalism can provoke if not properly and sufficiently regulated, guides us through the book. Philipp Ther foregrounds deeper economic and social causes in explaining the regression of liberal democracy. He argues that the reasons for this trend should be sought outside the capitals, where conditions similar to those in the early post-communist world have emerged. Ther thus distances himself from simplified political interpretations of the crisis of liberal democracy, which, in his view, cannot simply be attributed to the polarization and dysfunctionality of the political system. In other words, we cannot explain a problem by looking for its cause within the problem itself.

The Pendulum Swings to the Right – But How?

The Bretton Woods system after the Second World War was supposed to be a bulwark against protectionism and consequently against fascism, and the Marshall

¹ MOYN, Samuel: *Liberalism against Itself: Cold War Intellectuals and the Making of Our Times*. New Haven (CT) – London, Yale University Press 2023; GANZ, John: *When the Clock Broke: Con Men, Conspiracists and How America Cracked Up in the Early 1990s*. New York, Macmillan Publishers 2024.

² Hence the title of the German original *Das andere Ende der Geschichte* and some translated editions, such as the Czech *Jiný konec dějin* [A Different End of History].

Plan was meant to serve the economic and social recovery of the old continent, while the Cold War and fear of communism acted as a counterbalance to unbridled capitalism. The post-communist states brought their democracies into a rather different world. What they could rely on was a strong, almost Manichean story about the pot of gold at the end of a thorny path, the purpose of which was to “eradicate” the poor management and misery caused by the *homo Sovieticus* mindset. The initial teasing of the book title shares a glimpse of an unsuccessful end to the road taken.

The overall appeal of Ther’s analysis of the global hegemony of neoliberalism can be explained by his insight into the domestic affairs of various countries while challenging the understanding of it as a normative ideology reduced to a phenomenon that undermines democracy. Far from supporting the neoliberalization of society, Ther’s book can be read as a nuanced, if sometimes eclectic, contribution to the growing number of critical voices on the post-socialist road.

At times, Ther’s application of Polanyi’s pendulum thesis sounds a bit forced, such as when he speaks of an emerging dissatisfaction of sorts among liberal economists who, similar to their peers in the nineteenth century, were also not satisfied with the intensity of reforms after 1989, in that they demanded more reforms, done more intensely (p. 13). Although this argument is still (!) present in the argumentation toolkit of people like the former Slovak Minister of Finance Ivan Mikloš – who rarely fails to emphasize that the reforms of the 1990s should have gone even further – and ignoring the geographical and historical specifics of implementing reforms is a hallmark of neoliberal economists (if it works in Singapore, it must work here too), Ther’s invocation of Polanyi appears sufficiently explained and does not need to be forcefully applied. By essentializing the attitudes of liberal economists, he weakens what is the strongest element of his essay, namely the historicization of the long transformation from the 1970s to the present.³

Ther’s strongest point is that he understands neoliberalism as a structural problem, with the ideological content of “mobilizing poverty”, which, in his words, inherently includes a disdain for people. This approach allows Ther to move from a relatively impersonal institutional explanation of the establishment of neoliberalism in Central and Eastern Europe to socio-historical interpretations in which people emerge as active subjects. Moving away from econometrics, on the one hand we observe the rise of neoliberal tropes in everyday language

³ Ther also utilizes the analogy of late-nineteenth-century capitalism to support the thesis of deglobalization, protectionism and nationalism, as does the American historian Tara Zahra in her latest work *Against the World: Anti-Globalism and Mass Politics between the World Wars* (New York, W. W. Norton & Co. 2023).

(manager, businessman, “zero”), while on the other we find that only one fifth of the population in post-communist countries benefited from the regime change. Ther highlights an important phenomenon, namely the excessive macroeconomic discourse of market transformation and the neglect of the lived experience of transformation. This neuralgic moment of post-communist development, often accelerated by the so-called second wave of neoliberalization, also manifested itself in the rise of populist movements and policies. As Ther points out, these appeared in the region as early as the 1990s. The link between the establishment of the neoliberal order and the critique of the role of the state can thus be tracked back to the cooperation of governments and international organizations (International Monetary Fund, World Bank). While Ther identifies who was responsible for the rise of neoliberalism in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany and post-communist countries, and partially explains how it happened, we learn less about the motivations of the responsible actors.

In addition, Ther offers deserved criticism of the Bulgarian political scientist Ivan Krastev and the American political scientist Stephen Holmes, who understand nationalism in post-communist countries essentially and generally as a reaction to an excessive adaptation to the “West” and “Brussels”, which to a large extent work interconnectedly. Philipp Ther points to a much more autonomous stance, where the intensification of nationalist positions against the centre serves primarily domestic political purposes, mainly to cover up corruption and political legitimacy. In other words, nationalism is primarily for domestic purposes, not for external observers. However, it is a double-edged sword, because nationalist theses can become an authentic policy and worldview, as Viktor Orbán and perhaps the Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico have already convinced us.

A major contribution in the chapter on Germany (“The Price of Unity: Germany’s Shock Therapy in International Comparison”) is Ther’s placing of the problem of the former German Democratic Republic within the reference frame of other post-communist states, rather than merely viewing it through the lens of German-German reconciliation. This “German” problem largely anticipated the phenomenon of the so-called three waves of migration (1990, 2004, 2009, according to Ther) that affected the countries of the former so-called Eastern Bloc. East Germans were confronted with not only having to retrain and the transition to capitalism but also the fact that higher-skilled jobs, especially in the service sector, were taken by West Germans. Although there was no comparable situation in the other Central and Eastern European countries, the social consequences of transformation were very similar. However, Ther does not emphasize one important aspect. He himself points out that in the case of Germany’s reunification, its architects, the Ministers of Finance Theo Waigel and the late Wolfgang Schäuble, did not subscribe to the Chicago School of neoliberalism, but to the traditions of ordoliberalism and Christian social doctrine (p. 70). He further states that,

in addition to mitigating the social impacts, stronger state regulation, and a system of collective agreements, this “German” transformation largely overlapped with that applied in the former Eastern Bloc. These are indeed significant aspects which were not adopted in most countries outside Germany (perhaps with the exception of Slovenia), and which therefore makes their cases quite different from the German reunification experience. And yet, it was these measures that were able to mitigate the impacts of transformation.

Of course, it is not the task of historians to state now which path the individual states should have taken. But we can ask, as Ther does, in a somewhat activist way: what else could they have done? The answer: they could have taken measures to mitigate the impacts and not destroy the trade unions. The problem is that the social impacts of the transformation did not exist only as social and economic phenomena but also, or perhaps primarily, as components of political struggles. Should we not therefore ask how they were used by particular actors, how they functioned within the actors’ ideational or practical-political frameworks, and what policies they both generated and justified? For instance, in the case of the unions and collective emancipatory imaginaries in general, we should perhaps focus on why and how liberals in Eastern Europe ended up leaving the field open to nationalists.

Ther comes closest to addressing the impacts of politically exploited social preferences in his analysis of so-called welfare chauvinism. This is the ability to politically mobilize voters by pointing to “unfair” social benefits for immigrants. These are the different starting positions of the post-communist countries compared to the former West Germany. Despite the improvement in the economic situation of certain groups or individuals, we should not underestimate the fear of a return to a bad economic situation. This experience, in the words of the German sociologist Till Hilmar,⁴ that something has to be earned, allows us to understand how social frustration or its threat can be translated into political action. Ther’s comparison is regionally sensitive in this regard, taking into account another type of emotion in post-communist countries, namely the reluctance to share or endanger newly found prosperity (p. 86). However illusory this prosperity may seem, or however such feelings may be subject to memory distortions, this insight is often underestimated in the discussion about transformation.

⁴ HILMAR, Till: *Deserved: Economic Memories After the Fall of the Iron Curtain*. New York, Columbia University Press 2023. For particular cases of the memory of neoliberalism in Eastern Europe see: PEHE, Veronika – WAWRZYNIAK, Joanna (eds.): *Remembering the Neoliberal Turn: Economic Change and Collective Memory in Eastern Europe After 1989*. London – New York, Routledge 2024.

The Troubled Centre

Around the time the author was completing this essay, the *Financial Times* published data about four economic champions of Europe, Portugal, Italy, Greece, and Spain. These are the notorious countries that, in the wake of the financial crisis, were derogatorily referred to as PIGS. In the Italian chapter (“*La Crisi: Italy’s Decline as a Portent for Europe*”), Philipp Ther comes closest to the genre mastered by Timothy Garton Ash. He puts into historical perspective what has become part of the “left-wing mobilization toolkit”, namely, that the left, social-democratic parties in particular, abandoned their traditional electorate, represented mainly by the working class, in the 1990s.

To elaborate on his thesis, Ther explains that, similarly to the case of post-communist countries, support for neoliberalism in the USA and other countries was based on increasing consumption. By focusing on the social behaviour of the population, he debunks the widespread myth of the solely top-down and externally-driven implementation of neoliberalism. Here we can rely on the late-socialist origins of such economized class-based consumerism, as was brilliantly demonstrated by Annina Gagyiova whose research on the consumer choices of Hungarian citizens shows why neoliberalism was able to find a welcoming embrace not only at the factory management level.⁵ Of course, we can hardly conclude that neoliberalism was what populations in the 1990s demanded. We can, however, assume some level of the popularity of market economics and the denunciation of an interventionist state, since the state to a large extent equated with preventing people from being able to choose, indeed to choose from a supermarket shelf.⁶ This raises the question: what was the anti-democratic nature of neoliberalism when it emerged in the post-socialist situation? And what does it tell us about the democratic nature of populism? Ther’s analysis does not aspire to go in this direction, focusing instead on the structural consequences of a neoliberalized social-economic order.

The left’s shift to the centre and its transformation into a technocratic driving force positioned it in defence of the establishment. Along with what Ther calls a cultural policy devoid of content, quoting the Italian example, this allowed the dominance of right-wing populism, whose protagonists fish in the waters of the

⁵ GAGYIOVA, Annina: *Socialism Without Future: Consumption as a Marker of Growing Social Difference in 1980s Hungary*. In: ERIKSROED-BURGER, Magdalena – HEIN-KIRCHER, Heidi – MALITSKA, Julia (eds.): *Consumption and Advertising in Eastern Europe and Russia in the Twentieth Century*. London, Palgrave Macmillan 2023.

⁶ For a closer look at economic thinking before the 1989 revolution in Czecho-Slovakia, see RAMEŠ, Václav: *Trh bez přívlasků, nebo ekonomickou demokracií? Spory o podobu vlastnické transformace v povelučním Československu*. Praha, Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR, v.v.i., 2021.

working classes. In the context of the establishment of right-wing populism in Italy, embodied by Silvio Berlusconi, Ther highlights two theses: first, that right-wing populism is not only a political movement and ideology but also a form of radicalizing governance. We can ask whether this radicalizing form of governance is possible also because the democratic left is unable to occupy the cultural space in a constitutive way. In other words, if right-wing populism is currently undermining liberal democracy and its representatives are occupying the space we call culture, we can argue, along with Ther and also the Czech political scientist Ondřej Slačálek,⁷ that the decline of liberal democracy was enabled by the exclusion of the radical left from the liberal political consensus.

The neoliberalized social-economic order, most evident in the dismantling of the welfare state in the 1980s and 1990s, was also evident during the Covid-19 pandemic, when better prepared welfare states had lower mortality rates than those that had undergone austerity policies, such as Southern European countries and the United States, whose highly privatized healthcare sector is extreme by European standards. In the light of this experience, the English historian Adam Tooze currently calls for massive public investment in preparation for another potential viral threat.⁸

The dismantling of the welfare state also needs to be examined in terms of motivations. In this sense, Philipp Ther appears as a liberal budget pragmatist of the Keynesian type, who realizes that individual governments cannot command the markets. To this end, he distinguishes between the application of neoliberal policies as situational and ideological neoliberalism (p. 96). This typology, he argues, is important to prevent neoliberalism from becoming a scarecrow that can be politically criticized but not sufficiently analysed. This approach has become increasingly necessary and present in the academic literature. Many authors tend to essentialize neoliberalism and present it as a monolith that goes inherently against the democratic, mostly populistically perceived collective people. To challenge such a vision, Ther differentiates between the case of Great Britain, where Margaret Thatcher pursued neoliberal policies for ideological reasons, and, for example, Italy, where this happened “situationally”, under fiscal pressure. Similarly, Romanian economic historian Cornel Ban speaks of embedded and disembedded neoliberalism, which he understands as a dynamic set of economic

⁷ See SLAČÁLEK, Ondřej: Czechia 30 Years On: An Imperfect Oligarchy without Emancipatory Alternative. In: GAGYI, Agnes – SLAČÁLEK, Ondřej (eds.): *Political Economy of Eastern Europe 30 Years into the Transition: New Left Perspectives from the Region*. Cham (Switzerland), Palgrave Macmillan 2022, pp. 140–145.

⁸ TOOZE, Adam: Vaccine Investment Is a No-Brainer – So Why Aren’t We Doing It? In: *Financial Times* [online], 30. 03. 2024. [Accessed 2024-08-01.] Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/ffded995-6bed-4961-bb2f-d1262ef1b0e3>.

ideas and related policies that manifest themselves more or less intensely and effectively depending on the local context.⁹

Likewise, Ther is not a theorist of neoliberalism but offers its socio-historical and political explanations. In addition to the aforementioned struggle for the cultural space in which politics “happens”, he also introduces the thesis of a generational conflict (p. 106). I would argue that this factor, often neglected in historical literature, deserves more attention. Ther makes important steps in historicizing it. With his social-historical analysis of neoliberalism, we can now return to Ther’s aforementioned predicament about the emergence of neoliberalism against the backdrop of eager consumers rising from the late-socialist ashes of stagnating economies. Its hegemony emerged unchallenged even from the financial crisis of 2007–2008, where we witnessed the almost universal application of austerity measures, while after the Covid-19 pandemic crisis even the more fiscally frugal states, namely Germany and the Netherlands, had to opt for more state and international interventionism in the name of safeguarding public services. The question is, for how long. As with many other issues, the position of Germany would be crucial.

A Semi-Optimistic Conclusion

Despite the declared historical analysis, Ther programmatically diverges into political analysis. The essay genre encourages him to do so, and from this perspective it is remarkable that he analyses the recent past through the eyes of a historian who is aware of the limits of his discipline but who points out that the current problem, especially of right-wing populism, can only be understood through long-term observation of the functioning of local nationalisms in crisis situations (pp. 112–117). At a time when the European Union has to decide whether there really is a difference between Giorgia Meloni and Marine Le Pen – and the war in Ukraine seems to be giving the Euro-Atlantic elite a push towards accepting Meloni – perhaps we should join Ther in shifting our attention from populism to nationalism, as it may provide us with a better analytical tool for understanding the bigger challenges the EU faces. Ther ushers us to look at the recent “migration crisis” from this perspective as well. It was mainstream German nationalism, not populism, that shifted the main refugee routes to reach the coasts of Italy, which in turn paved the way for the, at least formerly, neo-fascist Meloni. Italy’s nationalist leaders, unlike their Central European counterparts,

⁹ BAN, Cornel: *Ruling Ideas: How Global Neoliberalism Goes Local*. New York, Oxford University Press 2016.

demand quota mechanisms to water down the economic and political responsibility for immigration imposed on the coastal countries. Eventually, Philipp Ther concludes his Italian chapter on a surprisingly optimistic note pointing to the striking vitality with which Italy has managed to emerge resilient from multiple crises (p. 120).

As Ther moves on to analyse Russia and Turkey (chapter “The West, Turkey and Russia: A History of Estrangement”) and the legacy of the Covid-19 pandemic at the end of his collection of essays (chapter “Systemic Competition during the Covid-19 Pandemic”), he emerges less as a historian and more as a political commentator. Again, the chosen genre encourages him to act like one. To his credit, he also provides historical excursions into the EU’s relations with both countries. Yet, the overall message he promotes is that the EU, and Germany in particular, are to blame. The most valuable aspect of an approach that criticizes Europe’s neglect of Russia’s economic hardships in the 1990s is, once again, to challenge the predominantly celebratory narrative of the golden decade. Nonetheless, Ther places much of the responsibility on the country’s oligarchs, while international institutions are largely to blame for the disastrous economic and social situation after the break-up of the Soviet Union. Here, one is tempted to balance Ther’s position with Tobias Rupprecht’s emphasis on the fundamentally local responsibility for the mode of economic transformation of the Soviet Union and later of Russia.¹⁰ Indeed, the responsibility of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank is undeniable but to blame mainly external subjects may make Ther seem a little less forgiving when it comes to piling up German rather than Russian responsibility. In the case of Turkey, the situation is slightly different, as strong Islamophobia on the right-wing spectrum and in mainstream parties has played an important role within nationalist discourses in Western countries. Thus, if you cannot win elections in Germany by addressing the concerns of desperate Italians, to paraphrase Ther, can you win them by saying that Turkey belongs to Europe? In the chapter dedicated to Russia and Turkey, Ther thus excavates an issue that was as important for Fukuyama as the liberal-democratic order, namely the question of national recognition. If “recognition” is in the hands of nationalists, and Angela Merkel was no exception in this respect, we must be prepared for wide-reaching consequences. This is why culture is so important to Ther, especially in times of crises. According to him, although the EU has missed a chance to be generous and truly European, with

¹⁰ RUPPRECHT, Tobias: *The Road from Snake Hill: The Genesis of Russian Neoliberalism*. In: SLOBODIAN, Quinn – PLEHWE, Dieter (eds.): *Market Civilizations: Neoliberals East and South*. New York, Zone Books 2022, pp. 109–138.

Ukraine we have an opportunity to avoid making the same mistakes the West made when the post-socialist countries emerged from communist dictatorships.

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Neoliberalism and Geopolitics

Notes on Philipp Ther's Diagnosis of Our Times

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The original German version of Philipp Ther's book has the title *Das andere Ende der Geschichte: Über die Große Transformation*; the expanded English version is called *How the West Lost the Peace*.¹ The Czech translation, *Jiný konec dějin: Eseje o velké transformaci po roce 1989*, restores the German title and adds a reference to the concept of "great transformation", most closely associated with the work of the Hungarian-Jewish economist, historian and philosopher Karl Polanyi (1886–1964).² It is the Czech title that seems most appropriate. Ther is primarily dealing with a complex of economic, social and political changes that mark the confused end of an epoch and the uncertain beginning of another; this is not the grand farewell to past history announced by confident optimists in the 1990s, but there can be no doubt about a structural shift, and the logical response is to test a model that has proved useful in making sense of comparable earlier cases. For a focus on the "loss of the peace" (in other words: the failure of the world order that was supposed to result from victory in the Cold War), a more thorough analysis of geopolitical constellations would be needed, but such considerations are marginal to Ther's argument. They would, not least, involve some reference to China, which is virtually absent from the book. It is of course possible to trace geopolitical connections of events and problems foregrounded in Ther's essays, but the discussion must start with more explicit themes. The following reflections will engage most directly with the overall perspective set out in the first essay; more selective comments on specific cases treated in later parts of the book will serve to flesh out some issues.

At the outset, I should stress that the general orientation of the book is much to my taste. That applies to Ther's critique of neoliberalism as well as his *plaidoyer* for

¹ Page numbers in brackets refer to the English edition.

² First edition: POLANYI, Karl: *The Great Transformation*. New York – Toronto, Rinehart & Co. 1944.

the relevance of Karl Polanyi's work, but also to the view that the West (including the Western Left) should do more to put its own house in order before sounding the alarm about external threats. I would nevertheless like to problematize or amend some aspects of his argument, both with regard to the historical context and in relation to conceptual issues, not least to the idea of populism.

Polanyi and the Double Movement

There seems somewhat hesitant about situating Polanyi in relation to Marxism. One reference simply mentions him among "other Marxists" (p. 51) and notes the shared failure to understand nationalism. On another occasion he is labelled a "revisionist Marxist" (p. 6), but a note adds that he was not "*only* a Marxist" (p. 240, n. 7) and links this verdict to his affinity with Christian socialism. Irrespective of the elusive Christian connection, there are good reasons to place more emphasis on Polanyi's distance from Marxism. His conception of capitalist development was, in more senses than one, more open-ended than the Marxian one. Although Polanyi did not abandon all hope for a socialist alternative, he moved away from the ideas of a predetermined collapse and a necessary transition to a more advanced society; his main focus was on periodic major crises, but they were not to be understood as breakdowns of self-derailing economic mechanisms. Rather, the interaction of politics and markets is central to the whole process, and the theoretical perspective is thus shifted from Marxian assumptions about the primacy of production to the analysis of broader social contexts. The disembedding of markets is, for Polanyi, a key feature of critical junctures in the history of capitalism, but, from another point of view, the markets let loose on society are still embedded: their escape from social controls is dependent on political initiatives, and the political factor is co-determined by ideology. Last but not least, Polanyi's interpretive model is open-ended in the sense that it allows for alternative responses to the social problems generated by marketization. He saw both radical left and radical right movements as such responses, but left no doubt about his preference for a democratic socialist strategy.

The views that set Polanyi apart from Marxist approaches (orthodox as well as revised) must also be the starting point for critical assessment of his importance for contemporary debates. An obvious point to raise is the questionable suggestion of a cyclical pattern implicit in the notion of a double movement "between the principle of the self-regulating free market and the need for 'social protection'" (p. 7). In view of the irreversible changes that have occurred during the twentieth century (from social transformations and cultural mutations to globalizing processes), the idea of an encompassing and secular cyclical dynamic is a priori implausible; and a closer look at the historical record will further highlight

the differences between the interwar background to Polanyi's theorizing and the post-Cold War constellation that now calls for a clarifying effort.

Ther does not unreservedly follow Polanyi's model of a double movement. As a historian, he criticizes the one-sided sociological focus on structures and the limited attention to actors involved in the changes. He nevertheless accepts – at a certain level of abstraction – the idea of a swinging pendulum, together with the dichotomy of possible responses. He views the development of the welfare state and the advance of economic regulation after the Second World War as moves towards an embedded capitalism, corresponding (at least tendentially) to Polanyi's left version of social protection. This leftward shift was succeeded by a counter-offensive of laissez-faire capitalism in new guises, variously described as neo-liberalism, financial capitalism or globalized capitalism (these labels reflect different perspectives on a complex phenomenon). Ther sees this as a return of Polanyi's pendulum on an enlarged scale; but his main concern is with the responses that have taken shape as the crisis-prone character of triumphant capitalism became manifest. They are predominantly on the right-wing side, and more specifically – in Ther's terms – of the kind associated with right-wing populism. He is fully aware of the social conditions behind this trend; the weakening of the workers' movement, aggravated by neo-liberal strategies of "mobilization through the threat of poverty" (p. 23) and policies inspired by a general "disdain for humanity" (p. 24), has undermined the prospects for left-wing responses. This diagnosis of recent and present times is already a step towards historicization of Polanyi's pendulum model; the following reflections will seek to move further in that direction, and thus strengthen the case against a cyclical model. The main arguments to be adduced have to do with geopolitical factors on one hand and ideological illusions on the other. As will be seen, the two sets of considerations are not unrelated. A comparison of the sequels to the First World War and the Cold War will help to clarify their interrelations. The question of contrasts and similarities between these two historical constellations is crucial to Ther's frame of reference.

That approach must, however, begin with a brief look at the 1914 crisis and its background. Polanyi's view of 1914 and its immediate aftermath is strangely downsized and largely determined by misplaced perspectives on what he calls the "civilization of the nineteenth century". He refers to it as a "hundred year's peace",³ troubled only by colonial wars and minor interventions in the affairs of small states, and argues that major wars were averted by a consciously maintained "balance of power", backed up by the global cohesion and influence

³ POLANYI, Karl: *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*. Boston, Beacon Press 2001, p. 3.

of financial capital. In fact, the nineteenth century saw brief but consequential wars between great powers: the 1853–1855 Crimean War (which Polanyi inexplicably dismisses as “a more or less colonial event”),⁴ the 1866 war between Prussia and Austria, and the 1870–1871 war between Prussia and France. In all three cases, the long-term consequences were of some importance for the attitudes and alliances of the great powers on the eve of 1914. The war between Prussia and France did not, as Polanyi suggests, simply end with France paying an indemnity; it ended with a loss of territory that no French government could ever accept as final, and this was a significant part of the multi-causal process culminating in the outbreak of the First World War.

The “balance of power” is best seen as a utopian construct, never more than partly realized, and in that regard comparable to the vision of a self-contained and sustainable market society, criticized by Polanyi. In principle, he knew that geopolitical dynamics and great power rivalry had their own weight and logic; he refers to “governments whose end was power and conquest”, adds that “power had precedence over profit” and concludes on the note that “ultimately it was war that laid down the law to business”.⁵ But this insight is overshadowed by the assumption of economic imperatives and mechanisms as the distinctive and decisive features of nineteenth-century civilization. For Polanyi, the institution of the gold standard was a symbol and a pillar of the global order established on this basis; but by the same token, the problems accompanying its maintenance were emblematic of the fundamental tensions between market and society.

The emphasis on such tensions and on the counter-trends that they provoke is Polanyi’s key to explaining the imperialist turn taken in the 1870s, shaping global history during the decades before 1914. As he saw it, the division of much of the world among Western colonial powers reflected an effort to limit the impact of the global market and secure privileged access to overseas territories. Polanyi thus ended up with a one-sidedly economic theory of imperialism, albeit in a sense very different from Marxist approaches (and starkly opposed to Lenin’s construction of a direct link between finance capital and imperialism). Somewhat counter-intuitively, imperialism becomes a part of the “protective current” that can in other contexts give rise to revolutionary movements and regimes. As noted above, this runs counter to a better but only fleetingly expressed understanding of states as in competitive pursuit of power; that perspective prevails in the most representative recent scholarship.⁶ There is no convincing reason to regard

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 5.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

⁶ See for example MANN, Michael: *The Sources of Social Power*, Vol. 2: *The Rise of Classes and Nation-States, 1760–1914*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2012 (first edition

the pursuit of power as less important or more derivative than the pursuit of wealth, and the idea of the nineteenth century as an exception from that rule does not withstand scrutiny. If the “hundred years’ peace” is seen in this light, a very different picture emerges. The original project of a lastingly peaceful order, launched by the Vienna Congress in 1815, was fatally flawed by close links to a repressive social and political stance, and the upheavals of 1848 weakened it in significant ways; between mid-century and the outbreak of global conflict, great power rivalry was contained by increasingly feeble ad hoc arrangements. The progress of economic and political globalization, in both regards intertwined with but not reducible to imperialism, became a destabilizing factor; it opened up new domains of competition, and led to unequal increase of resources for warfare and a polarization of alliances designed to cope with the changing geopolitical scene. In 1914, these trends culminated in a war of such magnitude that it must be equated with a civilizational crisis.

That was not, however, Polanyi’s view. As he saw it, “World War I and the postwar revolutions still formed part of the nineteenth century”,⁷ and the political crisis of 1914 was a consequence of disintegrative processes in the world economy, supposedly at work since the beginning of the century (but *The Great Transformation* does not contain any evidence for this causal connection). The event famously labelled by other historians as the “inaugural catastrophe” of the twentieth century becomes only a late and somewhat enlarged repetition of the periodic breakdowns plaguing a civilization dependent on the gold standard. It is only in the 1930s that we can speak of “the transformation of a whole civilization”.⁸ To round off this interpretation, Polanyi describes the 1920s as a “deeply conservative” decade, almost universally committed to a “re-establishment of the pre-1914 system”.⁹ And to boost the claim to continuity, he adds: “Not only Hindenburg and Wilson, but also Lenin and Trotsky were, in this sense, in the line of Western tradition.”¹⁰

That is, as we might say, a bit on the adventurous side. The “line of Western tradition” may be defined in different ways, but if it denotes an unbroken

published 1993) and HOPKINS, A. G.: *American Empire: A Global History*. Princeton, Princeton University Press 2019. The latter work discusses, among other things, the varying weight of economic interests in the imperial strategies of Western powers. For an unequalled multi-dimensional history of the nineteenth century, see OSTERHAMMEL, Jürgen: *Die Verwandlung der Welt: Eine Geschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts*. München, C. H. Beck 2009.

⁷ POLANYI, K.: *The Great Transformation*, p. 21.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 23.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 24.

nineteenth-century heritage, the statement is wholly misleading. More specifically, Polanyi's description of the 1920s as conservative flies in the face of a much more complicated historical reality. To begin with the most obvious aspect, the ongoing impact of the Russian revolution, does not fit into Polanyi's picture. It is true that the attempt to export Bolshevism to Eastern and Central Europe had already faltered by 1919; but there was a sequel on another front. After the failure in Europe, China became the main outlet for visions of world revolution and for some time a likely success story. The Chinese revolution unfolded along two lines, nationalist and communist (both supported and influenced by the Soviet regime), and the two currents came to blows before the end of the decade, with the first round going against the communists. Even so, the continuing transformation of China was a complicating factor in the global context; together with other situational pressures, it prompted Japanese militarists to embark on a doomed war of conquest (meant to forestall the rise of a strong and dominant China) which affected the global alignment of great powers and was in the long run destined to pave the way for a communist revival. On the other hand, the temporary eclipse of Chinese communism in the late 1920s seems to have been one of the reasons for Stalin's turn to a more rapid and violent implementation of "socialism in one country". The failure of world revolution had to be compensated on the home front, and at the same time, the claim to embody – for the near future – an otherwise stalled global project gave added legitimacy to the Bolshevik version of imperial restoration.

Another missing aspect in Polanyi's picture of the 1920s is the rise of Italian fascism. Its very inglorious end has tended to obscure the record of early successes and pretensions. It is true that the claim to have created a paradigmatic anti-liberal order (self-described both as a totalitarian and an ethical state) disguised a brittle power structure whose fault lines were to break open in 1943; but the ideological clothing was effective up to a significant point. It helped to gain broad domestic support for the regime, and to attract international acclaim. A glance at prominent admirers of Mussolini in the 1920s (from Winston Churchill to Mohandas Gandhi, and from George Bernard Shaw to Oswald Spengler) will show how different the pristine image of the regime was from its posthumous reputation. On a very different level, it may be recalled that the fascist seizure of power inspired – already a year later – a German imitation, unsuccessful at first but more indicative of further progress than has often been thought. Hitler's "beerhall coup" is mostly remembered as a ridiculous failure; but it put him on the map as a force to be reckoned with on the right wing of German politics, provided an activist background to his ideological manifesto, and exemplified a tactic less different from the one applied in 1933 than commonly believed (in both cases, the aim was an alliance with the ruling elites, later to be redefined in more radical terms, but instead of the 1923 act of force,

success was achieved through the massive pressure of a movement with strong parliamentary representation).

The upshot of these considerations is that the revolutionary forces described by Polanyi as products of the 1930s had emerged during the preceding decade, and not primarily as radicalizations of a protective movement against market expansion, but as responses to the First World War and its aftermath, with a strong focus on geopolitical challenges and orientations. Without the collapse of the Russian empire under the strains of war, there would have been no Bolshevik revolution; without the expectation of revolutionary upheavals on a global scale, the Bolsheviks would not have launched a bid for power bound to result in civil war; and without control over most of a vast and contiguous imperial space, there would have been no plausible strategy for a “socialism in one country” that was in practice geared to the rebuilding and accelerated industrialization of a great power. The triumph of National Socialism in Germany was greatly facilitated by worldwide depression, but its impact would not have been as massive as it was without a simultaneous aggravation of problems with war reparations; the resistance to those demands merged with an effort to undo the supposedly undeserved and avoidable defeat of 1918, Hitler and his movement positioned themselves as the most militant and organized force pursuing that goal, and gained power through a broader alliance bent on regaining great power status through authoritarian restructuring of state and society. In the event, the National Socialist regime subordinated social and political concerns to a project of total war and imposed an ideology tailored to that prospect. As for the Italian case, neither the statist nor the imperial goals were achieved to a degree comparable to Stalinism or the much more short-lived triumph of National Socialism; but the totalitarian aspirations and their geopolitical extension were real historical factors and affected the whole record of the regime.

The most salient conclusion to be drawn from this survey is that the movements and regimes in question had geopolitical and ideological dimensions going beyond the containment or countering of market dynamics. Their varying ways of intervention in the economic sphere depended on specific trans-economic orientations, and the scope of the latter in turn on a broader global context. The question of an interwar world order is more complicated than Polanyi's narrative of a revolutionary decade succeeding a conservative one would suggest. The notion of a liberal-democratic order assaulted by militarist and totalitarian forces is equally misleading; there is more to be said for Edward Hallett Carr's concept of a twenty years' crisis, but not for the details of his argument.¹¹ The events most

¹¹ CARR, Edward Hallett: *The Twenty Years Crisis, 1919–1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relation*. London, Macmillan 1939 (revised edition 1946). For a more sustained

conducive to lasting crisis unfolded right after the war; peace treaties were concluded against a background of ongoing conflicts and in terms highly inadequate to stated purposes. A dominant pattern was set by the Versailles conference. Its plan for a postwar order failed for multiple reasons, some obvious from the outset and others gradually apparent. Untenable conditions imposed on Germany and the exclusion of Soviet Russia left the settlement fatally flawed; American withdrawal to a position of external and uncommitted player was another blow; imprudent concessions to Japan at the expense of China upset the geopolitical balance of the East Asian region, with global consequences. Finally, the rivalry of erstwhile key allies, Britain and France, became a major obstacle to the quest for postwar order.

This was the global background to the transformative currents described by Polanyi. The attempts to revive earlier economic arrangements – including the gold standard – were chaotic and inconclusive, troubled by political dissonance and brought to an end by the Great Depression. But the counter-movements did not get far with projects of alternative order. As noted above, Italian fascism enjoyed a widely favourable perception, but the Fascist International did not get off the ground, and National Socialism was even less equipped to mobilize on an international basis. As for communism, its interwar record is perhaps best described as imperial isolation. Attempts to spread the Soviet model beyond slightly retrenched Russian borders were a series of failures.

This retrospect on the interwar years should not be mistaken for a negative verdict on Polanyi's critique of market fundamentalism. It remains a seminal contribution to the study of modern capitalism and its political context, and a necessary reference for critical approaches to the neo-liberal turn. But the "double movement" identified by Polanyi is a less self-contained process than he tended to argue. If his analytical model is to be reactivated (as Ther proposes), that can only be done in tandem with comparative reflections on global conditions and their more or less successful approximations to order. As will be seen, the aftermath to the Second World War was in this regard very different from the situation that Polanyi had in mind when he wrote *The Great Transformation*. Not that there was a single dominant or generally accepted order; but it is possible to distinguish more clearly defined competing projects of world order than in the interwar period. Both the neo-liberal turn and the backlash against it – for Ther largely identical with populism – should be seen in relation to this background.

and up-to-date account of the crisis, see BOYCE, Robert: *The Great Interwar Crisis and the Collapse of Globalization*. London, Palgrave Macmillan 2009.

Cold War Peace

A closer look at this constellation can begin with a distinction proposed by British political scientist Richard Sakwa in a recent publication.¹² He traces the formation of two kinds of order after 1945. On one hand, the United Nations represented what he calls a “Charter order” and describes as “a moderated form of great-power politics [...] tempered by a commitment to multilateral cooperation”.¹³ On the other, the predominance of the United States gave rise to a hegemonic order often labelled as liberal, although it was in fact compatible with major deviations from that model. The distinction is convincing, as far as it goes, but something may be added. The Cold War was not simply a by-product or a disturbance of *pax Americana*; it should, rather, be seen as a paradoxical case of global conflict becoming a source of order, and hence as a third factor in the arena of world politics. It became – after some initial oscillations – a mutually recognized framework for the interaction of two unequal power blocs. But there is a further aspect to be noted, of brief duration but not unimportant. The post-Stalinist Soviet leadership attempted to redefine the force field and ground rules of global rivalry; this was to be achieved through a policy of “peaceful coexistence” as well as an active search for allies among states emerging from decolonization. This strategy – formulated in the mid-1950s – foundered on an unexpected obstacle. The Chinese communist regime, invoking – however circuitously – the ideological seniority of its leader, aspired to leadership in the communist bloc; and at the same time, it tried to outflank the Soviet Union in the developing world by assuming a key role in the non-aligned movement launched by the Bandung conference in 1955. Both bids failed, but the result was a Sino-Soviet conflict, in full swing at the end of the 1950s and culminating in an informal alliance of China and the United States against the Soviet Union. Historians have recognized it as a second cold war, perhaps decisive for the outcome of the first.

The Sino-Soviet conflict is a momentous and instructive example of interaction between ideological, geopolitical and socio-economic factors. A power bloc apparently united by a shared ideology split apart, not just due to divergent interpretations of the common doctrine but because of the extravagant and incompatible great power aspirations that it inspired on both sides. The ideologically magnified geopolitical imperatives were strong and antagonistic enough to overshadow the supposedly more fundamental clash of socio-economic orders; both communist powers now sought accommodation with the capitalist superpower, with very

¹² SAKWA, Richard: *Lost Peace: How the West Failed to Prevent a Second Cold War*. New Haven, Yale University Press 2023.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 4.

different outcomes. In the Soviet case, a brief culmination of *détente* was cut short by expanded influence in the Third World, more apparent than real but spectacular enough to provoke an American shift to more confrontational policies; the Chinese change of course led – after a chaotic intermezzo in the 1970s and a temporary backlash because of action taken against a protest movement in 1989 – to a much closer rapprochement and eventually to a massive alignment with capitalist strategies of growth.

The global constellations emerging and changing in the course of two interconnected cold wars constitute a background to the successive shifts of economic regimes. The first point to be noted is that post-1945 cases of Polanyi's "second movement" (moves to regulate markets or the dynamic of capitalism, to be more precise) are more varied than his model would suggest, but none of the variants has paved the way for the kind of democratic socialism that he envisaged as an alternative to market economy. A further observation to be made is that although the globally consequential surge of neo-liberalism may have marked a historical watershed, it has unfolded in a context that set limits, caused variations and generated reactions. Given the geopolitical history of the last two decades, it is hardly necessary to argue at length that the world has not been "governed by market forces", as Chairman of the American Federal Reserve Alan Greenspan announced in 2007, and shows no sign of drawing closer to such a condition. And if this calls for a differentiating analysis of neo-liberalism, it is by the same token a reason not to take for granted that counter-currents can be reduced to a common denominator. With these caveats in mind, we should now take a closer look at some key steps in Ther's argument.

The international framework of the original Cold War was flexible enough to allow for significant and innovative developments on both sides of the global divide, different in fundamental respects but comparable to such an extent that a seminal interpretation of the twentieth century by British historian Eric Hobsbawm¹⁴ could refer to the couple of decades after its middle as a "golden age", at least in Europe and the United States (it is much less clear that this label would apply to other parts of the world). In core countries of the West, the 1950s and 1960s were a time of regulated capitalism and an advancing welfare state; these developments were in part due to concerns about the challenge from a competing system, but that factor operated in combination with others and was more important in some countries than in others. In Eastern Europe, the expectations and temporary successes of reform communism came to a close at the end of the 1960s.

¹⁴ HOBSBAWM, Eric: *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914–1991*. London, Abacus 1994.

Postwar achievements of societies conditioned by the Cold War did not enter into Polanyi's theoretical explorations in the same way as interwar crises and transformations, but they obviously served to maintain his faith in the general perspective set out in his main work. He did not live to see the turn to a different road in the 1970s. For those who have – after an interval dominated by opposite views – set out to revive his approach, it has been a primary task to account for reasons, driving forces and ramifications of the neoliberal wave; they have also faced the problem of explaining and understanding responses that bear some resemblance to Polanyi's idea of counter-movements, but differ markedly in other respects. These aspects are all included in Ther's analysis, with specific accents and nuances. Although he is most interested in the "great transformation" after 1989, he is well aware of the prehistory that goes back to the 1970s, and has something to say on this background.

Ther joins those who stress the conjunction of particular economic problems in the 1970s – "when low growth and high inflation led to stagflation" (p. 9) – as an opening for neoliberalism; the oil crises of 1973 and 1979 are key events often mentioned in this connection. But it has never been shown that the epoch-making change of policies and perspectives was a necessary consequence of these circumstances. It was, as Ther emphasizes, a project "deliberately imposed from above by the respective political and economic elites" (p. 5), inspired by visions that went far beyond momentary conditions. To use a term coined by British historians, it was a "rulers' revolt". Here it seems – as in the case of Polanyi's original ideas – appropriate to add a remark on geopolitical and ideological factors lending support to the project. Most obviously, the downgrading of the communist threat broadened the scope for initiative action. The Sino-American *entente* established in 1971 marked the final eclipse of a unified communist bloc; at the same time, it became clear that the previously feared economic upswing of the Soviet Union was not going to happen. What remained was only a military challenge, and since that source of power was ultimately dependent on economic strength, manifest decline on that level was bound to affect performance in the arms race and thus to boost Western chances of winning it.

The geopolitical rebalancing had direct ideological effects. Since the Soviet model had been the overwhelmingly most visible and powerful claimant to socialist credentials, its fading was bound to undermine the appeal of socialism in a general sense and on a global scale. Moreover, the loss of great-power backing, direct and indirect, coincided with another development adverse to socialist ideas. As sociologists (especially French ones) showed in empirically grounded studies, the cultural legacy of the protest movements of the late 1960s was very ambiguous; it could be adapted to individualistic and entrepreneurial strategies of innovation. In a context and an atmosphere already conducive to a retreat from socialism, that possibility tended to prevail over

others. This somewhat counter-intuitive convergence was an important feature of the decades after 1970.

The Neo-liberal Turn and the Concept of Populism

To sum up, the neo-liberal turn began as a transformative strategy taking advantage of a favourable conjuncture and a receptive global constellation; on that basis, preparatory intellectual work of older origin could be brought to bear on political issues. This point is the first step towards a historicization of the neo-liberal phenomenon. The next one is to consider the roads taken and forms assumed in different historical settings; as the message spread to multiple parts of the world, its specific claims to relevance and ways of translation into practice changed in response to diverse contexts. A comparative study of neoliberal regimes calls for typological distinctions, and Ther suggests at least a first step of that kind: “a fundamental distinction can be made between *neoliberalism by conviction* and *situational neoliberalism* in which certain principles and measures are implemented primarily because they seem to be the most reasonable option in a certain context” (p. xvii). Privatization of state industries is then mentioned as an example of the latter type.

A revised and expanded version of this distinction may be proposed. The reference to “conviction” is perhaps overly concerned with personalities; if we shift the focus to socio-cultural aspects, we can speak of an ideological neoliberalism, and within that category, a doctrinal version can be distinguished from more diffuse commitments (the Thatcher brand was definitely more doctrinal than the Reagan one). On the other side, privatization for the purpose of a short-term increase of state revenue is best described as opportunistic neo-liberalism. The concept of situational liberalism seems more suited to cases where neoliberal policies are accepted on the grounds that a given state of things – global or local – leaves no other choice; in other words, the rationale has to do with constraints rather than principles or opportunities. Arguments in that vein were – alongside more fundamental premises – of some importance for the legitimization of neo-liberalism in Eastern Europe after 1989. But a closer look at that example also reveals another significant distinction. The principled part of neoliberal advocacy was a mixture of ideological and utopian elements; utopian aspirations, expressed in visions of a superior social order, took a paradoxical turn through identification with an existing model: the advanced societies of the West. In this connection, it should be noted that Ther’s critical comment on Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes’s well-known work is not quite on target. The upshot of their analysis is not primarily that “East European politicians deliberately and obediently imitated the West” (p. 15, also p. 31 on “over-adaptation to the West”); rather, the point

is that the attempt to imitate, regardless of the different historical context and on the basis of inadequate notions about the model, led to unforeseen and disappointing results.¹⁵

One more typological perspective merits mention. The neoliberal project, though nowhere uncontested, could be promoted in an openly confrontational or relatively consensual fashion. In this regard, the contrast between the Thatcher government in Britain and the Labour government in Australia (1983–1996) is striking. In the latter case, there was no conflict comparable to Thatcher's collision with the trade unions; a more moderate procedure enabled the ruling party to maintain its connection to the unions.

Further distinctions could be suggested, but the general point seems clear: the transformation of the concept of neoliberalism from an affirmative to a negative one (noted by Ther) has somewhat obscured the historical – and therefore differentiating – trajectory of the phenomenon in question. To stress that aspect is not to reject Ther's general criticism of neoliberalism as a world-changing movement; as he stresses, it increases inequality of multiple kinds, from individuals to regions, and it inflicts precarity and social decline on vast segments of the populations subjected to its power (pp. xix–xx). The diversity of paths and contexts becomes more important when the record of counter-movements is to be examined. Ther joins those who propose “populism” as a covering concept for this variegated and often confusing field of political forces. But when it comes to more substantive issues, he has some difficulties with giving this label a clear meaning. The strongest claims are made in the first chapter, which contains the following definition of populism: “As a historian, I see it as a coherent world view that could be characterized as a bundle of promises of protection and security. Right-wing populists promise to protect the economy against international competition, which is why they have turned against free trade; to protect the domestic labour market from foreign competition [...] to protect society against crime [...] and against terror, which is seldom mentioned without the addition of the word ‘Islamic’; and to preserve national values and the traditional family unit with its clearly defined gender roles. This is, overall, a resolutely antiliberal world view.” (p. 30) As a definition of populism, this does not stand up to scrutiny. The only hint at a common denominator of left and right populism is the reference to a “bundle of promises”, too limited to get anywhere near a world view and so vague that it could be turned against the welfare state. The following details only apply to right-wing populism, and they are too conjunctural to add up to any distinctive orientation, let alone a world view. If circumstances seem to call for something

¹⁵ KRASTEV, Ivan – HOLMES, Stephen: *The Light that Failed: A Reckoning*. New York, Allen Lane 2019.

of the kind, any political party will take a stand against crime and terror; criticism of dogmas and myths about free trade is by no means limited to authors or parties that could conceivably be described as populist. In sum, Ther's formulation does not provide any criteria that would suffice to contrast populism with fundamentals of the liberal tradition (the latter being understood as a complex of key ideas, partly complementary but also open to dissonant developments).

Moreover, the above definition is out of tune with other statements in the book. On the next page, we are told that "the social and economic policies of right-wing populists therefore stand in continuity with neoliberalism almost everywhere (Poland is an exception)" (p. 31). The point about Polish exceptionalism is valid, but the general statement casts doubt on the idea of populism as a coherent project, and that conclusion is reinforced by analyses of concrete examples, especially the chapter on Italy. The account of Silvio Berlusconi's years in power is the single most damning indictment of a populist politician in the book, and it leaves no doubt about the strong admixture of neoliberalism in the policies that ran Italy "into the ground" (p. 88). It would thus seem that the most serious threat to European societies in the post-Cold War era is the worst of both worlds, liberal and antiliberal, rather than a wrong version of Polanyi's counter-movement.

Ther is of course not the only political analyst who has difficulties with the concept of populism. An uncontrollable inflation of this term has been characteristic of debates during the last two or three decades; populism has been diagnosed in all sections of the political spectrum, left, right and centre, and the question of a common denominator has either been neglected or answered in inadequate ways. This has understandably provoked scepticism about the very concept and suggestions to the effect that it would best be discarded. It may, however, be possible to see the proliferation as a symptom of an intuitive grasp of new phenomena and to argue that, to get further, a new theoretical perspective is needed. The most serious attempt to fulfil that need is probably Pierre Rosanvallon's book on the century of populism.¹⁶ To bring it in here is also a way to signal the absence of France – a very important arena of the political contest involving "populism" – from Ther's analysis.

Rosanvallon's argument presupposes a certain conception of modern democracy. It appears as a problematic regime, made up of several distinct components; each of them is open to different interpretations, historically conditioned, and so is the overall complex of relations between them. Against this background, populism appears as a configuration of modern democracy, distinctive enough to be identified as a likely key feature of the present century; whether it is as self-contained as its most trenchant critics like to think remains to be seen. Rosanvallon

¹⁶ ROSANVALLON, Pierre: *Le siècle du populisme: Histoire, théorie, critique*. Paris, Seuil 2020.

lists five features of the populist paradigm.¹⁷ The first and most fundamental is an emphasis on the unity, concrete presence and primacy of the “people”; this construction may be seen as a fusion of two traditionally imputed meanings, i.e. the people as a civic community and as a separate part of society, majoritarian but underprivileged. The mythification of the people entails a specific conception of democratic practice, perhaps better described as immediate rather than direct democracy, because of the aversion to institutional mediation and the emphasis on an instant and visible expression of the people’s will. That leads, in turn, to a truncated notion of representation: a leader, a “man of the people” (as experience shows, not necessarily a male) replaces or at least takes priority over representative institutions. A fourth feature, plausibly connected to the others, is an economic policy guided by what Rosanvallon calls national protectionism. Finally, a populist type of political passions and emotions is added to the picture (the inclusion of such phenomena in discussions of political theory seems more common in French publications than elsewhere); its salient aspects are resentment and anger against a supposedly usurpatory oligarchy and the opaque structures designed to hide its power.

Here I cannot discuss Rosanvallon’s extensive comments on the historical context of the populist turn. But the proposed interpretive model is convincing, as far as it goes, and it is compatible with the idea of left- as well as right-wing variations (twenty-first century populism can then be seen as one of several developments that have blurred this traditional distinction). Some reservations – not fundamental objections – should be noted. The coherence of the five features is a matter of elective affinities, rather than strict and invariant necessity. It is therefore to be expected that populist forces will need to put up with the compromises current in real-life politics, and hence to accentuate some parts of the pattern while putting others on hold; that fits Ther’s portrayal of the mixtures mentioned above. Another important consideration is that this outline of a common denominator cannot be equated with a world view. The compatibility with different world views reinforces political divergences.

If we follow Rosanvallon’s definition, populism is a significant aspect of the present global constellation, but not as self-contained as Ther’s strongest formulation would suggest, nor as diffuse as the journalistic overuse of the term has made it seem. Its recurrent association with other trends raises the question of its role – if any – in the events discussed in the afterword to Ther’s book and described as “a bad end” (thus reiterating and validating the original title’s allusion to another end of history). The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was the ultimate refutation of post-Cold War fantasies about an end of history, and

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 29–81.

perhaps better described as a bad new beginning (and a reminder of the fact that history has always been – to a very significant degree – shaped by the interplay of ideology and geopolitics; the revolutionary aspirations that seemed exhausted in 1989 now appear as a particular case of that pattern). Is there a populist side to Putin's war? That can arguably be said about the way of presenting it to a domestic audience, but then we are dealing with purely instrumental populism. The war itself is something else: a decisive escalation of efforts to regain a lost or at least impaired imperial status. As such, it has a prehistory that should be recalled but not mistaken for a rational justification.

As for the geopolitical record between 1989 and 2022 (especially the ways and circumstances of NATO's expansion to the East), there is no reason to disagree with Richard Sakwa's summary: the United States overreached and Russia overreacted.¹⁸ But then it needs to be added that the 2022 invasion was already more than an overreaction: it redefined the whole constellation of interstate relation and frontlines in Europe and beyond, with consequences that are still hard to estimate. That said, it should be added that although I agree with Ther's assessment of the war as a very major turn for the worse, I disagree with two aspects of his argument (in fact, they seem not only untenable, but also mutually incompatible). On one hand, the invasion was not a simple continuation of a conflict going on since 2014. The beginnings of the war and the accompanying official discourse clearly suggest that the aim was a complete reconquest of Ukraine; this was a delusional project, and in that sense irrational even from the Russian point of view. A more rational approach would have led to limited action; the existing frontier could have been frozen by annexation of the Donetsk and Luhansk territories already occupied. Needless to say, that would have been a breach of international law, but not a geopolitical disaster, and it would have prevented Ukraine from joining NATO in the foreseeable future. On the other hand, Ther writes that Russia started the war "with much wider ambitions, including the withdrawal of all NATO troops from the countries that joined the military alliance after 1997" (p. 226), and this makes the whole enterprise sound more delusional than can plausibly be claimed. The Russian leadership cannot have imagined that NATO would comply with the demand for such a withdrawal; the only convincing explanation is that this was meant to create a climate of confrontation, thus aiding the psychological preparation for war.

The other side of the prehistory is no less important but much less frequently mentioned. The attempted imperial revival is part and parcel of a statist backlash against the neoliberal chaos of the 1990s, for which Peter Reddaway and Dmitri Glinski, authors of a very thorough critical study, coined the label "market

¹⁸ SAKWA, R.: *Lost Peace*.

Bolshevism”,¹⁹ and at the same time a way of managing the tension between that backlash – necessarily incomplete – and the oligarchy that proved to be the last gasp of Russian-style neoliberalism. In that sense, experience vindicates Ther’s indictment of neoliberalism as conducive to the loss of peace, although it must – as I have tried to show – be more extensively contextualized than he has done.

Keywords:

post-communism; neoliberalism; populism; Europe; United States; *Great Transformation*; Karl Polanyi; Marxism; economic policy; political-economic systems; end of history

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¹⁹ REDDAWAY, Peter – GLINSKI, Dmitri: *The Tragedy of Russia’s Reforms: Market Bolshevism Against Democracy*. Washington, D. C., United States Institute of Peace Press 2000.

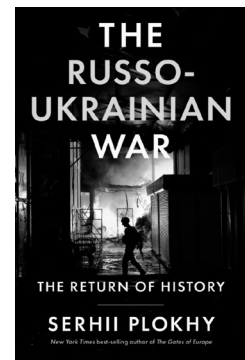
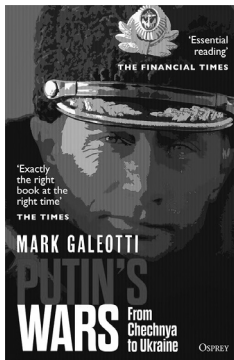


Russo-Ukrainian War

Roots, Causes and “Missed Opportunities”

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Prague – Brussels



GALEOTTI, Mark:

Putin's Wars: From Chechnya to Ukraine.

Oxford, Osprey 2022, 374 pages,
ISBN 978-1-4728-6445-1.

MATTHEWS, Owen:

*Overreach: The Inside Story
of Putin's War Against Ukraine.*

London – Dublin, HarperCollins 2022,
414 pages, ISBN 978-0-00-856274-8.

PLOKHY, Serhii:

The Russo-Ukrainian War: The Return of History.

New York, W. W. Norton & Co. 2023, 376 pages, ISBN 978-1-324-07892-0.

SAKWA, Richard:

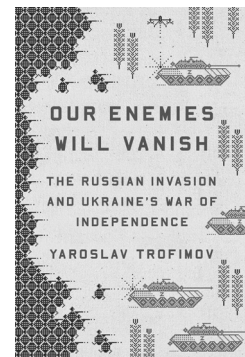
Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands.

London – New York, I. B. Tauris 2015, 286 pages, ISBN 978-1-350-34081-7.

TROFIMOV, Yaroslav:

*Our Enemies Will Vanish: The Russian Invasion
and Ukraine's War of Independence.*

New York, Penguin Random House 2024, 370 pages, ISBN 978-0-593-65518-4.



Europe is consumed by its biggest land war since the Second World War. Only time will tell if the war on our watch is a last imperialistic spasm and land grab or a harbinger of things to come. Whatever the outcome, the consequences are truly global, arguably even more than those of 9/11. Not only is the world security architecture changing, but we are witnessing the transformation of global energy and food supply chains, possibly forever. It is a war as much about the future as the past, as the Kremlin's struggle to control history is about controlling not only Russia but others as well.

Roots

There is probably no deeper and broader analysis of the historical context of the conflict than Serhii Plokhy's *Russo-Ukrainian War: The Return of History*.¹ The title is compelling and well-chosen. Ukraine was the victim of aggression but it has mounted a remarkable resistance as a strong, resilient and resourceful nation and society. Against Russian imperial expansion, Ukraine fights not just for its survival as a nation but its existence as a country.

The ongoing conflict, Plokhy rightly claims, is indeed of the old type but taking place in a new setting. Russia's onslaught came as the latest embodiment of (mis)perceptions deeply anchored in Russian historical self-perception which sees Ukraine – with the exception of her Western regions – as little more than an extension of the homeland. And it is precisely in laying out the historical context that Plokhy's text is strongest, building on his previous seminal books on the topic.²

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, Ukrainian statehood became a reality for the first time in Ukraine's history, recognized by the international community, including Russia. As Plokhy shows – contrary to Putin's narrative in his 2021 “hobby-historical essay” slavishly parroted

¹ Serhii Plokhy is an internationally renowned Ukrainian historian and, since 2013, the Director of the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute at Harvard University. Born in the Soviet Union in 1957, he studied history in Kyiv, and has worked in Canada and the United States since the mid-1990s. For a highly informative and quality treatment of the same subject see ZYGAR, Mikhail: *War and Punishment: The Story of Russian Oppression and Ukrainian Resistance*. London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson 2023. Czech edition: *Válka a trest: Putin, Zelenskij a cesta k ruské invazi na Ukrajinu*. Příbram, Pistorius a Olšanská 2024.

² PLOKHY, Serhii: *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine*. London, Penguin Books 2016 (Czech edition: *Brány Evropy: Dějiny Ukrajiny*. Brno, Jota 2023); IDEM: *Lost Kingdom: The Quest for Empire and the Making of the Russian Nation. From 1470 to the Present*. New York, Basic Books 2017; IDEM: *Last Empire: Final Days of the Soviet Union*. New York, Basic Books 2014.

by some of his apologists³ – modern Ukraine was not Lenin's invention. Already in 1917, prior to the Bolshevik Coup, the Central Council (*Rada*) of Ukraine declared Ukraine's autonomy within the Russian Republic. After Lenin's power grab, the Ukrainian People's Republic (*Ukrainska Narodnia Respublika*) was proclaimed, which more or less included the territories of today's Ukraine. When the Bolsheviks finally established their rule, they had to cope with Ukraine's awakened national consciousness. The ultimate opportunist, Lenin simply concluded that Bolshevik power would be best served by granting a certain degree of autonomy to Ukraine. This was a momentous decision in the long run. Rather than inventing Ukraine, which had already existed as an idea and a short-lived state, by recognizing Ukraine's autonomy, the Bolshevik government had to define Russia's territory and institutions as distinct from the Russian empire. Lenin thus laid the foundations for a modern Russian as well as Ukrainian state, Plokhy argues convincingly.

Similar to his previous book, Plokhy claims that Ukraine was the main instigator in the Soviet collapse when it turned down Mikhail Gorbachev's project of a reformed Union. Yet afterwards, the trajectories of the two nations followed different paths. Russia initially chose a radical, revolutionary market economy approach. In doing so, the President Boris Yeltsin dealt an initial blow to the nascent Russian democracy by violently taking over the recalcitrant communist-dominated parliament, with the West turning a blind eye.

Ukraine's modern statehood was born, by and large, from the improbable and hardly uplifting embrace of Ukrainian nationalists and communists. At the same time, Ukraine was destined to be pluralistic despite efforts by various leaders to impose a stricter regime. The initial drawbacks of a fragile state and society turned out to be a blessing in disguise, as its weak notion of statehood and regional diversity made it nearly impossible to unite around a strong undemocratic leader.

Russia under Vladimir Putin preferred that other countries in its putative sphere of interest were governed the same way as itself. No wonder Moscow was increasingly frustrated by the emergence of successive Ukrainian leaders who were not particularly willing to do his bidding and were incapable of turning Ukraine into Russia's mirror image.

Where Plokhy sees a blessing in disguise for Ukraine's pluralistic and democratic future, the veteran British scholar Richard Sakwa has a very different view

³ See PUTIN, Vladimir: On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians. In: *President of Russia* [online], 12. 07. 2021. [Accessed 2024-11-15.] Available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

of the roots of the crisis.⁴ In his 2015 *Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands*, he identifies two apparently incompatible visions of Ukraine's future as far back as early as 1991. One, in Sakwa's terminology the "monist" vision, reflected the preferences of the Western regions for a country based on one (Ukrainian) language and "affirming the link between ethnicity and the state" (p. 14), which also looked to the West for its future. Apparently sooner or later, this essentially Russophobic vision was bound to clash with the supposedly "pluralistic" vision of a decentralized, inclusive Ukraine made of disparate peoples brought together by civic identity and maintaining close ties with Russia.

In spite of a mainly sound and erudite analysis of Ukraine's challenges, Sakwa fails to see that – precisely for the reasons laid out by Plokhy – neither the monists nor the pluralists were able to impose their vision on an inescapably heterogeneous country. Ukraine was destined to oscillate between two extremist versions which were shared by very few at the top of the Ukrainian state and society. Sakwa's "monists" are thus little more than straw men as ethno-nationalists and linguistic purists were always marginal in the Ukrainian political reality. Those determined to build a truly independent state – e.g. Leonid Kuchma, not entirely accurately portrayed during the 1994 presidential election as the candidate of the East – were mostly Russian speaking and not confined to the west of the country.

What is more, where Sakwa entirely loses nuance is his claim that the two extremist visions directly translated into how the Ukrainian elites saw the future of their country in Europe. In his schematic rendering, this tension was apparently unwisely exacerbated by the "Sophie's Choice" presented to Ukraine by the West, both NATO and the European Union: Ukraine either joins the West-centred system or it will be left out. Ukraine was thus apparently deprived of the option to build together with Russia a decentralized, more inclusive vision of Europe with Russia as one of its points of gravity without a single ideology.

In reality, the West imposed no such choice. Whenever Ukraine sought membership or integration, the EU and NATO only imposed "criteria" and conditions. Sakwa thus in many ways sticks to the tenets of Russian mythology.

The Western choice of Ukraine was hardly the extension of the "monist" version. In fact, it was launched by the "pluralist" president Kuchma. As the EU was getting ready for its first post-Cold War enlargement, Kuchma continued to stress that there was no alternative to its "European vector" and that membership of the EU was Ukraine's ultimate goal. Similarly, Kuchma's Kyiv was worried that excessively fast NATO enlargement would increase Russia's pressure on the country

⁴ Richard Sakwa (born 1953) is a political scientist, former Professor of Russian and European Politics at the University of Kent and Honorary Professor at the Faculty of Political Science, Moscow State University.

to join its sphere of interest. While Ukraine in the 1990s was not ready to apply for NATO membership, it did not want to see it excluded as a possibility either.

Equally unconvincing is Sakwa's thesis that by applying for NATO membership, Ukraine was doing the bidding of the United States. In 2002, Kyiv's expression of its desire to apply for NATO membership was entirely its own. Various stakeholders in Washington, while beholden to the view that no European democracy should be excluded from being considered for NATO membership, remained doubtful about the seriousness of Ukraine's effort and its ability and willingness to implement the necessary democratic reforms. Paradoxically, Ukraine's declaration in May 2002 of its intent to join NATO was also the result of Russia's own rapprochement with NATO in the post-9/11 reset.⁵

Even in these unstable circumstances and shifting alliances, NATO membership was not necessarily a controversial issue in Ukraine between Sakwa's putative "monist" and "pluralist" élites. Due to the fratricidal fight within the "Orange camp", Viktor Yanukovych, the anti-Orange nemesis, became Prime Minister for more than a year in 2006. To be sure, Yanukovych was always prone to political expediency when money was involved, and not as viscerally passionate about NATO accession as the Orange leader Viktor Yushchenko. Yet, as Prime Minister he too supported Ukraine's bid for NATO membership. In fact, the real problem for Ukraine's pro-NATO elites across the political spectrum was the general public: until 2014 public support for NATO membership hovered at best around 30 per cent. EU membership, in contrast, always commanded majority support, including in the Eastern regions.

Concluding that NATO membership was off the agenda due to Western reluctance, Russia's opposition and lack of public support, Yanukovych, who became President in 2010, shelved Ukraine's NATO bid. However, he pursued EU integration in the ultimately false hope that Russia would condone it. When this turned not to be the case, he stubbornly resisted Russian pressure to join the Russian-sponsored Eurasian Union. In doing so, he drew ire and ultimately far from subtle coercion from Moscow, who knew full well that its Eurasian integration idea was meaningless without Ukraine. Putin's threats to tear the country's economy apart by a devastating ban on imports from Ukraine and, according to many sources, to detach Crimea as well were sweetened by an offer of a loan of 15 billion euros meant as a kickback to Yanukovych but on far from generous terms for the country as a whole. Yanukovych buckled and turned down the Association Agreements with the EU.

⁵ See, for example, the very well-informed memoir by US diplomat and academic Steven Pifer: PIFER, Steven: *The Eagle and the Trident: U.S.-Ukraine Relations in Turbulent Times*. Washington, D. C., The Brookings Institution 2017, pp. 221-224.

This decision, tantamount to an end of “the European dream” for Ukraine, triggered the Maidan Revolution and Yanukovich’s ousting. Russia delivered on its earlier threats with the annexation of Crimea and the first invasion of Ukraine in the Donbas, which in turn led the post-Maidan authorities to renew their bid to join the EU and NATO, a key part of the Ukrainian constitution since 2019.

Why?

The annexation of Crimea was the first step to “impose friendship” on Ukraine by military means after a quarter century of efforts to use non-military (albeit far from mild) pressure. Unlike Crimea, which had for Russia a strategic, political and historical value, the war in Donbas and the full-fledged invasion since 2022 is less about territory and a great deal more about Ukraine’s statehood and sovereignty in any meaningful sense.

Since 2014, it was clear that Putin was ready to go to war over Ukraine. Nonetheless, that a war is possible does not necessarily mean that it is also inevitable. As prolific academic Mark Galeotti claims in his *Putin’s Wars: From Chechnya to Ukraine*,⁶ the intervention made no sense as Russia in many ways was already winning without firing a single shot. The pressure since 2021 weakened Ukraine politically and economically. Investors were worried about the possibility of a war shutting Ukraine off from financial markets, and the Ukrainian currency was in free fall. European leaders were making pilgrimages to Moscow telling Putin what he wanted to hear, in particular that Ukraine will not join NATO in the foreseeable future. The Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky himself admitted that joining NATO is a long-term dream.

Galeotti acknowledges that he was amongst those who mistakenly believed that having achieved almost everything Putin would ultimately refrain from using military force. That said, even those in the minority who expected a military action – like the present author – could hardly imagine an operation beyond annexation of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions conducted with Second World War-reminiscent disrespect for human lives, both civilian and military.⁷

⁶ Czech edition: *Putinovy války: Od Čečenska po Ukrajinu*. Praha, Bourdon 2023. Mark Galeotti (born 1965) is a British historian and author specializing in the field of transnational crime and Russian security affairs, and Honorary Professor at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London.

⁷ In a treatise released only a few weeks before the invasion, Galeotti makes a broader argument to the effect that while shooting wars are not to be discounted, big wars are in decline. The argument is only valid to the extent that many a conflict start not as a big war but are intended as a short victorious military operation. Even the First World War was expected to be

The problem for any meaningful prediction arises when seemingly rational actors such as (arguably) Putin proceed from irrational and delusional assumptions concocted in his Covid bunker. As the head of the Newsweek bureau in Moscow, Owen Matthews, shows in his well-resourced yet at times tendentious *Overreach: The Inside Story of Putin's War Against Ukraine*,⁸ the Kremlin's intention was not to launch a years-long war with Ukraine but a short, targeted *blitzkrieg*.

Matthews blames the West for many sins including raising the tension with Russia by helping Ukraine build its military forces after 2014. Yet, he ultimately contradicts himself when admitting that it was the perceived weakness of the West that contributed to the perfect storm by way of the disastrous US withdrawal from Afghanistan in the summer of 2021. According to Matthews' high-placed sources within the Kremlin, the Afghan debacle came as "a gift from the heavens. [...] Suddenly the Americans were humiliated in front of the whole world." (p. 194) America's Afghan debacle together with the feeling that the previous Russian military build-up along the Ukrainian border in 2021 failed to produce the desired effect in the West and prepared the ground for the fateful decision to solve the "Ukraine problem" once for all.

According to Matthews' sources (interestingly, he seems to have travelled to Russia even after February 2022), the fateful decision to launch a full-fledged invasion was taken on 1 December 2021. In that situation, the only thing that could have prevented Putin from launching a military operation would have been granting Russia all she wanted far beyond Ukraine. This was apparently the reason for Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov to launch his subsequent ultimatum – not a "menu" to choose from, as Russia's Deputy Foreign Ministers Sergei Ryabkov and Aleksandr Grushko emphasized to their Western counterparts – whereby Moscow requested the withdrawal of all NATO troops and equipment from the territory of the new member states, restoring the military situation to 1997 before the first round of post-Cold War enlargement (Matthews erroneously says 2007, p. 205). This would have meant among other things NATO scrapping all measures to defend Allies on the Eastern flank taken in response to the annexation of Crimea. The Article 5 guarantee to the Eastern Allies would have become merely a political commitment unsupported by credible military force.

Thus, in Matthews' rendering, the absurd December 2021 proposals were meant as a serious attempt by Lavrov to prevent the war. "Putin is our last hope

over by the end of 1914 by many of its protagonists. See GALEOTTI, Marc: *The Weaponization of Everything: A Field Guide to the New Way of War*. New Haven, Yale University Press 2022.

⁸ Owen Matthews (born 1971) is a British writer, historian and journalist. He is best known for his first book *Stalin's Children: Three Generations of Love, War, and Survival* (London, Walker & Co. 2008).

to avert war,” he quotes Lavrov as saying (p. 204), after which the minister apparently embarked on an effort to avoid the military adventure by gaining (almost) everything without firing a single shot. The maximalist nature of Lavrov’s proposals at the time gave the impression that they were a typical Russian opening that could be negotiated down. If Matthews is right, they were a serious if ill-intended take-it-or-leave-it military ultimatum couched in diplomatic jargon. Overall, Matthews seems to ascribe too much importance to allegedly alternative thinking at the top – although Lavrov clearly was not part of the inner decision-making circle and underestimated the determination of his master to solve the Ukrainian issue once and for all by toppling the government – in addition to the landgrab of the Eastern regions. By solely blaming Putin for the war, Matthews thus (un)intentionally exonerates the rest of the country, in particular its elites, from the tragedy that followed.

Disaster

In launching the so-called special military operation on 24 February 2022 Putin hoped that the West would react in the same way as it did to the annexation of Crimea. Half-measure sanctions with little economic impact following Ukraine’s inevitable and immediate collapse coupled with the ousting of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and his replacement by a Moscow-friendly puppet, followed by a gradual return to business as usual.

Yet, the lesson Putin drew from the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea should have been different. As weak as the West’s post-2014 policy arguably was, Ukraine did not collapse and instead reconstituted itself as a functioning state within a few months by electing a new president, Petro Poroshenko. By the late summer of 2014 its armed forces had encircled the separatist militia in the Donetsk region at the point of imminent defeat and triggered a Russian invasion. For some reason Matthews does not ask – much less answer – the question of the wrong lessons that were learnt either.

As in 2014, Ukraine did not collapse in 2022 and her bravery as well as the outrage at the extent of the operation going way beyond the two annexed “people’s republics” of Donetsk and Luhansk made a strong impression on the civilized world. Putin and the narrow circle planning the operation now faced a situation they had hardly foreseen. Following initial doubts as to Ukraine’s chances to withstand the Russian attack, Western support grew by the week.

Ukraine’s resistance is the focus of an excellent journalistic account by Yaroslav Trofimov, *Our Enemies Will Vanish: The Russian Invasion and Ukraine’s War of Independence*, combining stories of resistance, survival, bravery and inevitable cowardice and betrayal with astute analysis based on his first-hand Ukrainian sources.⁹

Trofimov convincingly refutes the thesis that the entire Ukrainian leadership took lightly Western warnings of an immediate Russian attack. Zelensky publicly downplayed the threat lest panic destabilize the dire economic situation even more dramatically. His standard reply to Western warnings was a request for support and arms. The military leadership, however, acted upon the warnings. Unbeknownst even to Ukraine's political leadership, Chief of the General Staff Valerii Zaluzhnyi, currently Ambassador of Ukraine to the UK, ordered air defences and aircraft to be deployed outside their usual locations. "We needed the adversary to think that we are deployed in our usual bases, smoking grass, watching TV and posting on Facebook," Trofimov quotes Zaluzhnyi as saying (p. 30). This secrecy was, however, also a double-edged sword as it gave many in the West the impression that the Ukrainian forces would be a sitting duck for the Russian invaders.¹⁰

In the early stages of the conflict, the Ukrainian military leadership made the strategic decision to trade land for time in order to survive the initial onslaught. Rather than fighting for every village and borough as Russia would have preferred and expected, the Ukrainian forces withdrew to defensible positions, avoiding skirmishes with the stronger Russian forces.

The way Russia and Ukraine conducted their war could have hardly been more different. Russia followed the highly hierarchical Soviet model with little initiative given to commanders at the tactical level. What is more, with no military experience, Putin was unduly involved in planning and ordering the military operation even at the tactical level. The planning of the operation was entrusted to the Federal Security Service (*Federalnaia sluzhba bezopasnosti*, FSB) rather than military professionals. In contrast, following the Western NATO model adopted by the Ukrainian military, Zelensky left the conduct of the military operation to his competent military command, maintaining only broad oversight. While NATO is not part of the conflict, the war between Russia and Ukraine only proved the superiority of NATO's approach. As a democracy, Ukraine fought a war as democracies do, relying on trust and initiative to the extent possible.¹¹

⁹ Yaroslav Trofimov (born 1969) is a Ukrainian-born Italian writer, journalist and chief foreign-affairs correspondent at *The Wall Street Journal*

¹⁰ Similarly, but for different reasons, Ukraine concealed its 2024 Kursk operation from Western leaders, mainly to avoid the unsolicited advice not to attack Russia proper and to continue its war against Russia with one hand tied behind her back.

¹¹ Ukraine's Western-like approach to warfighting was in no small measure also due to the military training provided to Ukrainian armed forces through NATO-sponsored programmes in previous years. See SOHLER EVERINGHAM, Susan M. – STOLBERG, Alan G.: The Value of Institutional Capacity Building Through Professional Military Education. In: *RAND Commentary and Articles* [online], 25. 04. 2022. [Accessed 2024-11-04.] Available at:

Ukrainian strategy and bravery notwithstanding, the initial Russian failure was mainly the result of Putin's errors of political and military judgment. While the numbers were on Russia's side, Ukraine was a country of the size of France, the population of Poland and 200,000 highly motivated men and women in uniform. As Galeotti argues, any competent military commander would have initially launched a massive air and missile onslaught to knock out Ukraine's defences and gain control of air space, disrupt Ukraine's lines of communications, thus demoralizing its forces. Instead, believing his own delusions and propaganda fuelled by the FSB, Putin expected that Ukrainians would not resist and its people (perhaps with the exception of the Western regions) would welcome the Russian "liberators". As a consequence, he sent to Ukraine a peacetime army with little manpower to achieve his grandiose objectives. The poor planning was exacerbated by the fact that Putin kept his FSB-designed invasion plans secret until very late. Even some in his inner circle let alone in the top military brass found out about the scope of the operation only days before it was launched.

By summer 2022 it was clear that Ukraine had not only withstood the initial attack but that the West was ready to support her existential fight. While Western assistance was initially far from what Ukraine wanted and needed, it grew substantially by the week. The moment of truth for Russia came in September, when its troops were pushed out of Kherson and Kharkiv and the Russian campaign was on the verge of collapse. In that situation, Putin doubled down and changed tack entirely. What was supposed to be a special military operation became, in his world, war with the West for the survival of Russia. Russia has since followed its traditional trajectory: from the initial fiasco it embarked on adaptation, learning lessons from its failures and directing all its energy towards winning the war by mobilizing the economy and society.

It must be also said that the occasional departure from the Ukrainian strategy of not letting itself be drawn in, as designed by its military command, cost Ukraine dearly, as Trofimov shows. In particular, this was the case with the Bakhmut campaign in the last quarter of 2022. Rather than following the advice of the military top brass that Bakhmut was of secondary strategic value and that the effort should aim southwards to retake the Black and Azov Sea coastlines, the political leadership worried much more about the psychological impact of a possible loss of the first city since the summer of 2022. Under pressure mainly from the all-powerful head of the Presidential Administration Andriy Yermak, a lawyer and former film producer turned political operator without any military background whom Zelensky entrusted an outsized and possibly unconstitutional role,

the military leadership was directed to pick a set-piece battle with the Wagner mercenary troops manned in the front lines by recently recruited criminals. “Our aim is not Bakhmut itself but the destruction of the Ukrainian army and lowering its combat potential,” Trofimov quotes Wagner owner Yevgeny Prigozhin as openly saying (p. 335). In the Bakhmut meatgrinder, Ukraine was losing its best and bravest while Russia was purifying its penal system of despicable individuals, many of whom their hometowns refused to bury. The secondary strategic importance was confirmed when Bakhmut and later Avdiievka fell into Russian hands in May 2023 and February 2024 respectively: this did not translate into a game-changer in the war in Russia’s favour.

A Deal That Was Not

If what happened on the battlefield is hardly a matter of controversy, the behind-the-scenes diplomacy to put an end to the conflict in the initial stages is still disputed. Moscow regularly claims that Ukraine buried an apparently nascent deal that had been all but agreed in the first few weeks of the war. Ukraine, in turn, posits that Russia was never ready to negotiate in good faith and Kyiv, therefore, adopted the strategy of gaining time and achieving small advances such as prisoner swaps.

In a well-informed article published in *Foreign Affairs* in April 2024 entitled “The Talks That Could Have Ended the War in Ukraine”, historian Sergey Radchenko from the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies and political scientist Samuel Charap from the RAND Corporation think tank came – on the basis of previously available and newly accessible documents as well as interviews with Ukrainian and Western protagonists – to the conclusion that while apparently both interpretations contain a smidgen of truth, more importantly Moscow and Kyiv demonstrated a surprising willingness to consider far-ranging concessions. While the deal between Moscow and Kyiv fell through, “they might well surprise everyone again in the future”, Charap and Radchenko claim.¹²

Their account, sources and conclusions have been hotly disputed by many, including some close to the actual negotiations, as siding with Moscow’s line that it was mainly due to Ukraine’s intransigence that the negotiations “that could

¹² CHARAP, Samuel – RADCHENKO, Sergey: The Talks That Could Have Ended the War in Ukraine: A Hidden History of Diplomacy That Came Up Short – but Holds Lesson for Future Negotiations. In: *Foreign Affairs* [online], Vol. 103, 16. 04. 2024. [Accessed 2024-10-23.] Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/talks-could-have-ended-war-ukraine>, p. 3.

have ended the war” failed.¹³ It does not help, to say the least, that Charap and Radchenko remain cryptic on the origins of the documents they refer to, adding fuel to the speculation.

To be sure, the story of the early negotiations is a complex one and defies simple explanations. What further obscures what happened at the negotiating table is that the attitude of both sides has inevitably softened or hardened in line with the situation on the battlefield. However, lamentations over apparently missed opportunities to put an end to the conflict early in the weeks after it broke out are hardly supported by the so far available evidence. While Charap and Radchenko duly corroborated the then available documents with other available sources and interviewed some participants, they, along with a good part of the international commentariat, seem at times all too ready to accept the text on paper at face value, not heeding the general rule that in situations like this nothing is agreed until everything is agreed.¹⁴

The first meeting between the Russian and Ukrainian delegations that took place a few days after the Russian onslaught, held in Gomel, Belarus, did not give much hope for a meaningful end to the conflict. Ukraine seemed on the skids and the Russian delegation, led by Putin’s confidant and former (and by all accounts disastrous) Culture Minister Vladimir Medinsky, presented an ultimatum. Ukraine was supposed to hand over its tanks and artillery to Russia and cut down its military to a mere 50,000 troops armed with guns and rifles. The supposed Nazis running the country were to be arrested and tried. Russian was to be introduced as an official language and streets named after Ukrainian national heroes were to return to their Soviet monikers. Otherwise, as the Deputy

¹³ See, for example, the comments by Jakub Kumoch, former state secretary of Polish President Andrzej Duda, with regard to the apparent Russian willingness to compromise and the origins of the documents quoted by Charap and Radchenko: KĘDRYNA, Marcin: Jakub Kumoch ujawnia kulisy negocjacji: Rosja nie chciała pokoju, tylko kapitulacji Ukrainy. In: *Portal i.pl* [online], 13. 05. 2024. [Accessed 2024-10-29.] Available at: <https://i.pl/jakub-kumoch-ujawnia-kulisy-negocjacji-rosja-nie-chciala-pokoju-tylko-kapitulacji-ukrainy/ar/c1p2-26324503>. See also DANYLCHENKO, Anton: Russia Did Not Want Peace, Only the Surrender of Ukraine: For the First Time, the Polish Diplomat Opens the Backstage of the 2022 Negotiations. In: *Quora: Only Truth About Russia* [online] 15. 05. 2024. [Accessed 2024-10-29.] Available at: <https://onlytruthaboutrussia.quora.com/Russia-did-not-want-peace-only-the-surrender-of-Ukraine-For-the-first-time-the-Polish-diplomat-opens-the-backstage-of>.

¹⁴ A few months after Radchenko’s and Charap’s well-sourced text was published, a collection of documents apparently coming from Ukrainian, Russian and European sources, was made available in TROIANOVSKI, Anton – ENTOUS, Adam – SCHWIRTZ, Michael: Ukraine-Russia Peace Is as Elusive as Ever: But in 2022 They Were Talking. In: *New York Times* [online], 15. 06. 2024. [Accessed 2024-10-29.] Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2024/06/15/world/europe/ukraine-russia-ceasefire-deal.html>.

Defence Minister Aleksandr Fomin, who was part of the delegation, put it “we will keep killing and slaughtering you” (Trofimov, p. 92). Russia was then not even remotely ready for a compromise. No progress was achieved but negotiations were supposed to continue.

Unsure how long Ukraine would hold, President Zelensky apparently was ready to concede on NATO membership in exchange for iron-clad security guarantees as well as to consider recognizing the loss of Crimea and even the independence of the Donbas republics in exchange for Russia’s withdrawal to the pre-24 February borders. Kyiv also signalled an apparent readiness to put a ceiling on their military forces, although not to the extent that Russia requested. None of this was sufficient for Moscow to stop the operation and halt missile strikes on Ukrainian cities.

With no progress achieved in the initial stages, negotiations and exchanges continued on the basis of draft documents submitted by Russia.¹⁵ The immediate Ukrainian objective was – similar to their military strategy – to gain time and achieve small breakthroughs such as prisoners of war swaps and the establishment of humanitarian corridors. Simultaneously, in the negotiations Kyiv shifted focus to alternative security arrangements similar to NATO’s Article 5 guarantees.

Draft documents referred to by Charap and Radchenko and others from 17 March 2022 and the following weeks bear witness that the two sides continued to be worlds apart on pretty much everything except for Ukraine’s neutrality. Ukraine focused on security guarantees in the context of permanent neutrality. In her ambitious quest, Kyiv foresaw that in case of an attack, after an immediate and urgent consultation, the guarantors would close Ukraine’s airspace, provide necessary weapons and even use their armed forces. The potential guarantors were supposed to include a wide range of nations such as the United Kingdom, China, Russia, the United States, France, Turkey, Germany, Canada, Italy, Poland and Israel.

Russia, in turn, requested the recognition of the independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk statelets and the recognition of Crimea as part of Russia. Russia’s requested caps on Ukrainian armed forces and military equipment were lower than the Ukrainians were willing to accept. A deal at that stage would clearly have been to Ukraine’s disadvantage.

The Russian military failure in the initial weeks of the operation did change the context for negotiations in Istanbul at the end of March under the auspices

¹⁵ See, for example, the Russian 7 March proposal, tantamount, in principle, to a complete surrender of Ukrainian sovereignty in SURNACHEVA, Yelizaveta: Early Peace Plan Shows Russia’s Intent to Neutralize Ukraine. In: *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* [online], 04. 11. 2024. [Accessed 2024-11-06.] Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-ukraine-peace-deal-putin-draft-treaty/33183664.html>.

of Turkish President Recep Erdogan. Implicitly recognizing that its campaign was in trouble, shortly before the meeting, Moscow announced that the goal of their operation, the “liberation of Donbas”, had been achieved. At the meeting itself, Medinsky and Fomin (this time in civilian clothes) confirmed that the operation would be de-escalated and Russia began withdrawing its overstretched and decimated troops from the north of the country and near the capital.

These shifts were clearly the result of the situation on the battlefield. At the meeting, Russia apparently agreed to consider sweeping concessions: in exchange for Ukraine’s permanent neutrality, Russia was ready to reduce its territorial demands which, together with other unresolved issues, were supposed to be addressed at a summit meeting between Zelensky and Putin.

Most strikingly, Russia was apparently ready to accept Ukraine’s path to EU membership, though this prospect was precisely what led Moscow to force Yanukovich to withdraw from the Association Agreements with the EU that led to the Revolution of Dignity a decade earlier.

No less staggering at first sight was Russia’s apparent willingness to reopen the status of Crimea. While Ukraine was to commit itself not to try to retake the peninsula by force, the final status was supposed to be decided in 10–15 years. The notion is less sensational than it looks, as Moscow was not in reality committing itself to anything, let alone concessions. Moscow would show reasonableness and could in exchange request other concessions.

However, one should not rush to conclusions about an imminent deal which, to be sure, remained elusive. One of the vexing questions that remains is how much Putin himself was interested in and committed to a deal. Some suggest that he was closely involved with or even micromanaging the talks.¹⁶ Had he now come to grips with the sour reality of his *blitzkrieg* having failed or was he playing for time while his troops were regrouping? Despite its military blunders, why would Russia in good faith suddenly agree to something that was anathema to its decade-long approach to Ukraine? Charap and Radchenko simply state that in view of his military failures Putin was perhaps now willing to content himself with much less. They as well as others arguably attach too much importance to the statements made by one of the Ukrainian negotiators, Oleksandr Chalyi, a former deputy foreign minister with a not entirely clear role in the talks, to the effect that Putin realized shortly after the invasion that he had made a mistake and by the end of April there was a real chance for a peace settlement.¹⁷ The authors do not

¹⁶ TROIANOVSKI, A. – ENTOUS, A. – SCHWIRTZ, M.: Ukraine-Russia Peace Is as Elusive as Ever.

¹⁷ See Oleksandr Chalyi’s statements at a conference hosted by the Geneva Center for Security Policy in December 2023 in the video recording of “Breaking the Stalemate to Find Peace:

scrutinize Chalyi's blanket statement on the apparently "missed opportunities" as one that could have been just as well motivated by an attempt at self-aggrandizement by one individual.

The reality is that, as Charap and Radchenko themselves readily admit – in addition to Russia's dubious commitment to honour its own signature – crucial issues were never resolved, even on paper. Russia's ceasefire proposals stipulated that Ukraine would need to withdraw its troops to Ukraine's territory, which presumably did not include the Donetsk and Luhansk "people's democracies". No agreement was achieved on the size of Ukraine's military forces and the firing range of Ukraine's missiles. Most importantly, in the last version of the document from mid-April, Russia made a mockery of Ukraine's security guarantees and measures by trying to make them conditional on approval of all guarantors. In other words, Russia could attack Ukraine again and then prevent others from providing assistance.¹⁸ It would have taken a great deal of imagination as to how a lasting agreement could have been achieved under those circumstances.

The UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson had hit the nail on the head when he visited Kyiv on 9 April and commented on the durability of any pledge by Putin. "Any deal would be some victory for [Putin]: If you give him anything, he'll just keep it, bank it, and then prepare for his next assault," Johnson told Trofimov. To Zelensky, he encouragingly said that "Ukraine must be entitled to retain full sovereignty and independence" (Trofimov, p. 160). While the Americans were less vocal about their doubts, they were no less sceptical of Putin's willingness to live by his word, and also because the central piece of the deal was security provided by Western guarantors. These realistic assessments of Russia's future intentions and encouragement to Ukraine to resist were later misconstrued by Putin so as to lay the blame for the failure of the talks.

In view of the reversal of fortunes on the battlefield, Zelensky did not need much encouragement to reconsider his initial willingness to meet Russia halfway. In addition, the Russian retreat set the stage for the discovery of atrocities committed by Russian troops against civilians in the Kyiv affluent suburb of Bucha and elsewhere. Zelensky now spoke of Russian war crimes and called for the expulsion of Russia from the UN Security Council.

The Russia-Ukraine War – A Geneva Security Debate". In: *YouTube* [online], 05. 12. 2023. [Accessed 2024-10-29.] Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t2zpV35fvHw>, in particular minute 28–29.

¹⁸ TROIANOVSKI, A. – ENTOUS, A. – SCHWIRTZ, M.: Ukraine-Russia Peace Is as Elusive as Ever. The April version also includes in an annex a list of Ukrainian laws apparently glorifying Nazism as well as language laws to be amended in line with Russia's wishes.

Radchenko and Charap seem overall to attach undue importance to the simple fact that the diplomatic machinery on both sides continued to work on a possible document and they extensively cover the changes in the text. However, diplomacy at that stage clearly parted company from the statecraft pursued by Zelensky, who was, like the rest of the world, outraged by the atrocities committed by Russia. This made any deal with Putin morally and politically virtually impossible. The Ukrainian president was also encouraged by the prospect of military support from the West, newly impressed by Ukraine's military successes. If Russia was initially intransigent in view of its expected cakewalk victory in Ukraine, it was Ukraine's successes as well as the brutality of Russia's attack that affected Ukraine's willingness to make compromises via a negotiated settlement with the aggressor. By early May, negotiations were dead.

If there is any lesson to be drawn from the initial negotiations, it is that any settlement will be determined by the situation on the battlefield. One might perhaps agree with Charap and Radchenko that future negotiations may result in surprises as to how far the protagonists are willing or forced to go. Currently, with news from the battlefield hardly encouraging, these surprises are more likely to be unpleasant for those who believe, like the present author, that Russia could and should have been defeated – for the sake of Ukraine, the West and Russia itself.

Keywords:

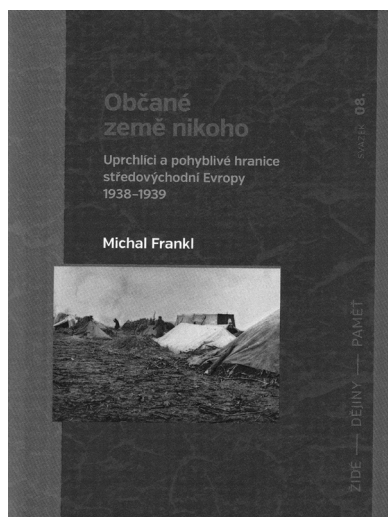
Russia; Ukraine; Russo-Ukrainian War; United States; NATO; European Union; Eastern Europe; post-Cold War; Vladimir Putin; Volodymyr Zelensky

Portents of the Holocaust

A Multi-Genre Mosaic on the Sources of Central European Anti-Semitism and the Refugee Crisis of 1938–1939

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FRANKL, Michal:

Občané země nikoho: Uprchlíci a pohyblivé hranice středovýchodní Evropy 1938–1939.

(Židé – dějiny – paměť, Vol. 8.) Praha, Nakladatelství Lidové noviny 2023, 294 pages, ISBN 978-80-7422-924-4.

At the end of last year, the Institute of Contemporary History and the Masaryk Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences published, as the eighth volume of the *Židé – dějiny – paměť* [Jews – History – Memory] book series, a work entitled *Občané země nikoho: Uprchlíci a pohyblivé hranice středovýchodní Evropy 1938–1939* [Citizens of No Man's Land: Refugees and the Shifting Borders of Central and Eastern Europe, 1938–1939] by a prominent Czech expert in the history of anti-Semitism, the Holocaust and refugeeism, Michal Frankl. In this nearly three-hundred-page publication, a rather daunting work for the reader but very interesting in terms of its research, the author describes “a prelude to the Holocaust” against the backdrop of the increasingly tense international situation of the period. Thousands of Jewish men, women and children who had been

deprived of all legal protection and driven out of their homes found themselves in border areas without any food, water or medicine, and with no hope of shelter.

Increased tension in Europe, the *Anschluss* of Austria, the annexation of a broad strip of Czechoslovak borderlands after the Munich Agreement, and the First as well as the Second Vienna Awards in combination with the revision of the citizenship of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe or refugees fleeing from Nazi Germany: all of this contributed to the outburst of anti-Semitism. A wealth of documentation draws a convincing picture of how the state authorities of individual Central European countries took steps against the Jews.

The signal for the expulsion of Jewish fellow citizens, regardless of their social standing or the level of their assimilation or rootedness in local communities, was given by the “Polish Action”, which was carried out with German thoroughness mainly in Saxony in October 1938. This was preceded in the spring (March–April) of the same year by the plight of the Jews expelled from Vienna and of the Jewish inhabitants of the Austrian border state of Burgenland. The author, or the collective of authors¹ – because processing such an impressive number of different archival documents, recollections of survivors in oral history collections, articles in the press of the period and other sources requires team cooperation and the publishing practice of “the backing of an authority” – take us back to the roots of the “Jewish problem”, the period of the Habsburg monarchy. At that time, the dynamically developing Vienna was a natural destination for immigrants from the agrarian eastern territories of the Danube monarchy. With the First World War, the constant flow of Jewish migration to the Austrian metropolis increased even more.

There was a similar situation in Hungary, especially in Budapest, which after the secession of vast territories faced a “competition crisis”. The large numbers of intelligentsia, who had fled Slovakia and other territories that were lost after the First World War and who were mainly of Jewish origin, had problems finding employment. The *numerus clausus* for Jewish students introduced at Pázmány University was one of the first measures of this kind in Central Europe. Poland

¹ In the opening of the book, Michal Frankl mentions with gratitude the team that worked on the research project funded by the European Research Council “Unlikely Refuge: Refugees and Citizens in East-Central Europe in the Twentieth Century”. We can therefore understand the book as one of the outputs of this project. The research team worked, for example, in the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, in Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, in the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) Archives in New York, in the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies, in the National Archives of Hungary in Budapest, and in the Holocaust Documentation Centre in Bratislava. It also drew upon the oral history collections stored mainly in the University of South Carolina Visual History Archive, but also from the collection of interviews in the Jewish Museum in Prague.

resorted to expelling Jews deprived of citizen rights in revenge for the steps taken by Germany – the above-mentioned “Polish Action”. However, as is shown throughout the book, there is no need for illusions regarding the benevolence of the then Polish government towards its “Jewish element”.

In comparison with neighbouring countries, which were in the long-term undemocratic, the Second Checo-Slovak Republic (official “post-Munich” spelling) was a specific case. It is surprising how quickly the traditions of Masarykian tolerance and democratism disappeared from the practices of the state apparatus. Had twenty years of existence as an independent state not been sufficient time for civil servants to embrace them? Whereas Czech, Slovak and Ruthenian refugees from the annexed borderland territories were accepted without any doubts about their citizenship, the rejection of Jewish refugees by the Brno authorities is illustrated by a quotation from a petition for citizenship, chosen by Frankl from a number of similar examples: “Good reputation was in many cases relativized by notes, such as ‘except for being a Jew’, added by senior officials to the original text.” (p. 139) According to the quoted documents, the revision of Jews’ state citizenship was handled chaotically and non-transparently.² In a period when there was a complete disintegration of the Little Entente alliance along with spy mania, we should not be surprised that, with the border controls, the Jews expelled and fleeing from Romania to the West were considered undesirable in the territory of the republic (pp. 39–40).

The publication offers a very critical view of “state nationalism” and a mechanism of excluding citizens of Jewish origin from the community of “state-building” majority nations. This is mainly illustrated by the Polish approach. However, the book is also critical of Czech officials who, for reasons of prejudice, rejected petitions of registration for citizenship. As intimated by Frankl, their anti-Semitism was probably also intensified by the fact that they identified Jewish refugees as being a German element. Jews were graduates of German schools, and in the 1920s and 1930s they supported German associations. As absurd as this may seem today, they were even suspected of voting for the Sudeten German Party (*Sudetendeutsche Partei*). After surrendering the borderlands, the central authorities in Prague followed a similar logic as that of the leadership of some of the Jewish organizations, that is, they invested in organizing humanitarian activities for the majority Czech population and refrained from taking other “unprofitable” steps.

² In May 1939, Karl Hermann Frank, as a State Secretary of the Reich Protector’s Office, initiated proceedings to abolish revisions of citizenship of the already non-existent state, transformed into the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. Officially, the revisions of citizenship of the (from the point of view of the occupation administration already rightless) Jewish population were abolished in February 1940.

Michal Frankl also focuses on the phenomena of shifting borders, perceiving it as a no man's land, where the extent of dehumanizing suffering and a complete absence of any efforts by the state authorities to solve the situation of refugees acquired an apocalyptic dimension. The border is described here as a place where even conditions of medieval pogroms seemed acceptable. It is a land from which any elements of civilization had disappeared.

Out of many localities where expelled Jews were stranded, I have chosen for closer examination the Danube border between the Austrian state of Burgenland (the traditional territorial bone of contention between Austria and Hungary), Hungary and southern Slovakia. The status of the Danube as an international river artery contributed to a unique solution – refugees were placed on a French tow boat anchored close to the Hungarian village of Rajka. The refugee shelter on the boat even attracted international attention. In the summer of 1938, it was visited by representatives of Jewish trade unions in Palestine. Marie Schmolková (1893–1940), chairwoman of the National Coordination Committee for Refugees in Czechoslovakia (*Národní koordinační výbor pro uprchlíky v Československu*) who worked for a Zionist organization, also sought to secure humanitarian help as well as overseas visas for the refugees on the boat. It is regrettable that this remarkable woman was not accorded at least a biographical footnote in the book. From the Czech perspective, it is interesting that Schmolková was acquainted with Czech journalist Milena Jesenská (1896–1944). Based on the information provided by Schmolková, Jesenská wrote an article entitled “V zemi nikoho” [In No Man's Land] about the plight of the refugees, the impact of which is discussed in detail in the book (pp. 235–236).³ Self-sacrificing activities by a number of humanitarian workers and the public attention that the suffering of the refugees received thanks to the efforts of these workers led to the holding of a controversial conference in Évian.⁴

³ JESENSKÁ, Milena: V zemi nikoho. In: *Přítomnost*, Vol. 15, No. 52 (29. 12. 1938), pp. 827–829. The article is published in the anthology edited by Marie Jirásková: JESENSKÁ, Milena: *Křižovatky: Výbor z díla*. Praha, Torst 2016, pp. 670–673. The title of Frankl's book is inspired by this article.

⁴ The conference in Évian, France, which was held ostensibly to resolve the situation of Jewish refugees, was convoked on the initiative of the American President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in July 1938. Despite the participation of thirty-two states and several humanitarian organizations attending as observers, it yielded no tangible results. Even though the representatives of all the participating states expressed regret about the hopeless situation of the refugees, at the same time they refused to accept them in the territories of their states or in their colonies. This public display of indifference to the fate of Jewish refugees only encouraged the Nazis in their plans for a “final solution”.

An extremely interesting chapter is the one focusing on the assistance provided by Jewish towns and humanitarian organizations (pp. 199–215). The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) tried to coordinate such help through its European branches. Regrettably, their senior workers did not consider the threat that European Jewish communities faced as a sufficiently pressing problem. The decisions they made were based on the principle of cost-effectiveness, and therefore, for example, they hesitated to pay large sums for refugee visas for several families who were isolated on the deck of the above-mentioned boat on the Danube River.

The book expresses considerable sympathy with the involvement of Jewish humanitarian workers, but it also does not shy away from criticism. However, what raises some doubts is the passage in which the author wonders “whether by bringing food, medicine, clothes and tents and therefore saving lives, the workers did not also facilitate and vindicate exclusion, the consequences of which they mitigated” (p. 209). The quoted lines could create the impression that, by their activities and efforts, humanitarian organizations substituted state assistance and objectively allowed the states to shirk any responsibility. While there can be criticism of the limited impact of the help, errors in its coordination and the limited understanding of the senior workers who were located far away from the events and had no personal experience of the refugees’ suffering, the importance of the help provided cannot be questioned (nor even hinted at). In contrast to the dehumanizing attitude of the state bureaucracy, any individual life saved represented a miracle of humanity – even though in the context of the imminent “final solution” this salvation was often only temporary.

A combination of the methods of several social science disciplines including, for example, border studies, the identification of transitional rituals in expelling Jews and reflections of the refugee experience in fiction and film, certainly enrich the book. However, the author’s decision to refrain from building the text chronologically together with the use of a cyclic or “mosaic” structure makes the text rather difficult to understand. Valuable excerpts from the recollections of contemporary witnesses, scattered throughout the text, keep the reader engaged. However, in some cases, it is not clear whether the situation described relates to places at the Polish-German, the Czech-German or the Hungarian-Slovak border, or somewhere else. This was probably meant to inspire readers to abandon the position of mere consumers of the text and to get closer to the experience of contemporary witnesses. In this sense, the intention was achieved.

On the inside covers of the book are a clear map showing the places where refugees were trapped at the borders, a detailed map of the expulsions of Jews from the Austrian state of Burgenland, and maps with graphic depictions of deportations from Slovakia. Also included are illustrative high-quality reproductions of archival documents and photos of the period depicting refugees in their

provisional shelters, on the boat on the Danube, and in other situations. A list of abbreviations used would be helpful for understanding the text better.

Apart from purely research goals – to contribute to the mapping of the as yet overlooked beginnings of the Holocaust – the author, or the collective of authors, identified another ambitious goal, to point out dangerous parallels in the way the states approached the refugee issue in 1938–1939 and how they approach it now in the twenty-first century, including the attempts to close down borders opened up after the fall of the Iron Curtain. In concluding, the book states: “Whereas in 1989 the border became a place of openings, hope and future, in 1938 it turned into a symbol of hopelessness. The return of the border in the contemporary world [...] also reminds us how topical the issues covered in this book are.” (p. 259)

In my view, only the first of the goals has been clearly achieved. Certainly, parallels with the present day can be found; however, the contemporary globalized world is far more complex. Instead of race theories justifying the expulsion of one excluded group of inhabitants, we are witnessing the effects of a vast array of causes, from military conflicts, to economic factors resulting in periodical surges of migration across the continents. In combination with the ecological crisis, this is an unprecedented situation, practically impossible to be solved at the level of individual states. Nevertheless, the way politicians are failing to face up squarely to the current challenges strongly resembles the situation of 1938–1939.

Translated by Blanka Medková

Keywords:

Central and Eastern Europe; Jews; anti-Semitism; refugees; migration; state borders; borderlands; Holocaust; “no man’s land”

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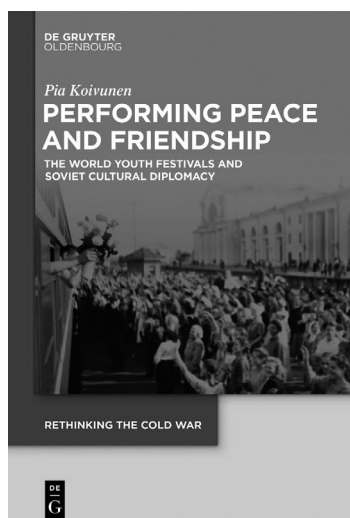
Anatomy of a Socialist Mega-event

World Youth Festivals as a Product of Soviet Cultural Diplomacy

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ISBN 978-3-11-075844-3.

World Festivals of Youth and Students are not often remembered as a serious youth activity. They are frequently pictured either as something laughable, a bizarre half-forgotten feature of the Cold War era, or as a sinister tool of Soviet power to brainwash young idealists and sway them to its side. And yet, the festival movement was a rich, multi-layered phenomenon, forged by the Cold War but worth looking at from different angles; as a space of interaction, as a social event, or as a product of Soviet cultural diplomacy. At least that is what Pia Koivunen says in her new book *Performing Peace and Friendship: The World Youth Festivals and Soviet Cultural Diplomacy* published by De Gruyter in 2022.

Pia Koivunen, a Finnish professor of history at the University of Turku, is no newcomer in the field. Focusing on cultural diplomacy in the Cold War since

her PhD studies, she has published extensively on the topic of the World Youth Festivals.¹

The World Youth Festivals were large gatherings of young people and students that began to take place in Europe after the Second World War.² The first one took place in Prague in 1947, in the atmosphere of a not yet Stalinized country. After that, the communist capitals took turns hosting the festivals biennially: Budapest in 1949, East Berlin in 1951, Bucharest in 1953, Warsaw in 1955 and Moscow in 1957. The huge Moscow Festival, often considered a peak of the festival phenomenon in a way, was followed by two experimental festivals in the capitals of neutral countries (Vienna and Helsinki) in 1959 and 1962. The attempts to organize a festival in a post-colonial country (first in Algiers, Algeria; then in Accra, Ghana) proved unsuccessful, so the Festivals were brought back to safer ground. Sofia was chosen in 1968, East Berlin in 1973, Havana in 1978 and Moscow in 1985. The last festival during the Cold War was held in Pyongyang, North Korea, in the summer of 1989. After the end of the Cold War, the festival movement lost its power but survived; the gatherings were held in Havana in 1997; Algiers in 2001; Caracas in 2005; Tshwane, South Africa, in 2010; Quito in 2013; and Sochi, Russia, in 2017.

In her book, Koivunen does not cover the whole history of the Festivals. She focuses in detail on the “golden age” of the Festival movement, the first ten years from the first festival in Prague in 1947 to that in Moscow in 1957. On the history of the five festivals, she sketches the development of the phenomenon – from its beginnings in still quasi-democratic Czechoslovakia at the onset of the Cold War through gatherings fully orchestrated in a Stalinist fashion, to its slow destalinization and eventual culmination in the Moscow Festival. And it is the 1957 mega-event in the Soviet capital that takes centre stage – in fact, about half the book

¹ For example, KOIVUNEN, Pia: The World Youth Festival as a Soviet Cultural Product during the Cold War. In: *Quaestio Rossica*, Vol. 8, No. 5 (2020), pp. 1612–1628; EADEM: Friends, “Potential Friends”, and Enemies: Reimagining Soviet Relations to the First, Second, and Third Worlds at the Moscow 1957 Youth Festival. In: BABIRACKI, Patryk – JERSILD, Austen (eds.): *Socialist Internationalism in the Cold War*. London, Palgrave Macmillan 2016, pp. 219–247; EADEM: International Events in the Service of Cultural Statecraft: The Sochi Olympics and the World Festival of Youth and Students. In: FORSBERG, Tuomas – MÄKINEN, Sirke (eds.): *Russia's Cultural Statecraft*. London, Routledge 2021, pp. 184–205; EADEM: The World Youth Festival as an Arena of the ‘Cultural Olympics’: Meanings of Competition in Soviet Culture in the 1940s and 1950s. In: MIKLÓSSY, Katalin – ILIC, Melanie (eds.): *Competition in Socialist Society*. London, Routledge 2014, pp. 125–141.

² The event is called the World Youth Festival by Koivunen for simplification and readability. The name of the organization varied at first and was finally settled in 1951 as the World Festival of Youth and Students. (KOIVUNEN, P.: *Performing Peace and Friendship*, p. 1.)

is devoted to it. The first half covers the other four festivals, serving partly as an introduction and historical contextualization of the main event.

Koivunen's new book contributes to the recently developing field of transnational approaches to Cold War history. In the last decade or two, many historians have begun to emphasize issues other than just the superpower clashes, namely the role of smaller states in both the Global North and South, and the role of non-state actors such as international organizations. Many of these historians have also tended to emphasize not the Cold War divides but rather the processes of trans-bloc economic integration, the global circulation of expertise, the mobility of students and workers, or transnational cultural exchanges.³

The World Festivals of Youth and Students are a phenomenon that can be well reinterpreted in these new framings – with their international attendance and global reach. Naturally, such a huge phenomenon has not escaped the attention of scholars. Apart from Koivunen, there are historians who have worked on specific aspects of the festivals before – from the political to the social and gender aspects, to the question of youth sports, for example.⁴

The perspective that Pia Koivunen offers in her book is that of cultural diplomacy. The mega-event that was the festival, she argues, was a kind of cultural product – one that became hugely successful in the socialist world. “Unlike the Worker’s Olympics (Spartakiads) or the Intervision Song Contest, the youth festival did not serve as an alternative or socialist version of any existing international events, but was a unique cultural product and one of the most long-lasting of the Soviet efforts to design cultural exports.” (p. 12) The author’s main focus is on how the festival was *performed*: how it was communicated, what its message was, and how it was received.

³ A couple of examples: APPLEBAUM, Rachel: *Empire of Friends: Soviet Power and Socialist Internationalism in Cold War Czechoslovakia*. Ithaca (NY), Cornell University Press 2019; MIKKONEN, Simo – KOIVUNEN, Pia (eds.): *Beyond the Divide: Entangled Histories of Cold War Europe*. New York, Berghahn Books 2015; RUPPRECHT, Tobias: *Soviet Internationalism after Stalin: Interaction and Exchange between the USSR and Latin America during the Cold War*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2015; BABIRACKI, P. – JERSILD, A. (eds.): *Socialist Internationalism in the Cold War*.

⁴ ROTH-EY, Kristin: “Loose Girls” on the Loose? Sex, Propaganda and the 1957 Youth Festival. In: ILIC, Melanie – REID, Susan E. – ATTWOOD, Lynne (eds.): *Women in the Khrushchev Era*. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan 2004, pp. 75–95; RUTTER, Nick: Look Left, Drive Right: Internationalism at the 1968 World Youth Festival. In: GORSUCH, Anne E. – KOENKER, Diane P. (eds.): *Socialist Sixties: Crossing Borders in the Second World*. Indiana, Indiana University Press 2013, pp. 193–212; LESNYKH, Lidia: Sport at the World Festival of Youth and Students: Between Olympic Ideals and Socialist Internationalism. In: *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2020), pp. 1–15.

The book provides a detailed anatomy of the festivals and in particular the one in Moscow, mapping all the different aspects of its organization, applying “both ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ approaches” (p. 3) and subscribing to such works as Stephen Kotkin’s *Magnetic Mountain*.⁵ Using these approaches, Koivunen paints a vivid picture of the event; an ambitious project that meant opening up the Soviet capital to the masses from around the world for the first time. It was a unique opportunity to present the thaw and the socialist project, which until then had been accessible only to a few outsiders. As a result, the festival became a symbol of the thaw and one of the key elements that formed the identity of the *shestidesiatniki* – the 1960s generation.

Even with the tight control over the festival’s organization, the influence was not only exercised over the festival guests; as Koivunen shows, it went both ways. The event was a platform where many people met and exchanged their experiences. In many cases, they also started friendships or romantic relationships that influenced the young Soviet generation. As for the Soviet influence, Koivunen argues that the festival’s success cannot be measured in financial terms alone. “In addition to cultural capital and experiences at the grassroots level, the Moscow festival was an investment in Soviet tourism infrastructure, and thus benefited the Soviet economy and its image building in the long run. [...] When over 30,000 young people passed on their impressions of the country, and showed photographs and souvenirs back home, at least some of the money invested in these messengers was eventually paid back by growing foreign tourism and support to Soviet international fronts.” (p. 227)

The author drew extensively from Russian archives, showing the perspective of the authorities, including the Party structures, the Komsomol, or the secret services. In addition to that, she interviewed various participants in the festival, both from the former Soviet Union and from the West, which enabled her to show a complex image of the Cold War phenomenon.

Although Pia Koivunen has succeeded in presenting the intricacies of the early period of the movement and organization of the Moscow Festival, the topic is still far from exhausted. One possible way forward would be to change the perspective based on the sources – Koivunen drew mainly on documents from Russian archives and built her narrative around them. This take, however, somewhat marginalizes the agenda of the International Preparatory Committee and the World Federation of Democratic Youth. Focusing more on the international and less on the Soviet side would give a different picture. Of course, another way

⁵ KOTKIN, Stephen: *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization*. Berkeley, University of California Press 1995.

to expand the story would be to include the festivals after 1957, or even after 1989, and the role they play in cultural diplomacy today.

This is not, however, a drawback of the book under review. The festival movement is such a rich phenomenon, spanning so many decades that it would be an entirely different task to try to tame it all in one volume. In the way Koivunen has delimited her subject, she has done an excellent job and penned a must-read for anyone who wants to study Cold War cultural diplomacy between Stalinism and the thaw.

Keywords:

World Festivals of Youth and Students; Cold War; communism; internationalism; cultural diplomacy; Stalinism; thaw; youth

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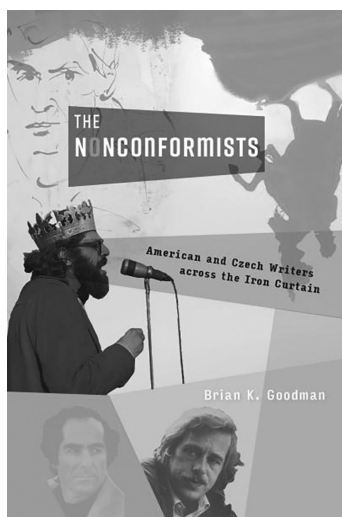
There and Back Again

Czech-American Transnational Literary Culture in the Cold War and Beyond

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GOODMAN, Brian K.:

*The Nonconformists: American and Czech Writers
Across the Iron Curtain.*

Cambridge (Mass.) – London, Harvard University
Press 2023, 368 pages, ISBN 978-0-674-98337-3.

For at least two decades now, the Cold War and its culture have been researched as a transnational phenomenon that exceeds the easy binary of the United States and the Soviet Union. Yet, some aspects of Cold War cultural and literary exchanges have been examined more thoroughly than others. In the Czech context, there have been studies on the Cold War reception of American writers in Czechoslovakia, some of them in a comparative context, for example, Antonín Zita's *How We Understand the Beats*.¹

¹ ZITA, Antonín: *How We Understand the Beats: The Reception of the Beat Generation in the United States and the Czech Lands*. Brno, Filozofická fakulta Masarykovy univerzity 2018.

In *The Nonconformists: American and Czech Writers across the Iron Curtain*, Brian K. Goodman, an assistant professor at Arizona State University interested in the intersections of postwar culture and literature and human rights, paves the way by seeing the cultural transfer between American and Czech writers during the long Cold War as a mutual process. It was a process with unexpected twists and turns, a process that shaped both sides and was part of a larger transnational dialogue over the Iron Curtain, a dialogue that needs to be heard from both sides as the nuances can simply be lost in a mono-national context. His is a book that brings forward exciting stories spun together in a gripping narrative, preceded perhaps only by Justin Quinn's *Between Two Fires: Transnationalism and Cold War Poetry* which presents a similar approach through a different scope and material.²

Divided into six chapters, *The Nonconformists* tells its story in a roughly chronological way, focusing on one protagonist for each chapter: Franz Kafka and his reception in the United States and the Czech lands from the 1920s onwards, with a particular focus on the early Cold War; the literary scholar Francis Otto Matthiessen's stay at Charles University in late 1940s; Josef Škvorecký and his engagement with American literature in the 1950s; Allen Ginsberg's notorious visit in the 1960s; the contacts with Czechoslovak and Central European writers in the 1970s and 1980s fostered by Philip Roth; and, finally, the international campaign regarding the Jazz Section (*Jazzová sekce*), the cultural institution promoting jazz and other musical genres out of favour with the Czechoslovak official structures, in the late 1980s. In the framework of each chapter, Goodman goes back and forth in time, and, more importantly, space, making his transnational scope appear effortless while it is backed up by a wide range of archival materials from both Czechia and the US, and a close reading of texts and paratexts from both sides of the Iron Curtain.

Some chapters in this to and fro may be more recognizable to Czech readers than others: Ginsberg's visit to Prague, for example, continues to provoke both popular and critical interests in Czechia. Paradoxically, and perhaps tellingly, as Goodman states, when he started his research, this visit was "largely absent from American literary histories of the Cold War era" (p. 2). Another topic which has a strong Czech scholarly tradition is the publishing, translating, and writing career of Josef Škvorecký (1924–2012). Still, Goodman's perspective on these stories adds nuance and enriches the picture through the transnational implications. In Škvorecký's case, it is especially his interest in the American jazzman Mezz Mezzrow and the corresponding global questions on Black authenticity and

² QUINN, Justin: *Between Two Fires: Transnationalism and Cold War Poetry*. New York, Oxford University Press 2015.

appropriation. It is, however, in the stories lesser known to Czech and, arguably, American readers, too, where Goodman's book shines: the case of Kafka's importance for Cold War cultural imagery (though one might wonder whether Goodman does not overestimate Kafka's centrality); Matthiesen's new perspective on American studies based on his experience at Charles University in Prague; or the intricate networks of the 1970s and 1980s involving writers such as John Updike (1932–2009) or Philip Roth (1933–2018) and organizations such as the Jazz Section. In the last case, Goodman demonstrates how the language of human rights activism became the final battlefield of the cultural Cold War: "In the early eighties, samizdat manuscripts and human rights reports were being smuggled across the Iron Curtain in the same diplomatic pouch, and they often reached the same Western audience." (p. 211)

Roth's relations to Czechoslovakia and his "Writers from the Other Europe" series in particular represent a fascinating and under-discussed issue.³ Representing "an entirely new Cold War genre", as Goodman argues, the series raises fascinating questions about the "mechanics of transnational influence, appropriation, and canon formation" (p. 201). Goodman delves into these questions with expertise on both the Czech and American contexts, but also the wider global processes and debates. Part of his narrative skill is the ability to both provide the wider context and combine an overarching narrative through a close reading of the individual texts. In the case of the chapter on Roth, this includes an analysis of the consequences of the encounter with the Central Eastern European counter-realist tradition in literature for Roth's writing on a formal and thematic level, but also an excursion into Roth's correspondence with Milan Kundera (1929–2023) to counterbalance the Other Europe narrative. Though he later revoked his position, Kundera initially told Roth that "there were still a few ideas he took very seriously, and the nonexistence of this Other Europe was one of them" (p. 200).

It is the correspondence between Roth and Kundera that points towards the unexplored potential of the book's material. It was Kundera's wife Věra Kunderová, who, as Goodman writes, edited Kundera's letters and served as a translator for "hours-long" in-person conversations between Kundera and Roth (p. 189). Other women appear as side characters in the narrative, such as Milena Jesenská, Rita Klímová, and Barbara Sproul.⁴ The list of protagonists, on the other hand,

³ Philip Roth, who had visited Czechoslovakia and other Central Eastern European countries in the early 1970s, prompted Penguin Books to launch a series called "Writers from the Other Europe". This included both reprints of previous English translations and original translations from Czech, Polish, Hungarian and Serbian. Between 1976 and 1983, a total of 17 books were published in this series. Roth served as its general editor.

⁴ Milena Jesenská (1896–1944) was a Czech journalist, writer, and translator who was also a member of the underground opposition to the Nazi regime in Czechoslovakia. Apart from

is strictly male. This is a tricky subject and Goodman is aware of it as he returns to the question of gender several times throughout the book. As he writes, “nearly all of the Eastern Bloc dissident writers who became well-known in the West were men. My decision to focus on the transnational dynamics of canon formation – on the question of which writers made it into wider circulation during the Cold War and why – has resulted in even more (though far from exclusive) attention on a subset of famous male literary figures.” (p. 22) While this is a valid explanation, I could not help but wish some of the fascinating stories presented on the margins of the bigger story were presented in more detail, for example, Rita Klímová translating Jiří Weil’s novel *Život s hvězdou* [Life with a Star].⁵ Klímová’s labour stayed literarily invisible as her translation was published to much critical acclaim under the pseudonym Růžena Kovaříková (p. 251). But perhaps, rather than a shortcoming of Goodman’s book, this points towards new avenues for research: there remain many people, texts, and events whose stories have not yet been told and they, too, will bring fresh perspectives on the transnational literary culture of the Cold War and beyond.

In *The Nonconformists*, Goodman walks the fine line of not marginalizing a subject that falls outside the mainstream interests of global literary history, which tends to favour different narratives and from which, the Other Europe (as Roth’s label goes) – neither postcolonial nor mainstream – tends to be left behind. Indeed, one of the virtues of the monograph is that Goodman avoids a simplistic division into minor and major cultures and instead treats both sides with equal interest, countering a narrative of “Cold War cultural history that is at once US-centric and unilateral, a picture that includes well-known American literary figures like Arthur Miller but not Václav Havel” (p. 19). Goodman never estimates the agency of his Czech characters nor their influence on their American counterparts, going against the “seductive narrative of Western countercultural influence behind the Iron Curtain” (p. 4). He also meticulously provides context for his material: understandably, given the language of the book, this especially concerns the Czech side. For Czech readers, this means they are faced with explanations of histories and people well known to them as more context is

her own prolific writing and political career, she was also the first translator of Kafka to Czech, but also the first translator of Kafka overall. Rita Klímová (1931–1993) was an economist, politician and translator. She served as Václav Havel’s interpreter after he became Czechoslovak president following the Velvet Revolution in 1989, a term she is credited with coining. In the early 1990s, she was Czechoslovak ambassador to the United States. Barbara Sproul (born 1945) is an American specialist in comparative religion. In the 1970s, Sproul was the Czechoslovak country coordinator for Amnesty International.

⁵ WEIL, Jiří: *Life with a Star*. New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux 1989. Original Czech editions: Prague 1949, 1964 and 1967.

provided perhaps for the benefit of institutions such as the National Endowment for the Humanities, a federal agency that funds research, education, preservation and public programs in the Humanities, or figures such as Norman Podhoretz (born 1930), an American neoconservative writer and magazine editor. On the other hand, Czech readers may notice occasional slips in the editing of Czech names, such as the constant use of Vera Kunderová, instead of Věra, or the misspelt name of the prominent contemporary Czech literary scholar and critic Pavel Janoušek, who becomes Janousek (p. 111). Moreover, Prague is sometimes treated as a synecdoche for the whole of Czechoslovakia: perhaps that is a libation to the Anglophone readership. One also wonders if this is perhaps also the case with Václav Havel (1936–2011), who appears in the introduction and epilogue but does not have a standalone chapter.

Despite its focus on the American and Czech contexts, *The Nonconformists* cannot, however, be reduced to this duality – because it challenges the very notion of it. Transnationality as both an approach and a subject matter dominates the book: here, Goodman was able to build on previous scholarship, for example, on the transnational circulation of samizdat and tamizdat by Jessie Labov and Friederike Kind-Kovács,⁶ or the above-mentioned study by Quinn. *The Nonconformists*, therefore, should be of interest not only to Czech and American audiences but also to the wider field of Slavic Studies, Cold War Studies, and, finally, any readers interested in transnational exchanges and approaches to history, literature, and culture. It also has the potential to find readers outside of academia, not only through its gripping subject but also through the way it is narrated. Goodman walks us through the story, providing information and pointing towards important details and the larger narrative that spans more than half a century and two continents, with convincing arguments and vivid prose. The scope of the long Cold War works well for building the story of transcultural contacts that were shaped, but not initiated, by the global conflict, nor did they end with its end, as Goodman reminds us in the epilogue. In *The Nonconformists*, the “network of literary circulation, political solidarity, and personal friendship” (p. 22) between Czech and American cultural figures, spanning over four decades, appears not as a sidenote to the larger stories of Czech or American literature during the Cold War, but integral to them, transforming the very terms in which we conceive of them.

⁶ KIND-KOVÁCS, Friederike – LABOV, Jessie (eds.): *Samizdat, Tamizdat, and Beyond: Transnational Media during and after Socialism*. New York, Berghahn Books 2013.

Keywords:

Czechoslovakia; United States; Soviet Bloc; Central and Eastern Europe; Cold War; Iron Curtain; Czech writers; Czech literature; American writers; American literature; Czech-American relations; transnational cultural exchanges

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In Defense of a Common Goal

Connecting the History of Czechoslovak Left Exile Groups

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ANDĚLOVÁ, Kristina – SUK, Jiří –
ZAHRADNÍČEK, Tomáš:

Pro nás dějiny nekončí: Politická práce a myšlení českého levicového exilu (1968–1989).

Praha, Argo – Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR, v.v.i.,
2023, 354 pages, ISBN 978-80-257-4229-7.

In *Pro nás dějiny nekončí: Politická práce a myšlení českého levicového exilu (1968–1989)* [For Us History Does Not End: Political Work and Thought of Czech Left-wing Exile (1968–1989)], three historians joined forces to follow and reflect on the historical trajectory of three left-wing exile groups and the publications that represented their views from when they left Czechoslovakia to when they returned or would have liked to. Respectively, the groups coalesced around the journal *Listy* [The Pages], *Informační materiály* [Information Materials], *Infomat* for short, and several publications put out by the social democrats. Their shared goal was a democratic Czechoslovakia, but when the regime collapsed in that momentous December of 1989, despite their previous efforts, they either failed to be part of the subsequent chapter of political development or participated in unforeseen ways. This transition is the subject of the book's epilogue and the three

parts (each could be a book in itself) seek to explain it. One moment in that trajectory that stands out is the impact of the independent civic initiative Charter 77 (*Charta 77*) on all of them, albeit in different ways. The book gives it the deserved detailed treatment.¹

The journalist and politician Jiří Pelikán (1923–1999) was a steeled member and functionary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (*Komunistická strana Československa*, KSČ) from his youth all the way to 1968. By the time of the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia in August that year he was the head of the Czechoslovak Television but on the Soviet order was forced to abdicate and went into exile. Based on her doctoral dissertation defended in 2021, Kristina Andělová follows the history of the journal *Listy* which Pelikán founded in 1970 in Rome and which began to circulate in 1971. Its mission was to build a bridge between exile and home, between the reform communists who upheld democratic socialism and the opposition to the restored Neo-Stalinist regime in Czechoslovakia on the cultural and political fronts.

Andělová titles her chapter “Socialism without Moscow: The Listy Group between East and West”² but the story she tells does not corroborate the title. Her text is based primarily on the journal’s articles, published in exile from 1971 to 1989 (and in Czechoslovakia/the Czech Republic thereafter), on the rich historiography on the subject, on many archival sources, including some, but not all, of the revealing correspondence between the members of the Listy Group³ in exile and collaborators in Czechoslovakia. The correspondence, missing in her otherwise well-documented chapter, between the historian Vilém Prečan (in exile from 1976) and Václav Havel, for instance, or the unpublished correspondence between Prečan and Pelikán are a treasure trove for historians. As a result, relying on the copious writings and feverish activities of the political scientist and politician Zdeněk Mlynář (1930–1997), the leading communist intellectual who emigrated to Vienna in 1977, is to give him a central stage at the expense of Prečan and Havel and betrays the chapter’s intention if for no other reason that Mlynář without Moscow is unthinkable.⁴

¹ While the book’s subtitle refers to Czech thinking, I have opted for Czechoslovak in mine on the understanding that it reflects more accurately the exile’s belonging to an imagined community from their country of origin.

² *Socialismus bez Moskvy: Skupina Listy mezi Východem a Západem*, pp. 33–120.

³ The Listy Group (*Skupina Listy*) was not so much the editorial office of the magazine but an informal circle of collaborators with broader (and sometimes not entirely identical) political ambitions and intentions.

⁴ See HAVEL, Václav – PREČAN, Vilém: *Korespondence 1983–1989*. Ed. by Vojtech Čelko. Praha, Československé dokumentační středisko 2011; PREČAN, Vilém – PELIKÁN, Jiří: *Korespondence, 1976–1998* (unpublished correspondence, archived in the Czechoslovak Documentation Centre

Andělová follows the articles and debates that took place among Listy Group's collaborators on problems of historical significance in Czechoslovakia and worldwide, step by step, issue by issue, year by year. Pelikán's archive, stored in the Historical Archives of the Chamber of Deputies (*L'Archivio storico della Camera dei deputati*) of the Italian Parliament in Rome, provides her with a window onto the politically motivated personal choices to emigrate. Most of the emigrés agonized over wanting to remain faithful to their convictions, Pelikán among them. He proposed and his colleagues agreed to subtitle the journal as *Časopis československé socialistické opozice* [Journal of the Czechoslovak Socialist Opposition]. It was its hallmark all the way to 1989.

The communist ideal had been eroded by the invasion of Czechoslovakia as well as among the left in the western world. Eurocommunism, a flash in the pan during the late 1970s and early 1980s, inspiring Pelikán and others to believe that socialism was not a spent force, did not save it. When Charter 77 erupted onto the world scene in January 1977, after an ambivalent reaction, it inspired their hope because Mlynář and Jiří Hájek (1913–1993), foreign minister under Alexander Dubček in 1968, were its signatories. But Charter 77 forced the Listy Group to confront the amorphous movement's "apolitical politics", the centerpiece of Charter 77's politics. *Listy* would have wanted to steer it away from the self-proclaimed defense of human rights and the creation of a civil society into a programmatic confrontation with the regime but could not. However, *Listy* played a major role by publishing Charter 77's and VONS's⁵ texts in different language versions, as well as news about the regime's persecution and bullying of the chartists.

Andělová includes in her chapter the Listy Group's flirtation with China in search of an ally against the current regime, taking advantage of the Sino-Soviet split and the fact that China was among the countries that were critical of the military occupation in 1968. The dalliance failed because the Chinese leaders were not interested in propagating the Czech exiles' interests but in using them to spread their critical stand of the Soviet Union and the capitalist world.⁶ It was

(*Československé dokumentační středisko*), is available on request); MLYNÁŘ, Zdeněk: *Mráz přichází z Kremlu*. Praha, Mladá fronta 1990 (first edition 1981 in exile); IDEM: *Can Gorbachev Change the Soviet Union? The International Dimensions of Political Reform*. (Translated by Ruth Tosková and Marian Šling.) Boulder (Co.), Westview 1990.

⁵ Committee for the Defense of the Unjustly Prosecuted (*Výbor na obranu nespravedlivě stíhaných*, VONS) was a Czechoslovak dissident initiative founded in April 1978 mainly by Charter 77 signatories.

⁶ See ORSÁG, Petr: S čínskými komunisty proti Husákově normalizaci: Exilová skupina Listy a její hledání politických partnerů proti sovětské mocenské dominanci ve střední Evropě. In: *Soudobé dějiny*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (2016), pp. 563–601.

not until Mikhail Gorbachev came to dominate Soviet politics from 1985 onwards that the members of the Listy Group became cautiously optimistic that *perestroika* and *glasnost* could restore the tenets of the Prague Spring: “Listy’s editors watched closely the steps taken by Moscow’s center, pondering about what will follow.” (p. 93)⁷

To begin with, they hoped for a radical turn regarding the 1968 occupation and the stationing of Soviet troops on Czechoslovak territory. When it finally came in December 1989, it was too late. Relying so heavily on Mlynář’s writings and activities, Andělová downplays Pelikán’s openness towards the opposition and the creation of civic initiatives together with his recognition, unlike Mlynář’s, that the subsequent historical chapter was unthinkable without Alexander Dubček (1921–1992) as much as without Václav Havel (1936–2011). *Listy*’s December 1989 issue, putting the articles of the two side by side and showing the smiling Dubček and Havel holding hands, is its written as well as graphic evidence.

Examining a younger generation than the one studied by Andělová allowed Jiří Suk in his part of the book entitled “For an Anti-Bureaucratic Revolution: The Czech Revolutionary Socialists in Exile and at Home”⁸ to resort to oral history as one of his methodological tools. In addition to the intellectual production of the radical socialists, their changing outlook on Czechoslovakia and the world at home and in exile through their short-lived publication *Informační materiály*, printed in West Berlin, Suk garnered information about their clandestine activities and pseudonyms which would not have been revealed otherwise.

Suk’s tracing of the origins of revolutionary socialism in Czechoslovakia led him to the journalist Petr Uhl (1941–2021) and to the poet and philosopher Egon Bondy (the alias of Zbyněk Fišer, 1930–2007). Marxists at heart, while they dismissed the existing Stalinist regime lock, stock and barrel, they differed in their appraisal of the Prague Spring. Uhl was more congenial towards the reformists than the maverick Bondy. Influenced by radical socialism represented by a general idea of Trotskyism as an alternative to Stalinism and as an aspiration to liberate the entire globe from capitalism, or, like Jiří Boreš (born 1948), who identified with Trotsky for his criticism of the Bolshevik revolution, its betrayal and the bureaucratic degeneration of the Soviet state, the self-styled socialists belonged to a generation that matured to adulthood in a country in which the regime was built by the hardline communists. The military occupation in August 1968 reaffirmed their left-leaning convictions against the bureaucratic dictatorship and their determination to defend the freedom which the Prague Spring upheld and then lost, through different forms of resistance. At home they resorted to boycotts

⁷ All quotes were translated by the author.

⁸ Za antibyrokratickou revoluci: Čeští revoluční socialisté v exilu i doma, pp. 121–222.

of the press, alternative theatre and cinema, or distribution of antiregime leaflets. When the government tightened the screws around any opposition, many went underground. Betrayed by an agent provocateur, scores of activists were jailed. The Trotskyists abroad and major European intellectual figures advocated their release.

The radical socialists in exile happened to gather in West Berlin with collaborators scattered in different European countries, upholding their credo of socialism from below and workers' organization in self-governing councils. Even though the journal was driven by an ideology, the editors steered the journal toward providing political and cultural information rather than spoon-feeding a revolutionary program. Having a global view of the world, their left-wing ideational map was that of the currently accepted division of the world in the capitalist first, the socialist second and the developing third world. Suk details each one (pp. 142–169).

The radical socialists drew close to the French Revolutionary Communist League (*Ligue communiste révolutionnaire*) and Ernest Mandel (1923–1995), the Trotskyist theorist and politician in Brussels, who financed the publication of their journal *Infomat*. It began circulating in 1971 four times a year, the last issue was published in 1982. The journal pilloried the neo Stalinists in Czechoslovakia, the Soviet ideological and political reality but also western social democracy for its compromising softness. *Infomat* had a well-defined ideological platform and decried Pelikán's *Listy* for not being critical enough of Marxism, for not being critical of social democracy and for being too "pluralistic". So, while Pelikán published Uhl's articles, it did not happen the other way round. *Infomat* was smuggled to Czechoslovakia with the same difficulty as *Listy*, by the same routes and couriers as the other proscribed journals, with the state secret police on their heels and suffering from police infiltration, which hampered their distribution in Czechoslovakia.

Gradually, the Trotskyists' pursuit of their theoretical ideological convictions had to take second place to the need to defend the unjustly persecuted activists in Czechoslovakia, to support the samizdat publications at home, and sponsor cultural creativity in exile. When Charter 77 appeared, the radical socialists made a firm stand for its moral resistance as a political act and defended its plurality of opinions as a way out of the existing lethargy. That openness aided in bringing the radical socialists at home and in exile closer together and forced them to revise their foundational ideas, as Suk reveals in his subchapter "Retreat from Revolutionary Thought after Charter 77".⁹

⁹ Ústup od revolučních myšlenek po Chartě 77, pp. 169–173.

"Never Again with the Communists: Czechoslovak Social Democrats in Exile" is how Tomáš Zahradníček titled his part of the book.¹⁰ It deals with the history of the social democrats and their numerous publications, reflecting their precarious existence. In exile since 1948, they saw in the Prague Spring the possibility of the rebirth of democratic Czechoslovakia. Their previous experience made them cautious. The Soviet occupation in August 1968 shattered their hopes, while social democrats in Czechoslovakia who had longed for the renewal of the party joined them in exile. Thus, several waves of emigrés from different generations met on foreign soil.

What took place from then onwards were acrimonious confrontations among the different currents of social democrats, different generations and opposing appraisals of the Prague Spring. Under such circumstances, it was difficult to create a functioning party. This marks a fundamental difference from the Listy Group, which from day one had a mission to fulfill. What also made a difference, in my view, was the nature of the leaders. Whereas Pelikán was known for bonhomie and tolerance, recognized by his colleagues, the social democrats in exile belonged to a different generation, experience, and outlook. In addition, most stuck to their views of "never again with the communists". Thus, the new wave of exiles who were less rabidly anticommunist did not integrate into the existing group's leadership even though they shared the same hope for democratic socialism. *Perspektivy socialismu* [Prospects of Socialism] was a short-lived intergenerational publication, which ceased to exist because of irreconcilable points of views and intolerance.

Was there a social democratic party in exile? This question is not tackled fully. Vilém Bernard (1912–1992), a social democratic veteran, kept a members' list, but we do not know how many members were in it. And this bickering anticommunist grouping could hardly build a bridge to the likeminded social democrats in Czechoslovakia who went into hibernation even after the leadership of the social democrats in exile had been rejuvenated.

When Charter 77 erupted onto the political stage, seeping into the consciousness in Czechoslovakia and abroad, the "sleeping party", as Zahradníček calls the social democrats at home, had no representatives in its midst. Charter 77 was welcomed in exile. It is once again an irony of history that it was the communist intellectual Zdeněk Mlynář who summoned the chartists and social democracy in exile to overcome their differences and wrangling. And it was Mlynář who helped to connect the leaders of the Socialist International and the social democrats.

¹⁰ Už nikdy s komunisty: Českoslovenští sociální demokraté v exilu, pp. 223–310.

On page after page, Zahradníček demonstrates convincingly that the social democrats' strife was not for power but for its existence on both sides of the frontier. It is significant to highlight that after the birth of Charter 77, a more functional relationship was established between the social democrats at home and in exile. Once again, the regime took note and went after its members. That did not stop them from starting a new venture – the samizdat journal *Dialogy* – and eventually to defy the regime by founding the independent initiative Movement for Civil Liberty.¹¹

The social democrats in exile lagged behind the development of civic initiatives at home. And then an unexpected *volte face* took place, according to Zahradníček: “The party was perhaps the only political organization in exile that at the end of the 1980s grew in strength and numbers, primarily due to its presence in refugee camps, where some issues of *Právo lidu* were distributed.”¹² (p. 294) Really, that simple? The problem with such an assertion is that the concept *party* is never defined. When in November 1989 a council preparing the foundation of a social democratic party in Czechoslovakia sprang into action, the exile group was not represented while the “sleeping party” woke up and “entered the political development as another actor, distinctive and confident, strengthening fast and enjoying significant support from different sides” (p. 295).

1989 was a turning point in Czechoslovak, European and indeed world history's zigzagging continuum. The book ends with an outline of the exile's return. Jiří Pelikán, like his *Listy* cohort, wanted to return to public life but was sidelined by the new generation of politicians who rejected him for his communist past. Pelikán had failed to return on his high horse but his accomplishment in establishing *Listy* as a publication relevant to the political and cultural milieu of the new Czechoslovakia and later Czech Republic is remarkable. Mlynář's return was a political fiasco but an intellectual success. He wrote numerous thought-provoking reflections on the state of the country – all cited in the bibliography of the book – which drew him supporters as well as implacable foes. Because Mlynář was one of the central figures in Czechoslovak political and intellectual history,

¹¹ Movement for Civil Liberty (*Hnutí za občanskou svobodu*, HOS) was founded in October 1988 in the environment of Charter 77. Its founding was initiated by Charter signatory and spokesman and independent socialist Rudolf Battěk (1924–2013). HOS combined the germs of three political currents – left-liberal, i.e. social democrats (around Battěk), right-liberal, and conservative – and represented a more political initiative than the Charter. It developed the political programme “Democracy for All” (*Demokracii pro všechny*), which was shared by most of the Czech dissent.

¹² The traditional social democratic newspaper *Právo lidu* [People's Right] ceased publication in Czechoslovakia in 1948. From 1983 onwards, it was published in West Germany as an exile quarterly.

he deserves a serious biography to do him justice. A rich archival material is available while family members and people who have been witnesses to his past are there to be interviewed.

The radical leftists hoped for a third way after the demise of communist rule – capitalism with a human face and direct democracy – which did not materialize. Their exiled brethren drifted into other directions while at home Petr Uhl adapted to the new reality, becoming a deputy in the Czechoslovak Federal Assembly (*Federální shromáždění*) and assuming other public posts. His autobiography is a unique testimony to the life of a tireless advocate for his ideals regardless of the costs.¹³ In his conclusions, Zahradníček outlines the establishment of social democracy in post-1989 Czechoslovakia as a triumph without exile. Indeed, the historical trajectory that he provides in his part of the book predetermines that outcome. Like Phoenix, social democracy was reborn. But that is an inquiry for a different book.

In sum, this enlightening text weaves together three currents of the left-wing opposition, more in exile than at home, presenting their successes or failures to act in a concerted way in defense of a common goal – democratic Czechoslovakia. The generational background of each group is relevant to the examination of the relationship between exile and the home front, to their capacity to construct bridges between the two, strengthening or not their organizational structures on either side of the border, leading eventually to their problematic return after 1989 and insertion into democratic Czechoslovakia.

Keywords:

Czechoslovakia; Czechoslovak left exile; Czech political thinking; dissent; communism; Listy Group (*Skupina Listy*); radical socialism; social democracy

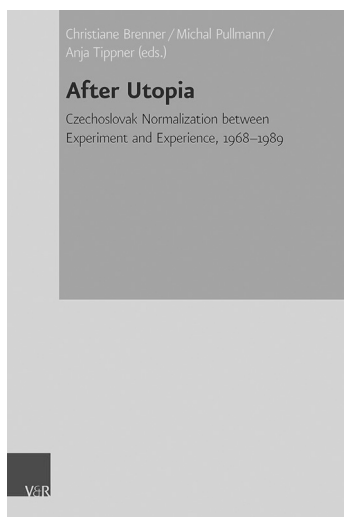
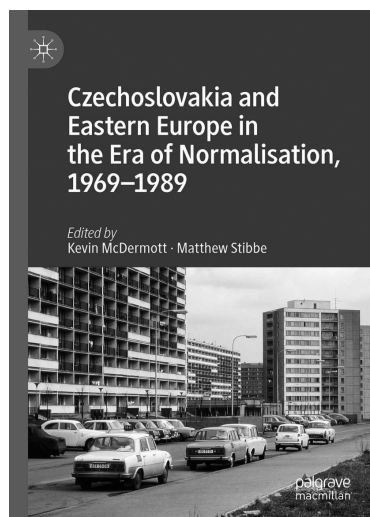
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¹³ UHL, Petr – PAVELKA, Zdenko: *Dělal jsem, co jsem považoval za správné*. Praha, Torst 2013.

Two Similar Books on Czechoslovak Normalization

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McDERMOTT, Kevin – STIBBE, Matthew (eds.):

Czechoslovakia and Eastern Europe in the Era of Normalisation, 1969–1989.

Cham (Switzerland), Palgrave Macmillan 2022, xix + 345 pages, ISBN 978-3-030-98270-6.

BRENNER, Christiane – PULLMANN, Michal – TIPPNER, Anja (eds.):

After Utopia: Czechoslovak Normalisation between Experiment and Experience, 1968–1989.

Proceedings of the Annual Conference of Collegium Carolinum, Pelham, 8–11 November 2018.

(Bad Wiesseer Tagungen des Collegium Carolinum, Vol. 41.) Göttingen,

Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2022, vi + 403 pages, ISBN 978-3-525-33614-4.

In 2022, two collections devoted to normalization in Czechoslovakia were published by renowned academic publishers. Both publications, whose form and content are aimed at a narrow circle of readers, were contributed by experts who have been working on the topic for a long time. Normalization is interpreted from two basic perspectives in Czech scholarly and media discourse. The first, which is the dominant one in the media, describes the years 1968–1989 as a grey timelessness, which ordinary people spent at their weekend cottage and which was ruled by the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (*Komunistická strana Československa*, KSČ)

and the State Security Service (*Státní bezpečnost*, StB). Only a handful of courageous individuals, namely the liberal-minded and homogeneous dissent, spoke out against this totalitarian power.¹ The second approach, heavily inspired by German and Anglophone research and dominant in both reviewed publications,² attempts to view normalization in a more sophisticated way, arguing, for example, that the stability of state socialism did not stand only on repression.³ I will first evaluate the two reviewed publications separately and then attempt a brief comparison between them.

The collective volume *Czechoslovakia and Eastern Europe in the Era of Normalisation, 1969–1989* (hereafter *Era of Normalisation*) was edited by Kevin McDermott and Matthew Stibbe of Sheffield Hallam University. In a theoretical introductory chapter, they point out that the contributions in the volume show “multiple shades of grey”, as the authors take an approach not only from above but also from below, among other things.⁴ If we want to be thoroughgoing, however, the latter approach is actually a minority one in the book. The essays aim to bring together a more diverse set of interpretations than the conventional Western-centric and teleological narratives of the gradual re-emergence of civil society after decades spent “under the ice” to interpretations of normalization in Czechoslovakia.⁵ Neither politics nor society was frozen, as, according to the editors, the Oxford historian Timothy Garton Ash, for example, too simplistically argues.⁶ Their main goal – to portray normalization in a balanced, non-categorical way which gives back agency to “ordinary” Czechs and Slovaks – can be welcomed as important for a wider readership. On the other hand, it is not very revelatory for academic readers to state that we should not overlook the array of social welfare legislation and mass housing construction of the 1970s and 1980s. According to the editors, normalization can be seen as a process, which was not simply designed and enforced “from above” by party, state and security elites,

¹ See, for example, SVOBODA, Libor – PETRÁŠ, Jiří (eds.): *Bezčasi: Československo v letech 1972–1977*. Praha – České Budějovice, Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů – Jihočeské muzeum 2018.

² See, for example, SABROW, Martin: Socialismus jako myšlenkový svět: Komunistická diktatura v kulturněhistorické perspektivě. In: *Soudobé dějiny*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (2012), pp. 196–208.

³ See, for example, ČINÁTL, Kamil – MERVART, Jan – NAJBERT, Jaroslav (eds.): *Podoby československé normalizace: Dějiny v diskusi*. Praha, Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů – Nakladatelství Lidové noviny 2017.

⁴ STIBBE, Matthew – McDERMOTT, Kevin: *Czechoslovakia and Eastern Europe in the Era of Normalisation*, pp. 1–26, here p. 5.

⁵ Ibidem.

⁶ GARTON ASH, Timothy: *The Uses of Adversity: Essays on the Fate of Central Europe*. London, Random House 1989.

but was often the product of negotiation and interaction from below involving a spectrum of actors at multiple levels. Secondly, the book takes normalization as an era with two main phases, divided by the post-invasion consolidation of conditions in 1970/1971. They stress that in the immediate post-invasion period Czechoslovakia was a maverick, but from the mid-1970s it became one of the most loyal acolytes of the Soviet Union.⁷

American historian James Krapfl reconstructs the beginnings of normalization in Nymburk, Central Bohemia, from a grassroots perspective, based on articles in the regional periodical *Nymbursko*. He draws on Kieran Williams' earlier thesis that despite the formal restoration of censorship in September 1968, most regional newspapers continued to publish diverse opinions and reports on local political debates. I agree with Krapfl's assertion that only a contemporary perspective allows us to trace changes in mentality and behaviour systematically and quite reliably, whereas memoirs and oral testimonies are clued in by *ex post facto* accounts.⁸ However, can we consider the Nymburk district as unexceptional in the Czech lands? Are only districts in Bohemia entitled to this label, or could we also label a district in Moravia or Silesia as unexceptional? Although some historians would argue that the analysis of one newspaper is not a sufficient source base, Krapfl shows through semiotic analysis that the establishment of the normalization order discursively returns to the notion of the leading role of the communist party as dictatorship and not paternalistic umpireship, as it had been under Alexander Dubček. Krapfl agrees with the author of another essay, Michal Pullmann, in that one of the main features of normalization was the gender-conservative policy of the "quiet life".⁹ Martin Štefek offers a similar view of political stability, focusing on the top tier of the party hierarchy, the Presidium of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia's Central Committee. Unlike the previous two essays, he uses archival sources or editions of them but does not reflect the new synthesis of the history of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, which focuses primarily on normalization.¹⁰ Perhaps most useful are the passages on the brief era of Miloš Jakeš at the head of the KSČ (1987–1989), when the previous personal stability

⁷ STIBBE, M. – McDERMOTT, K.: Czechoslovakia and Eastern Europe in the Era of Normalisation, p. 18.

⁸ KRAPFL, James: Building the Normalisation Panorama, 1968–1969, pp. 27–52, here p. 28.

⁹ PULLMANN, Michal: The Ideological Face of Normalisation: Socialist Modernity and the "Quiet Life", pp. 53–72, here p. 63.

¹⁰ KOCIAN, Jiří – PAŽOUT, Jaroslav – VILÍMEK, Tomáš – BALÍK, Stanislav – HLOUŠEK, Vít: *Dějiny Komunistické strany Československa*, Vol. 4: 1969–1993. Praha, Academia 2020.

ended, and the reformist image was more important for Gustáv Husák's successor than reform as such.¹¹

Normalization in Slovakia is successfully summarized by Adam Hudek from the position of social and cultural history. Hudek analyses the strategies adopted by the communist leadership in Slovakia to achieve the desired "normalization consensus" based on a stable community of satisfied apolitical citizens, which is a hilarious shortcut to the definition of normalization. He notes that the combination of positive economic and social development and a successful national communist narrative meant that Slovak society (emancipating itself from stronger neighbours) had a much weaker motivation for radical systematic change than the Czech one.¹² American historian Kieran Williams, whose study of the onset of normalization "from above" is one of the most cited texts in the reviewed volume,¹³ focuses on the StB and summarizes for foreign readers previous Czech studies, to which he adds a case study from Slovakia (Operation OLINA, 1972).¹⁴ For many Czech and Slovak historians, Williams' approach, as well as Molly Pucci's studies and monographs,¹⁵ can be a useful inspiration for writing about the StB without overlapping into the politics of history.

British historian Celia Donert raises important questions about the long-term continuities that shaped gender politics and gender relations in Czechoslovakia before, during and after normalization. The author draws on the research of Jiřina Šiklová (1935–2021), a dissident and founder of gender studies in Czechoslovakia in the early 1990s. Donert and Šiklová conclude that the influence of conservative notions of masculinity and femininity in normalized Czechoslovakia were nowhere as significant as in the dissident movements associated with Charter 77.¹⁶ The optics of gender invite not only a longer time span but also comparison. Instead of a brief comparison with Nazi Germany, however, a comparison with Western and Eastern Europe in the 1970s and 1980s would have been more

¹¹ ŠTEFEK, Martin: *The Leadership of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia during Normalisation: Stability and Change*, pp. 73–96, here p. 90.

¹² HUDEK, Adam: *An Uncommon Course: Normalisation in Slovakia*, pp. 97–120, here p. 109.

¹³ See WILLIAMS, Kieran: *The Prague Spring and Its Aftermath: Czechoslovak Politics, 1968–1970*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1997.

¹⁴ IDEM: *The Czechoslovak Security Service during Normalisation: The Appearance of Success*, pp. 121–144.

¹⁵ E.g. PUCCI, Molly: *Security Empire: The Secret Police in Communist Eastern Europe*. New Haven – London, Yale University Press 2020.

¹⁶ DONERT, Celia: *Gendering Normalisation: Citizenship in Czechoslovakia during Late Socialism*, pp. 171–194, here p. 185. See ŠIKLOVÁ, Jiřina: *Podíl českých žen na samizdatu a v disentu v Československu v období tzv. normalizace v letech 1969–1989*. In: *Gender, rovné příležitosti, výzkum*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (2008), pp. 291–322.

appropriate, and the study also lacks a comparison of the situation in the Czech and Slovak parts of the federation. For example, was the approach to the female body, as seen in the photograph of the Unified Agricultural Co-operative (*Jednotné zemědělské družstvo*, JZD) Slušovice featuring a tanned, blonde woman in a low-cut white dress, a Czech specificity?

One of the few chapters based primarily on archival research is Vítězslav Sommer's essay about the city of Gottwaldov during normalization. Sommer shows, among other things, that thanks to the legacy of inter-war Bataism (a specific ethic and way of organizing work founded by Tomáš Baťa, Czech entrepreneur and founder of the Bata shoe company) Gottwaldov seemed like an ideal local environment for the implementation of the political and economic strategies of the normalization regime. Instead, it became a place of economic absurdities, when for example in the summer of 1983 there was a chronic shortage of seasonal shoes for children and adults – this crisis occurred in the city which was a major centre of shoe manufacturing and supplied the entire Eastern Bloc.¹⁷ The Svit shoe factory also had to deal with the citizens' lack of interest in the poorly paid work of shoe production, which was not solved by employing foreign workers, which Ondřej Klípa discusses in more detail further on in the volume.¹⁸

Using a diverse range of sources, from Russian archives to Czechoslovak feature films, American historian Rachel Appelbaum reconstructs an interesting aspect of normalization as a transnational project that was also directed at the Soviet people, so the Soviet government also had to convince its own citizens that the friendship project remained viable.¹⁹ At the same time, it aimed to convince Czechoslovak citizens that the security of their country – and the sanctity of their private lives – depended on maintaining cultural, people-to-people and business contacts with the Soviet Union. The Czechoslovak leadership therefore strove to present friendship with the USSR as inevitable and inviolable. It portrayed relations between Prague and Moscow as pragmatic in contrast to the optimistic and friendly ties prior to the 1968 occupation, but it must be stressed that the essay focuses mainly only on the seventies.

British historian Matthew Stibbe also stays mostly confined to the 1970s but a bigger problem is that he looks at contacts between East Germany and Czechoslovakia using only German sources, and the focus is on German-German

¹⁷ SOMMER, Vítězslav: The "City of Shoes" under Normalisation: Local Politics and Social-Economic Trends in Gottwaldov after 1938, pp. 215–238, here p. 229.

¹⁸ KLÍPA, Ondřej: Fragile Friendship: Polish-Czechoslovak Labour Force Cooperation in the Normalisation Era, pp. 291–312.

¹⁹ APPELBAUM, Rachel: Friendship under Occupation: Soviet-Czechoslovak Relations and Everyday Life after the 1968 Invasion, pp. 239–258, here p. 246.

and German-Polish relations rather than on Czechoslovakia.²⁰ Ondřej Klípa's study, on the other hand, is one of the most useful parts of the whole book. He focuses on Polish-Czechoslovak relations in an area of economic connections, namely the "export" of Polish workers to Czechoslovakia, using Czech, Polish and German archives, both at the central and regional level. He distinguishes two main groups of Polish workers in Czechoslovakia: 1) young Polish textile workers; and 2) elite male Polish construction crews. The interest of Polish men and women in working in Czechoslovakia gradually declined, but overall the project was mutually beneficial: Prague supported Jaruzelski's conservative state while keeping domestic enterprises running, which was one of the factors that maintained the stability of the Husák regime. Finally, Ondřej Vojtěchovský and Jan Pelikán compare Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. Unlike the previous chapters devoted to relations with East Germany and Poland, the essay ranges widely from economics to the fine arts. It ends with the stimulating, if only sketched, thesis that Czechoslovak reconstruction could rather have looked to Yugoslavia for models than to the USSR.²¹

The editorial – and to a large extent also the authorial – team of *After Utopia: Czechoslovak Normalisation between Experiment and Experience, 1968–1989* (hereafter *After Utopia*) is German-Czech. According to Christiane Brenner, Anja Tippner and Michal Pullmann, the volume aims to challenge older interpretations which equate normalization with a linear rollback that led to complete stagnation.²² They consistently historicize normalization because, according to them, there was no master plan for the "consolidation" of the country lying around in Moscow or Prague in August 1968. At the same time, they question (unfortunately, in rhetorical terms) whether the implosion of the regime in 1989 is proof that the normalization experiment, which they want to view through the lens of the long changes from the 1960s to the 1990s, failed.

Martin Schulze Wessel, Director of the Munich Collegium Carolinum research institute, examines how the concept of normalization developed during the years from 1968 to 1970 in the party debates. Drawing primarily on speeches by party leaders often published in the daily *Rudé právo* [Red Law], he approaches the topic from the perspective of conceptual history and from

²⁰ STIBBE, Matthew: Normalisation across Borders: Official Cooperation and Contacts between East Germany and Czechoslovakia, 1969–1980, pp. 259–290.

²¹ VOJTĚCHOVSKÝ, Ondřej – PELIKÁN, Jan: A Different Socialism: Czechoslovak Normalisation and Yugoslavia, pp. 313–336, here p. 330.

²² BRENNER, Christiane – PULLMANN, Michal – TIPPNER, Anja: After Utopia: Introductory Remarks on Normalization in Czechoslovakia, pp. 1–16, here p. 2.

above. Like Michal Pullmann, he focuses on the “quiet life” or “calm for work” (*klid na práci*) as one of the norms of life under normalization.²³ Stefan Lehr also chooses a perspective from above when he discusses the decision-making processes in the Presidium of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. His study is based primarily on the transcripts of twenty-eight selected Presidium sessions between 1970 and 1987. Although he does not indicate on what basis he selected these particular sessions, I find Lehr’s analysis very useful for understanding both the functioning of the decisive power organ in socialist Czechoslovakia (e.g. economic issues provoked more heated debates than personnel “discussion”) and the behaviour, ambitions and interests of individual functionaries. Prime Minister of the Federal Government Lubomír Štrougal, for example, spoke extensively and delivered detailed monologues, especially on economic topics.²⁴ While rather passive during the Presidium “discussions”, the Secretary of the KSČ Central Committee Vasil Biľak played a far more active role in practical policy issues²⁵ and Gustáv Husák, Czechoslovak President and a party leader, preferred consensus-based solutions. If we compare Lehr’s approach with Štefek’s, the latter did not fail to mention the changes in the leadership of the party and the state after Husák left the post of General Secretary in 1987. In contrast, Lehr goes deeper into specific decision-making mechanisms and his account provides a better understanding of the functioning of the Presidium, specifically, for example, the realignment of forces between the “healthy core” (*zdravé jádro*) camp (made up of the President of the Federal Assembly Alois Indra or Vasil Biľak) and the “realists” (such as Lubomír Štrougal), and a glimpse into the manoeuvring “centrist” position of Gustáv Husák.

Tomáš Vilímek uses the example of elections during normalization to show that the people of Czechoslovakia were loyal to the regime. Although the state did, in fact, manipulate elections, there was actually no need to do so since the party achieved results of over ninety per cent even without falsification. This confirms the thesis of historian Jan Měchýř from 1999,²⁶ who pointed out that it is necessary to abandon the self-apologetic, merciful half-truth that

²³ SCHULZE WESSEL, Martin: “Calm for Work” or Neo-Stalinism: The Genesis of the Normalization in the Party Debates between 1968 and 1970, pp. 37–56.

²⁴ LEHR, Stefan: Communication and Collective Decision-Making in the Presidium of the KSČ Central Committee (1971–1989), pp. 57–88, here p. 72.

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 86.

²⁶ MĚCHÝŘ, Jan: *Velký převrat či snad revoluce sametová? Několik informací, poznámek a komentářů o naší takřečené něžné revoluci a jejích osudech 1989–1992*. Praha, Progetto 1999.

the election results of that time were being falsified.²⁷ However, loyalty and satisfaction should not be overestimated, as Jakub Rákosník shows in his chapter on social policy – for example, satisfaction with income gradually declined during normalization.²⁸

Filip Keller focuses on the education and training of apprentices, who, unlike primary school pupils or university students, have so far remained beyond the attention of academics, and the article thus appropriately complements existing research.²⁹ He makes extensive use of the contemporary press (including the iconic “Dopisy pro Sally” [Letters to Sally] column of the popular teen magazine *Mladý svět*) as well as a feature film (*Vítr v kapse*) and uses these sources to show the protracted problems of apprenticeship in Czechoslovakia, such as the turnover of apprentices, their delinquency, and the low quality of masters. On a general level, they deal with the devaluation of manual labour in Czechoslovakia and the cultural hegemony of the “better educated”.³⁰

Jaroslav Šebek focuses on the clergy in the early years of normalization, which, according to him, “contributed strikingly to the moral devastation of Czechoslovak society”.³¹ This narrative scheme, traditional since the 1990s, and the moralizing view of the past distinguishes Šebek’s study from all the others. Slovak historian Agáta Šústová Drélová, on the other hand, takes a more comprehensive approach to a similar topic.³² She critically evaluates older interpretations of church history whose approach is clearly based on a totalitarian paradigm. Her aim was to explore what official constructs of the saints Cyril (Constantinus) and Methodius reveal about the official understanding of religion in the national communist discourse. She argues, for example, that in the second half of the 1980s, Slovak communist (historian Viliam Plevza) proclaimed an effort to “organically integrate” the Christianizing aspect of the mission into the history of the Slovak nation.

Austrian historian Peter Hallama, too, reveals incoherencies and open contradictions, but also the diversity of Czechoslovak normalization. Hallama

²⁷ VILÍMEK, Tomáš: The Functions and Characteristic Attributes of Elections during Normalization in Czechoslovakia, pp. 89–118, here p. 117.

²⁸ RÁKOSNÍK, Jakub: The Social Policy of Czechoslovak Normalization, pp. 119–142, here p. 139.

²⁹ See, for example, CUHRA, Jaroslav – ČERNÁ, Marie – DEVÁTÁ, Markéta – HERMANN, Tomáš – KOUROVÁ, Pavlína: *Pojetí a prosazování komunistické výchovy v Československu 1948–1989*. Praha, Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR, v.v.i., 2020.

³⁰ KELLER, Filip: The Making of the Czechoslovak Socialist Working Class, pp. 143–164, here p. 164.

³¹ ŠEBEK, Jaroslav: Disintegration of the Prague Spring Impulses and Interference in the Clergy in the Early Years of Normalization, 1969–1974, pp. 185–210, quoted p. 208.

³² ŠÚSTOVÁ DRÉLOVÁ, Agáta: Catholicism and National Communism in Late Socialist Slovakia, pp. 211–242.

very usefully examines the presence of the father at birth through the lens of gender history and the cultural history of late socialism. For the first time in Czechoslovakia, a father could be present at birth on 29 March 1984 in a maternity hospital in Znojmo, Southern Moravia, whereas in West Germany at the same time, between 50 and 80 per cent of fathers were already present at birth. Hallama used the private archive of Miroslav Štimpl, one of the doctors responsible for this “experiment”, who kept more than a hundred letters. He analyses the rich debate about the shape of childbirth taking place in the press, which reveals a certain schism among obstetricians in their approaches to childbirth. Although Znojmo was followed by some other maternity hospitals (e.g. Havířov), and the presence of fathers at birth was supported by some experts (e.g. sexologist Radim Uzel), Czechoslovak obstetrics remained, and remains in part, industrialized and disembodied. Finally, Hallama, like Celia Donert, points to the “passive” dominant masculinity in the era of normalization, when men had power but lacked authority, and were described as weak, indecisive, and impractical.³³

In his chapter, Marek Nekula draws attention to Jan Palach, stressing that compared to the deep impression that Jan Palach left in Czech collective memory, the corpus of texts that he himself wrote could hardly be smaller. Nekula concludes that Palach’s demands, abolition of censorship and an end to ideological indoctrination by the occupying power, seem not too spectacular in political terms, but it is precisely these demands that strike at the heart of the new-yet-old political regime.³⁴ Polish historian Anna Artwińska focuses on Michal Viewegh’s well-known prose work *Báječná léta pod psa* [Pretty Bad Years] (1992). She notes that it combines elements of nostalgia for normalization and anti-communism.³⁵ Markéta Špiritová also explores the phenomenon of nostalgia by analysing comments and online discussions on the television show *Retro* and on the book published under the same name. However, her conclusions that popular or social media played an important role in highlighting the counter-hegemonic narrative of memory (socialism was not all bad) are not too surprising.³⁶

³³ HALLAMA, Peter: “Are We Afraid of Fathers in the Delivery Room?” Experiments in Obstetrics in Late Socialist Czechoslovakia, pp. 267–292.

³⁴ NEKULA, Marek: Jan Palach and His Public, pp. 292–314, here p. 313.

³⁵ ARTWIŃSKA, Anna: The Discrete Charm of Times Past: Michal Viewegh’s Family Saga *Báječná léta pod psa* (1992), pp. 333–346.

³⁶ ŠPIRITOVÁ, Markéta: The Normalization Era in Popular Culture of Memory: Using the Example of Online Discussions on the Czech Television Programme *Retro*, pp. 347–364, here p. 363.

If we compare the two reviewed publications, both have, with the one exception mentioned above, very similar goals and research approaches, the authors belong to the same paradigmatic field. At the same time, their texts are thematically differentiated according to the specific research interests of historians. Of course, the era of large, coherent narratives is over, we live in times of heterogeneous post-narratives, yet both volumes appear somewhat fragmented and editorially incomplete. Both publications are dominated by Czech historians and men. According to Denisa Nečasová, the underrepresentation of female experts leads to one of the fundamental weaknesses of (not only) Czech historiography: most of the research ignores the gender structure of society at the methodological level, which is universal and permeates all areas of society.³⁷ In the reviewed books, a more comprehensive gender perspective appears only in essays by Celia Donert and Peter Hallama. Only two Slovak historians (Adam Hudek, Agáta Šústová Drélová) contributed to both books, if we do not count the journalistic appendix by Slovak writer Michal Hvorecký in *After Utopia*.³⁸ This illustrates the traditionally predominant “Czech writing” on the history of Czechoslovakia. Anglophone and German historians, then, have the roles of leading personalities in both publications (editors, and authors of the introductory theoretical chapters). On the one hand, this is understandable, but from a postcolonial perspective, Western experts take on the traditional authoritative role of the centre of knowledge. Not a single historian working in Poland or Hungary contributed to the books and in the case of the Czech authors, experts from “regional” academic and university institutions are also not represented in the books. Only one author, Czech Jan Mervart, contributed to both books,³⁹ but I do not evaluate his essays in this review because of his currently close professional ties.

The era of Czechoslovak Stalinism serves the authors of both volumes for simple comparison with normalization. The 1950s and the 1980s surely differed from each other in many ways, but Stalinism, understood as a complex of the years 1929–1953, also contained, alongside its revolutionary dimension, a stabilizing dimension, which is conceived in the books as a distinctive feature of Czechoslovak normalization. Conversely, during the first two years of normalization, ultra-orthodox communists used terms like “cleansing” (*čistky*), so that

³⁷ NEČASOVÁ, Denisa: Několik (o)bludných cest české historiografie posledních třiceti let. In: *Soudobé dějiny / CJCH*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (2023), pp. 169–174, here p. 172.

³⁸ HVORECKÝ, Michal: Four Slovak Lives – Dissidents under Normalization, pp. 389–398.

³⁹ MERVART, Jan: Shaping “Real Socialism”: The Normalised Conception of Culture. In: McDERMOTT, K. – STIBBE, M. (eds.): *Czechoslovakia and Eastern Europe in the Era of Normalisation*, pp. 195–214; MERVART, Jan: Czech Research on Normalization. In: BRENNER, Ch. – PULLMANN, M. – TIPPNER, A. (eds.): *After Utopia*, pp. 365–388.

from the perspective of their expectations and emotions one can speak of neo-Stalinism.⁴⁰ Neither book is visually very inventive. Unfortunately, the visual world of normalization remains mostly aloof from analysis and interpretation. Yet it can be a functional and meaningful part of the research, as Celia Donert shows when working with the aforementioned 1980s' PR photograph for the Unified Agricultural Co-operative Slušovice. *After Utopia* does contain more photographs, but they are mostly used as "illustrations of the time", not as primary sources.

While both books were published in 2022, the texts in *After Utopia* are older, being papers from the annual conference of the Collegium Carolinum in November 2018. The editors of the volume owe an explanation to their readers as to which conference papers were not included in the volume and why. If we compare the book with the conference program, we find that the authors of some essays (such as Jakub Rákosník, Jakub Havlík, or Jaroslav Šebek) did not present conference papers.⁴¹ Furthermore, the editors of *After Utopia*, which is thematically more diverse compared to *Era of Normalisation* and also deals with cultural history, did not prepare an index and did not print the chapters in a uniform format – some have a conclusion, others do not. The division of the essays into four thematic units is not explained in any way and therefore looks somewhat template-like. On the other hand, the editors of *Era of Normalisation* have given up on an explicit conceptual framework altogether; the chapters are merely numbered. The order of the chapters in *Era of Normalisation*, however, does not lack meaning; for example, the last four of the fourteen chapters are devoted to Czechoslovakia's relations with selected Eastern Bloc countries, but without paying any attention to the relations of the states of Eastern Europe and the postcolonial world.⁴² The *After Utopia* publication, on the other hand, does not focus at all on the Husák regime's ties with other states. Let me add that the absence of essays on the Czechoslovak exile in the West, including, for example, the activities of Radio Free Europe, is understandable due to the objectives of both publications and the relatively rich production on these topics to date,⁴³ but it is also possible to revise and expand the existing state of knowledge in this field

⁴⁰ See SCHULZE WESSEL, M.: "Calm for Work" or Neo-Stalinism, pp. 55–56.

⁴¹ See the conference programme: *Was war die Normalisierung? Die Tschechoslowakei 1969–1989. Jahrestagung des Collegium Carolinum vom 8. bis 11. November 2018 in Pelham, Bayern* [online]. [Accessed 2024-11-02.] Available at: <https://www.collegium-carolinum.de/jahrestagungen/einzelansicht/jahrestagung-2018>.

⁴² Cf. MARK, James – KALINOVSKY, Artemy M. – MARUNG, Stefi (eds.): *Alternative Globalizations: Eastern Europe and Postcolonial World*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press 2020.

⁴³ See, for example, TOMEK, Prokop: *Československá redakce Radio Free Europe: Historie a vlivy na československé dějiny*. Praha, Academia 2015.

of research – for example, the problematic relations between the exile publishers Sixty-Eight Publishers (Toronto) and Index (Cologne).⁴⁴ Differences can be found not only in the space explored but also in the emphasis on time. Although both books focus greatly on the first phase of normalization up to 1970, in *After Utopia* we also find more about the late normalization of the second half of the 1980s, and some essays cross the milestone of 1989 and go all the way on to the 1990s, contributing to the academic stream of inquiry into the (dis)continuities between “grey” normalization and the “wild” 1990s.⁴⁵

In summary, it can be said that both books present a mosaic of contributions framed by the historicization and destigmatization of normalization in Czechoslovakia. For most of the authors, normalization in Czechoslovakia was not simply a matter of negating the reforms that preceded the Soviet invasion in August 1968. For the informed reader, it is rewarding to read texts on normalization in Czechoslovakia that are methodologically varied, produced with scholarly erudition and imagination, and based on a diverse range of sources and relevant scholarly literature. Despite the tendency to address, among other things, some hitherto neglected topics, the authors do not avoid the constitutive figures of normalization, such as Gustáv Husák or Havel’s greengrocer from the famous essay *Moc bezmocných* [The Power of the Powerless] – this text is one of the most cited in both volumes. The cleaning lady from Žďár nad Sázavou, a new media figure in the interpretations of Czechoslovak normalization who appeared in the summer of 2020, did not manage to get into the books. At the time, Michal Pullmann constructed this woman as an example of the popular imagination under socialism, whose mental horizon was supposedly filled not by the Alps but by a holiday in Czechoslovakia. This led to another round of culture wars, and Pullmann’s image of a manual labourer from the Vysočina Region, greatly simplified, was used as an example of relativizing the criminality of the Husák regime by critics of the so-called revisionists.⁴⁶ Although it is not certain that they would abandon their belief that normalization was a dark age, I recommend to them a careful reading of both publications. They would find

⁴⁴ Cf. PŘIBÁŇ, Michal: *V různosti je síla: Exilová nakladatelství Sixty-Eight Publishers a Index nejen ve vzájemné korespondenci*. Praha, Academia 2023.

⁴⁵ See, for example, KOPEČEK, Michal (ed.): *Architekti dlouhé změny: Expertní kořeny postsozialismu (1980–1995)*. Praha, Argo – Filozofická fakulta Univerzity Karlovy – Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR, v.v.i., 2019.

⁴⁶ See, for example, DRDA, Adam: Uklízečka ze Žďáru, milovník Wagnera a nečernobílý Miloš Jakeš: K rozhovorům s historiky Pullmannem a Svobodou a k reakci Michala Klímy. In: *Bubínek Revolveru* [online], 21. 07. 2020. [Accessed 2024-11-02.] Available at: <https://www.bubinekrevolveru.cz/uklizacka-ze-zdaru-milovnik-wagnera-necernobily-milos-jakes-k-rozhovorům-s-historiky-pullmannem>.

a more sophisticated argument than the short-hand construct of the cleaning lady from Žďár that they use to denigrate much of the academic writing on state socialism in Czechoslovakia.

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Keywords:

Czechoslovakia; Central and Eastern Europe; state socialism; Czechoslovak normalization; Central European historiography; historical revisionism; gender

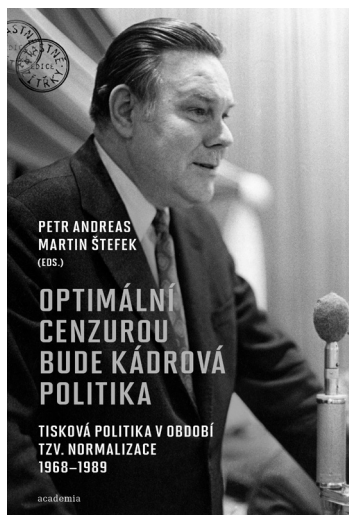
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Tug-of-War of the Powerful

A Useful Addition to Research on State-Socialist Censorship, although in Want of a Theoretical Synthesis

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ANDREAS, Petr – ŠTEFEK, Martin (eds.):

Optimální cenzurou bude kádrová politika:

Tisková politika v období tzv. normalizace 1968–1989.

Praha, Academia 2023, 511 pages,

ISBN 978-80-200-3461-8.

The editors of the book *Optimální cenzurou bude kádrová politika: Tisková politika v období tzv. normalizace 1968–1989* [The Optimal Censorship Will Be Cadre Policy: Press Politics in the “Normalization” Era 1968–1989] – expert in comparative political science, intellectual history and Czech political history Martin Štefek and literary historian Petr Andreas – set themselves the ambitious goal to “capture the dynamics” (p. 12) of the politics of press regulation between the years 1968 and 1989 (the period of the so-called normalization) in the Czech lands. The editors define the politics of press regulation as “conceptions and approaches of the central political and administrative authorities to the periodical press as to the content (censorship, monitoring, propaganda), personnel (human

resource policies) and material resources (central planning of the economy)” (ibidem).¹ The book is divided into seven chapters, with the first two chapters being substantially longer (70 and 200 pages, respectively) than all the others (around 30 pages), and a short summary in English.

The first chapter, “Press and Information Policies of the Institutions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia between 1968 and 1989” by Martin Štefek,² describes the institutional changes and development from early 1968 with a focus on the post-invasion months and the first years of normalization up to 1975. The last ten pages of the chapter cover the period from 1985. The second chapter, which takes almost half of the volume in terms of length, is “Censorship of Periodicals, 1968–1980: Monitoring Officers, Press Assessment, the Censoring Norm and Publishing Politics” by Petr Andreas,³ which begins by restating some of the information covered in the first chapter. It then continues with almost a blow-by-blow account of the clashes between the (Czech) Office for Press and Information (*Úřad pro tisk a informace* / *Český úřad pro tisk a informace* – ÚTI, from 1969 ČÚTI), the Governmental/Federal Committee for Press and Information (*Vládní*, from 1969 *Federální výbor pro tisk a informace*), editorial offices, directives from Moscow and other powerful actors over bringing journalism and journalists under control, streamlining censorship and establishing a censorship norm. The author exemplifies using periodical publications – magazines and newspapers – three areas of sensitivity for the regulating authorities: news reporting on politics and the Soviet Union, norms in the interest of the preservation of public peace; the positive image of the regime toward society; and public morality, that is restrictions imposed on sexual and pornographic content (p. 207). The chapter again focuses mainly on the immediate post-1968 period and early normalization (up to 1971) and only to a lesser degree on the 1970s and up to the establishment of the Federal Office for Press and Information (*Federální úřad pro tisk a informace*, FÚTI) in 1981.

The activities of this institution are the subject of the third chapter, “Federal Office for Press and Information: A Transmission Mechanism of the Press Politics of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, 1981–1989” by Petr Andreas and David Klimeš.⁴ This concise chapter differs in its approach from the previous chapter in that it describes the general principles and dynamics of the functioning

¹ All quotes were translated by the author.

² Tisková a informační politika orgánů ÚV KSČ v letech 1969–1989, pp. 19–88.

³ Cenzura periodického tisku 1968–1980: Zmocněnci, hodnocení tisku, cenzurní norma a vydavatelská politika, pp. 89–294.

⁴ Federální úřad pro tisk a informace: Převodní páka tiskové politiky KSČ 1981–1989, pp. 295–328.

of this institution, rather than the details of the circumstances of its formation or the particulars of its actions toward other actors. The obvious highlight of the whole volume is the next chapter, "Normalization Concept of Culture and Cultural Journalism" by Jan Mervart,⁵ which goes beyond description and aims at understanding the agenda of the proponents of normalization on their own terms (p. 332). Looking at cultural policy documents, Mervart confirms what gender researchers documented earlier about family, labour and public health policies: that the argument about the separation of the public and the private in terms of state interference in interpreting normalization does not hold; instead, the public and the private were intertwined. He further concludes that normalization succeeded in purging "any vestiges of the reform cultural practice" but failed to generate a new aesthetic theory, on which "a canon of real socialism in the arts could be based" (p. 360).

The last three chapters centre on the role and activities of the Security Services in the press surveillance and propaganda. Chapter 5, "State Security and Domestic Press, 1968–1989: Propaganda, Censorship and Repression" by Adam Havlík,⁶ describes the ways in which the Security Services actively shaped the content of periodicals by placing propagandist and even downright disinformation articles in newspapers and magazines. It further describes the mechanisms of personnel surveillance and interference in the editorial offices of the print media. Chapter 6, "State Security and Surveillance of the Foreign Press: Department of Foreign Press as a Part of the Ministry of the Interior's Information Policy, 1968–1989" also by Adam Havlík,⁷ is a counterpart to the previous chapter in that it considers similar issues of content, but on the subject of the foreign press. It maps the principles of the importing of the foreign press into Czechoslovakia and degrees of restrictions on its distribution. Havlík identifies three criteria for importing periodicals from abroad – getting information about current affairs and scientific developments, cost and ideological acceptability – and explains the dynamic and tensions between them. Non-compliance with the third criterion, ideological acceptability, found expression in three stages of restrictions on distribution: "absolute ban" (the periodical would be delivered only to the General Secretary of the Party and to the President of the Republic; e.g. specific issues of West German, French, British or American quality dailies); "ban of the first degree" (the periodicals were made available to a special list of Party and governmental institutions, media and research institutes); "ban of the second degree" (these periodicals were only for

⁵ Normalizační koncepce kultury a kulturní publicistiky, pp. 329–362.

⁶ Státní bezpečnost a domácí tisk 1968–1989: Propaganda, cenzura a represe, pp. 363–386.

⁷ Státní bezpečnost a dohled nad zahraničním tiskem: Odbor zahraničního tisku jako součást informační politiky ministerstva vnitra 1968–1989, pp. 387–416.

the internal use of the subscribing institutions and not available to the general public, such as in public libraries); and also a general ban on certain periodicals, e.g. the Italian men's magazine *Albo Blitz* (pp. 396–397). The chapter also touches on the organized clandestine distribution networks of foreign press and books by black marketers and dissident circles. Finally, the last chapter, “Journalists and Writers in Uniform: Magazines and Literary Fiction of the Federal Ministry of the Interior and the National Security Corps” by Tomáš Malínek,⁸ has apart from a documentary value also a certain entertainment appeal for a broader readership. It gives an account of the publications that the Ministry of the Interior produced either for its internal use or for the broader public, whose aim was to cultivate a positive image of the Security Services. It then briefly considers several fiction writers who were employees of the Security Services and wrote either spy or criminal stories – either as part of their jobs or as a hobby.

The title *The Optimal Censorship Will Be Cadre Policy* does not quite do justice to the content of the volume. Considering that a defining feature of normalization was the purges of personnel from political, academic and cultural life, “cadre policy” as the pivotal point of censoring practices in various spheres of publishing in the Czech lands is to be expected and has been written about in that sense many times before in the last two decades. Besides, the volume's chapters cover much more than personnel policies and show a more diverse dynamic. The title thus obscures the key dynamic shared by all the chapters: the clashes of interests between powerful actors. The authors draw on a wealth of archival materials to take the perspective of power, institutional actors that shaped press policies and everyday operations of editorial offices. They are interested in the rulers rather than the ruled and yet they do not fall into the trap of the totalitarian paradigm. Rather, they show the variety of positionings of a set of powerful actors and achieve a much more nuanced understanding of the shaping of the normalization ruling than the totalitarian paradigm would have enabled. The main gain of this book lies in showing the complicated dynamic *among* “them” in the often-presumed division of state-socialist cultural environment into the oppressed and the oppressors, “us” and “them”. It shows those in power not as a unified front, but as a collection of actors, to a degree hierarchically organized, all of whom had their own agendas, with access to the highest echelons of power and pulling their own strings. They were all engaged in a continual tug-of-war, sometimes to the benefit of less powerful actors, although mostly to their cost.

This narrative paradigm and the demonstrated quality of the archival material have a great potential to tell the story of the politics of press regulation during

⁸ Novináři a spisovatelé v uniformě: Časopisy a beletrie Federálního ministerstva vnitra a Sboru národní bezpečnosti v letech 1968–1989, pp. 417–468.

normalization. This potential, unfortunately, remains underutilized, and the book as a whole fails to tell a story. Part of the problem is that the chapters are uneven both in structure and quality and they do not build an argument toward a theoretical synthesis, as one would expect from a book that the publisher calls "a collective monograph" on the inside dust cover blurb. Apart from chapter 4, there are few moments in which the chapters exceed the descriptive level, even though some of the authors compose classifications of processes or criteria (see the summaries of the individual chapters above). The other problem lies in the organization of the text and the editing. The long chapter 2 is symptomatic in this regard: it could be much shorter and say more. The painstaking documentation of events, administrative measures, names and dates could have been replaced by a clear line of argumentation, with concise case studies as examples of a particular dynamic or process. The narrative is hard to follow and numerous fascinating stories and quotations that could drive the argument are relegated to footnotes or only mentioned in passing.

The second weakness of the volume is having little theoretical and international context, which together with the above absence of a story raise the question of who the intended audience is. The first two chapters of the book mention numerous names, events and institutions in passing, assuming the reader's familiarity with them. Such a reader would have to be specialised in exactly the same area as the authors; for anybody with a different specialization many of the points made by the authors are unintelligible. To give one example: "When Vaculík's text was discussed at a meeting [...] in Warsaw." (p. 41) This is the very first reference to the writer Ludvík Vaculík and, presumably, the manifesto "Two Thousand Words" (*Dva tisíce slov*) in the volume, which only readers already knowledgeable about Czech normalization will be able to "decode". If one is a specialist in media studies or in Russian or Polish state-socialist history, one does not know who this or that personality or the significance of a document was without being given sufficient context. At any rate, one would expect that a book published by the Academia publishing house is aimed at specialists in a research field, be it media studies, contemporary history or something else. But then, for a reader to appreciate its contribution, there would need to be a thorough theoretical and state-of-the art contextualization. This is to a large degree missing. Theories of censorship are a large and long-researched area and much research has been done on the former state-socialist countries. The authors say that they follow "the proponents of the so-called new censorship" (p. 273) in that they are interested in the productive effects of censorship, but offer only a scant account of it, without mentioning any of the theorists and without taking the discussion to the stage of saying how their work advances these theories. There are also imprecisions, such as ascribing Richard Burt's (1994) key concept "dispersed censorship" to the literary historian Petr Šámal, who of course quite correctly identifies Richard Burt

as the originator in his own work.⁹ The authors propose combining “dispersed censorship” in a theoretical framework with “censoring norm” (p. 115), giving considerable space to the latter throughout the book, and creating an opportunity to break new theoretical ground. Yet, they do not pursue the theoretical discussion systematically and thus fail to make a claim as to the theoretical gain of their proposed approach.

Further, the authors mention only a few of the many works on state-socialist censorship published internationally. There have been numerous works written on censorship, including the censorship of the media, in the German Democratic Republic, Poland, the Soviet Union and other former state-socialist countries. It would be pertinent to ask what there is to learn from these works, what were the similarities and differences across the region and why? Given the frequent references to directives from Moscow throughout the book, one would expect that the work on the Soviet system of censorship would be especially relevant. No omission is more curious, however, than Ivo Bock's *Scharf überwachte Kommunikation: Zensursysteme in Ost(mittel)europa (1960er–1980er Jahre)* from 2011.¹⁰ Bock draws on many of the same or similar archival resources and covers similar ground: the system of state-socialist censorship, a typological overview of the censorship of the media and culture in Czechoslovakia, types and levels of censorship, and political directives and criteria for censoring practice. This insular and theoretically inconsistent approach is a definite loss to the knowledge potential of the material discussed in *The Optimal Censorship Will Be Cadre Policy*, because a more substantial contextualization in existing research and theory would put the contribution of the volume into a sharper relief. As it is, it is impossible to tell from the text alone what new knowledge the book brings.

Despite these drawbacks, the volume will be a useful addition to the growing body of literature on state-socialist censorship and media studies. If apart from the authorities index it were equipped also with a subject index, then it would have been a useful resource for an even broader audience of researchers.

⁹ BURT, Richard: (Un)Censoring in Detail: The Fetish of Censorship in the Early Modern Past and the Postmodern Present. In: POST, Robert C. (ed.): *Censorship and Silencing: Practices of Cultural Regulation*. Los Angeles (CA), Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities 1998, pp. 17–41; see also ŠÁMAL, Petr: Rozptýlená cenzurní soustava. In: WÖGERBAUER, Michael – PÍŠA, Petr – ŠÁMAL, Petr – JANÁČEK, Pavel et al.: *V obecném zájmu: Cenzura a sociální regulace literatury v moderní české kultuře 1749–2014*, Vol. 2: 1938–2014. Praha, Academia – Ústav pro českou literaturu AV ČR, v.v.i., 2015, pp. 1102–1105.

¹⁰ BOCK, Ivo (ed.): *Scharf überwachte Kommunikation: Zensursysteme in Ost(mittel)europa (1960er–1980er Jahre)*. Berlin, LIT 2011. Particularly, Bock's chapter „Unser ganzes System ideologischer Arbeit muss wie ein gut eingespieltes Orchester agieren“: Zensur in der UdSSR und der CSSR. In: IDEM, pp. 31–208.

Keywords:

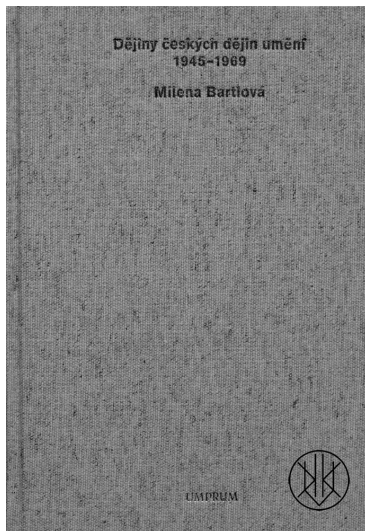
Czech lands; Czechoslovakia; censorship; communism; Czechoslovak normalization; Communist Party of Czechoslovakia; cadre policy; press politics; media surveillance

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Czech Art History – Science in Quiet Seclusion, (Finally) Removing Its Velvet Gloves

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BARTLOVÁ, Milena:

Dějiny českých dějin umění 1945–1969: Dějiny umění slouží vědě o člověku.

Praha, Vysoká škola uměleckoprůmyslová 2020, 549 pages, ISBN 978-80-88308-11-9.

Czech art history, as one of the more hesitant and, with regard to its own self-reflection, certainly more cautious fields of the humanities, has finally been launched on the journey towards a synthesis of its own early post-war history thanks to several years of research by Milena Bartlová, a renowned Prague art historian. Bartlová is a professor in the Department of Theory and History of Art at the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague (UMPRUM) with a focus on medieval art and culture. She also researches the methodology of art history, museology and relations between national and state identity and the production of art.¹ Her more than 500-page synthesis entitled *Dějiny českých*

¹ Milena Bartlová (born 1958) has published several other monographs, primarily *Poctivé obrazy: Deskové malířství v Čechách a na Moravě 1400–1460* [Honest Paintings: Panel Painting

dějín umění 1945–1969: Dějiny umění slouží vědě o člověku [History of Czech Art History 1945–1969: Art History Serving the Science of Man], builds on both thorough heuristic work with local sources and the study of the relevant methods of approaches to the research subject in neighbouring countries, especially Poland and Germany. Nonetheless, the author does not develop this important but still not obvious contextualizing element into a comparison of specific examples of local and foreign advances in the field. For the quarter century that is examined, the publication follows roughly the same periods as the four-volume *Dějiny české literatury 1945–1989* [History of Czech Literature 1945–1989], which takes as a starting point the year 1945 and divides this period into three phases (1945–1948, 1948–1958 and 1958–1968).² The author identifies other important milestones in specific years: 1953, when the Cabinet for Theory and History of Art was established at the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences (*Kabinet pro teorii a dějiny umění ČSAV*, years later “upgraded” to the Institute for Theory and History of Art – *Ústav pro teorii a dějiny umění ČSAV*); and the year 1964, which marked the beginning of increasing international prestige and confidence in the field. It should be noted that the author deals with the history of the field in the Czech environment, which is reflected in the selection of more than a hundred personalities that she follows here. Links in this period to Slovakia and to the fate of expelled Czech Germans active in the field, who were logically also present, are described in sections aptly titled “Younger Siblings” and “Expellees and Revanchists” (pp. 448–456 and 457–464).

Milena Bartlová proposes an innovative methodology consisting of a multi-dimensional analysis of “an infrastructural network of interconnected

in Bohemia and Moravia 1400–1460] (Praha, Argo 2001); *Mistr Týnské kalvárie: Český sochař doby husitské* [Master of the Týn Calvary: Czech Sculptor of the Hussite Era] (Praha, Academia 2004); *Skutečná přítomnost: Středověký obraz mezi ikonou a virtuální realitou* [True Presence: A Medieval Painting between an Icon and Virtual Reality] (Praha, Argo 2012); and *Pravda zvítězila: Výtvarné umění a husitství 1380–1490* [Truth Triumphed: Fine Arts and Hussite Movement 1380–1490] (Praha, Academia 2015). Her book *Naše, národní umění: Studie z dějin dějepisu umění středověku* [Ours, National Art: A Study from the History of Medieval Art History] (Brno, Barrister & Principal – Seminář dějin umění, Filozofická fakulta Masarykovy univerzity 2009) was also published in German under the title *Unsere „nationale“ Kunst: Studien zur Geschichte der Kunstgeschichte* (Ostfildern, Jan Thorbecke 2016). Bartlová stepped beyond the boundaries of the field into the meanderings of her own family history through the twentieth century in the book *Ženy, které nechtěly mlčet: Tři československé příběhy* [Women Who Did Not Want to Be Silent: Three Czechoslovak Stories] (Praha, Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung 2021; 2nd edition: Praha, Neklid 2022).

² JANOUSEK, Pavel et al.: *Dějiny české literatury 1945–1989*, Vols. 1–4. Praha, Academia 2007–2008.

objects, discourses, actors, interactions and processes” (p. 35). It therefore includes institutions, personalities, formal and informal power relations, concepts, communication of ideas, gender aspects and others. Part of her methodology is also the courage to de-construct the idealizing image that the field of art history has cultivated about itself for decades. This comprehensive narrative is matched with a wealth of visual material with many valuable, historical, black and white photographs and a stylish graphic layout, referring to typical bookbinding and typography of the period. All this turns *Dějiny českých dějin umění 1945–1969* into an indispensable overview work, which we will always be happy to re-read.

The post-war quarter century, which from the perspective of general history naturally falls within contemporary history, was in Czechoslovakia a period that, not only in terms of the synthesized historiography of the field but also in the frequency and complexity of addressing its individual subtopics – especially the sensitive ones – belonged for many years to areas that the mainstream of the field approached only with great caution. The deeply rooted affinity of the field to the culture of elites results from the nature of the studied material (see the chapter entitled “People”, pp. 51–84, here pp. 51–52). The traditional understanding of art history as a noble, refined science in which research is done into naturally “beautiful”, non-controversial works and figures from the past, ideally from the Middle Age or early modern times, which do not challenge prevailing consensual national narratives, and therefore support the desired collective self-legitimation, has always been surprisingly resistant. Moreover, this subliminal, positive self-identification and self-adoration was accompanied in the period of socialism with a now hardly comprehensible prestige, even with the elitist position of an art historian as an unfaltering and infallible social authority. Surprisingly, it has only been since very recently that opinions have been voiced in the art history community that question the legitimacy of critical research into “too contemporary” art history, as well as into the historiography of contemporary art history – with regard to an imaginary respect for living contemporaries – as being inappropriate at the given moment.

In this context, it should not come as a surprise to see how much attention Milena Bartlová's publication has attracted within the community, both as a whole and in some parts. Even such a basic fact as the political affiliations of influential representatives in the field – which each subsequent generation should naturally ask of the research period – was not taken for granted. Yet a third to a half of these individuals were card-carrying members of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (*Komunistická strana Československa*, KSČ) at the time (chapter “Plan View”, pp. 15–36, here p. 21; see also the table “Political Parties Membership”, pp. 496–497). Moreover, a relevant synthetic work in this field without a clear reflection of the sources that show explicit and conscious links

of art history, through its actors and institutions, with state power structures can hardly be imagined today. Milena Bartlová, who also speaks openly about the fact that some art historians were Freemasons, does not hesitate to work openly with these basic facts of the period and points out the surprising difficulty of thorough research into the sources in this area, and the clear interpretative and epistemological limitations associated with it. The ambiguous hermeneutic language of the sources of the period is naturally also an important factor. However, the ability to read these sources relevantly and with deep understanding unfortunately disappears with historical distance rather than the other way around (as seems to be the case with the current young adepts in the field). This is also why I consider the author's findings to be historically important, as well as timely for self-reflection in the field.

In her innovative approach, Milena Bartlová draws on a broad inter-disciplinary heuristic and structural analysis of individual interconnected structural sections.³ This approach contrasts with the previous, now nearly 40-years-old but still only practical attempt to draw a comprehensive picture of the history of the field. In the second half of the 1980s, a group of authors from the then Institute of Theory and History of Art at the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences opted primarily for a traditional method of biographical narration, in which they presented the profiles of those considered to be representative figures in Czech art history in chronological order.⁴ The newly elaborated methodology allows for an array of figures and issues to be set out in networks of relations and deeper mutual connections. This is, in my view, the greatest contribution of the work, which can, however, perhaps also be viewed as its weakness. It clearly de-constructs the traditional biographical-chronological and descriptive-analytical narration as no longer sustainable because of its low information and comparative value, and I would go as far as to say, not only for the historiography of art history, but also for art history itself (and, by extension, for other related fields too). This approach had been used in practically all major national syntheses in the field up to now, except for the most recent large volume of 2017, which represents a positive interruption of the trend.⁵ However, it is an open question whether this structuralist approach, which leaves periodization and classic narration aside, will

³ Among the methodologically inspiring works outside her own field, the author builds on, for example, Petr Szczepanik's monograph *Továrna Barrandov: Svět filmařů a politická moc 1945–1970* (Praha, Národní filmový archiv 2016).

⁴ CHADRABA, Rudolf – KRÁSA, Josef – ŠVÁCHA, Rostislav – HOROVÁ, Anděla et al.: *Kapitoly z českého dějepisu umění*, Vol. 1: *Předchůdci a zakladatelé*; Vol. 2: *Dvacáté století*. Praha, Odeon 1986 and 1987.

⁵ PETRASOVÁ, Taťána – ŠVÁCHA, Rostislav (eds.): *Dějiny umění v českých zemích 800–2000*. Praha – Řevnice, Artefactum – Arbor Vitae 2017.

enable the uninitiated reader to be made aware of the continuous chronological line of events in the field and their relation to the fairly rapidly changing political and social conditions.

Milena Bartlová was not able to rely very much on previous, at least partially functional attempts to capture the historiography of the field.⁶ She instead drew mainly on archival research across the available collections and institutions, although, in a number of cases, she found the preserved sources fragmentary and of limited informational value. Equally important for the author was the analysis and interpretation of the texts of the period, published by prominent representatives in the field. In a certain sense, she rehabilitates the value of the efforts of the period by showing for a number of examples and issues how erroneous it would be to reject the published results completely merely because of the ideological background upon which they drew (which is not an isolated occurrence to this day): “My main discovery is the quantity and extent of interesting artistic-historical thoughts which emerged here between the mid-1940s and the late 1960s. I am convinced that this deserves further detailed research,” she states in the preface (p. 13). At the same time, she points out that Czech art history, as a minor, politically little exposed and elitist humanistic field, remained “in certain quiet seclusion” even during this complex period (p. 45). Since the end of Stalinism, this provided “relatively calm conditions for work and thinking, without pressure for economic, or otherwise measurable performance”, whereas perhaps the biggest burden was being cut off from international relations and an exchange of information (p. 487).

The section on the activity of women in the field, which comprehensively reflects for the first time their institutional position in a historically “men’s” field (“Women in a Man’s World”, pp. 74–84) is groundbreaking, as well as indispensable through the lens of today’s knowledge.⁷ Of the many other issues discussed, it is worth mentioning, for example, the historical “revision” of the conditions and circumstances of the founding of the key institutions of the field (chapter “Institutions and Operation”, pp. 85–122), with a special focus on the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences (pp. 100–110), and the National Gallery in Prague (pp. 104–109). After a careful reading from a critical historiographic perspective, I believe that

⁶ Even so, one of the works Bartlová found very useful is the resource-rich, monumental *Slovník historiků umění, výtvarných kritiků, teoretiků a publicistů v českých zemích* edited by Lubomír Slavíček (Praha, Academia 2016).

⁷ Here Bartlová builds on a publication from the 2005 Colloquium of the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design, which for the first time focused on the role of women in art history and art criticism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (BARTLOVÁ, Milena – PACHMANOVÁ, Martina (eds.): *Artemis a Dr. Faust: Ženy v českých a slovenských dějinách umění*. Praha, Academia 2008).

these passages also provide an important basis for analysing the present operation of these institutions.

An important element in the concept of the work for me is the open approach with regard to strategically crucial, but gradually forgotten personal relations in the field. No matter how unbiased we try to be in our professional lives, we should admit that factors related to personal preferences, family ties, affections or, on the contrary, antagonisms, played and still play an extraordinary, though in general virtually unrecognized role in the institutional background of the field of art history (and not only in this field), the importance of which was clearly even greater in the explored period. With regard to the personnel situation at the Prague National Gallery in the early 1960s, Bartlová, for example, writes: “The nature of cadre policy is illustrated by the fact that despite the reasons for his removal, [Vladimír] Novotný was immediately appointed director of the State Heritage Preservation, where he worked until his retirement in 1966.⁸ Half a year later, the post of director of the National Gallery was given to Jan Krofta, who had until then worked at the Institute of Theory and History of Art of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, and the institution was allocated thirty ‘systemized’ work positions. As in the case of his predecessor, Krofta’s main qualification in art history was his KSČ membership. A primary reason for his position in the field was the fact that his father was the influential and respected historian and diplomat Kamil Krofta.” (pp. 107–108)

If Milena Bartlová’s historiography of art history is emblematic of anything, it is clearly her courage to openly describe the situation and point to “behind-the-scenes” circumstances. This was, in my view, formerly seen as an undesirable overstepping of a traditionally maintained, self-celebrating, patriarchally hypocritical, power framework in the field. However, I believe that without acknowledging these invisible links, which are often difficult to trace in the historical sources, the contemporary history of art history cannot be fully understood – especially considering that it has always been a relatively small and closed community in the Czech lands. Bartlová unhesitatingly identifies the relevant kinship, family and romantic ties between the actors. These were, from today’s point of view, incomprehensibly common and considered clear career determinants, especially for female actors in the field, given traditional gender stereotypes (pp. 76, 79).

Taking the example of the long-serving, post-war director of the Jewish Museum in Prague, Hana Volavková, Bartlová also observes an interesting phenomenon, namely that it “is not uncommon with the most intellectually original personalities of Czech art history, that they either did not study art history

⁸ Vladimír Novotný was head of the National Gallery between 1945 and 1960.

directly, or were active on the margins of the field” (p. 83). Recorded oral history or memoirs naturally help us, to a certain extent, to learn about these important personal connections, not registered in official records. However, on their own they cannot be “sources of undistorted truth” (p. 25). Bartlová specifically points to a potential factual and methodological blindness, as well as to an overestimation of the sometimes sensationalist, egotistically determined sources – among other things, in connection with the attempt by Slovak art historian Ludmila Peterajová to justify her collaboration with the secret police (p. 25), or the distortion of the late memoirs of one of the field’s most publicly admired Prague veterans, František Dvořák (p. 206).⁹

Milena Bartlová has thus taken upon herself responsibility for a role that would have been more suitable for an entire research team: the role of an arbiter who provides a synthesis and interpretation of all the interconnected researched layers – from the actors in the field to the institutions, their communication channels, power relations, discourses, methods and foreign relations – and in this way bridges the gaps in the inevitably partial views of the individual actor, whether a historical figure or a current researcher with his or her specific time focus and thematic specialization. The work therefore takes the natural form of a baseline synthesis that opens the way for subsequent in-depth research, to be carried out mainly by representatives of younger generations, but without closing hermetically, in line with the traditional concept, an imaginary door behind one historical period and turning it into a museum exhibit that has already been “correctly” and definitely defined and described. Milena Bartlová’s book forces the attentive reader to reconsider the fundamental questions of the nature and subject matter of the field, its methods, issues and role in the society from which it grows and which it serves. In this respect its subtitle is to the point. If we are honest, we must also acknowledge how much this work, thanks to its comprehensiveness in terms of heuristics, methodology and content, and its bold interpretations – without ever exceeding decent ethical boundaries – has the secondary effect of showing the limitations of modern profile publications in the field that have until recently been regarded as significant contributions to research.¹⁰

⁹ See DVOŘÁK, František: *Můj život s uměním*. Praha, Nakladatelství Lidové noviny 2006 and 2010.

¹⁰ This is especially true for contemporary publications on the history of major academic institutions in the field, UMPRUM and Department of Art History of the Faculty of Arts, Charles University: PACHMANOVÁ, Martina – PRAŽÁKOVÁ, Markéta (eds.): *Vysoká škola umělecko-průmyslová v Praze / Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague: 1885–2005*. Praha, Vysoká škola umělecko-průmyslová 2005; BIEGEL, Richard – PRAHL, Roman – BACHTÍK,

The post-war quarter century is one of the most complex and contradictory periods in contemporary history, and this is especially true for Central Europe. Our perception of this period, which is not easily understood, is significantly influenced by the still prevailing polarized narratives of a world divided by the Cold War: East and West. Nevertheless, even their categorically distinct interpretations are today being revised, and we can expect that with the contribution of different fields we will arrive at a more comprehensive synthesized understanding of this period. In a way, the reviewed book also contributes to this.

If Czech art history has until now been mostly a self-satisfied humanities discipline that treated the more problematic aspects of its recent past “with velvet gloves”, the indisputable contribution of Milena Bartlová’s publication is that the field has now definitely taken them off. Naturally, and probably correctly so, much concerning relationships, personalities and sensitive issues is left unsaid. However, Bartlová illuminates a path to be followed by other researchers.¹¹ It is encouraging that the author’s methodological approach and the breadth of her findings are already being reflected positively in other research projects, even in the short time since the publication of her book. An example is the extensive historiographical self-reflection by the Department of Art History in Olomouc, edited by Ondřej Jakubec, who is also the author of the key studies.¹²

Milena Bartlová’s narration reads like a very comprehensively and intelligently interpreted national saga about an elite, reclusive field in “quiet seclusion from big history”. These historical events pass in the background and the reader is expected to be familiar with them. Revolutionary historical landmarks are then reflected primarily in cadre and institutional changes, and not always directly in the research content and field results. We can look forward to other

Jakub (eds.): *Století Ústavu pro dějiny umění na Filozofické fakultě Univerzity Karlovy*. Praha, Filozofická fakulta Univerzity Karlovy 2020.

¹¹ New findings are also gradually being brought to light by newly accessible archival collections. An example of this, which is however virtually inaccessible for researchers, is the file of the communist Minister of the Interior Rudolf Barák, stored in the collection of the General Prosecutor’s Office at the National Archives in Prague. The collection’s documents reveal very specific personal connections between the institutional elites and political leaders of communist Czechoslovakia, in particular in the person of the prominent art historian Emanuel Poche (see RUSINKO, Marcela: Picasso’s Silent Grey Head and its Cathartic Role (Not Only) in the History of the National Gallery. In: SKOPALOVÁ, Eva (ed.): *Three Views of One Artwork: Pablo Picasso, Grey Head (Dora Maar), 1941*. Praha, Národní galerie 2024, pp. 62–99, particularly pp. 82–84).

¹² JAKUBEC, Ondřej (ed.): *Opakované začátky: Dějiny umění a jejich výuka na Univerzitě Palackého v Olomouci roku 1946 po současnost*. Olomouc, Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci 2024.

similarly well-thought-out works that shift the narrative of the field, and especially to the second part of *Dějiny českých dějin umění* by the author. This work will cover the period of normalization and is expected to be published next year.

Translated by Blanka Medková

Keywords:

Czechoslovakia; Czech history of art; state socialism; science of man

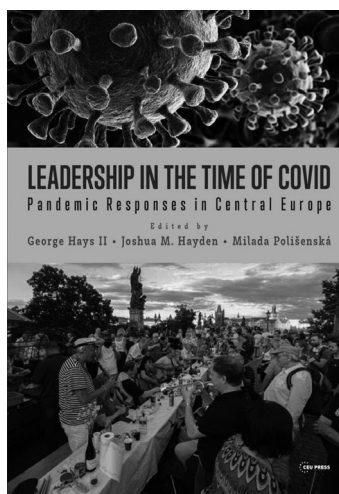
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Central European Variations on the Same Theme

A Problematic Contribution to the Narrowly Political Dimension of the Covid-19 Pandemic in Central Europe

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HAYS II, George – HAYDEN, Joshua M. –
POLIŠENSKÁ, Milada (eds.):

*Leadership in the Time of Covid: Pandemic
Responses in Central Europe.*

Budapest, Central European University Press 2023,
214 pages, ISBN 978-963-386-645-0.

The Covid-19 pandemic is a hot research topic. Already during the pandemic, social scientists were extensively writing about it. After all, much of the world during those few years dealt with almost nothing else but the future social, health, and economic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic. The same and many other social scientists continue to write about the Covid-19 pandemic today when other events, such as the war in Ukraine or the bombing of Gaza, have covered it up or rather consigned it to oblivion. One can think the pandemic is something that may have once been there but is not anymore, that it is an outdated event, which one can look at with a little more distance and see it differently now: not as an event that will one day mark a major historical turning point in high school history books, as we might have thought a few years ago, but as a kind of experimental and easily accessible laboratory in which we can

seek answers to some important questions. For example: what kind of societies do we live in today; what is the position of expert knowledge in these societies; how is such knowledge disseminated and what are the limits of its dissemination; how high is the trust of various population groups in the state (even in today's liberal democratic state); how are the decisions made by political elites written into reality or, better, into everyday human behaviour? Or one can ask the question the other way round: how can everyday human action negate such decisions made by political elites or transform them into forms that were not foreseen by those who made them (for example, observance/non-observance of wearing face masks in public space or the observance/non-observance of various other regulations)?

The collective volume *Leadership in the Time of Covid: Pandemic Responses in Central Europe* is one of many contributions to the narrowly political dimension of the Covid-19 pandemic. In the most general terms, the question posed by its authors (all three of whom are based at the Anglo-American University in Prague, a situational position, which, as I will show later in the text, is somewhat problematic in the final form of the text, both in terms of form and content) is as follows: How did the political leaders of Central European countries, or, more precisely, the countries of the Visegrad Four (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Hungary), which the authors describe as countries where populist and democracy-threatening leadership had already begun to thrive before the Covid-19 pandemic, manage to cope with the crisis caused by the spread of the virus? Did the "populist" – as the book's authors refer to political elites of these four countries – leadership in times of crisis stand up to the challenge?

The authors, who refer to adaptive leadership approach as a better alternative to populist leadership, came naturally – it was already encoded in their assumptions – to the unsurprising conclusion that populist and democracy-threatening leadership, represented in their conception by the then prime ministers Andrej Babiš (Czech Republic), Viktor Orbán (Hungary) and Igor Matovič (Slovakia), proved ineffective (chaotic, etcetera) in the time of the Covid-19 pandemic and they foresee that such "exposure" may have a positive impact on the strengthening of democracy in some of the studied countries, because people not only clearly realized the ineffectiveness of populists, but they have also acted. For example, as the authors write (p. 169), people made their disgust for populist leadership clear in the 2021 Czech elections to the Chamber of Deputies, because Babiš ("populist former prime minister", they write) lost the elections and his PM's seat (and subsequently lost the presidential election as well, the authors add), and, as noted elsewhere in the book (p. 30), the current Czech government of Prime Minister Petr Fiala acts in a more consistent, sensible (read: non-populist) way. According to the book's authors, he communicated much better with the public at a time of new crisis, the war in Ukraine. Such an approach is so value-laden (especially

when the authors base their statements on nothing but their impressions) that it is ultimately unsustainable. One could raise equally value-laden objections to their statements (think of how the Fiala's government communicated the price caps on electricity and gas). Moreover, Babiš may soon become prime minister again (and perhaps he will rule with the largest party of the current, "non-populist", government coalition). What will people realize at such a moment? Or will they make the wrong choice in the elections this time? In other words, I think these comments are nothing more than political commentary. We've read plenty of such comments (for better or worse) in various newspapers over the years, and I am not sure another one is needed.

Another problem with the book is its structure. At first glance, the book appears to be a balanced, comparative analysis of political leadership during the Covid-19 pandemic in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary. A closer look, however, reveals the privileged position of the Czech Republic, which is evident from the summary analysis of the scholarly and journalistic literature on Covid-19 that appears in the first (general) chapter and that is completely focused on titles originally written in Czech or translated into Czech. On closer reading, the book is a "Czech" book, to which invited authors from Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary contributed with their variations on the same theme (one chapter each). The fact that I am writing about variations is significant. Each chapter has an identical structure: a general analysis of the relevant government policy in the Covid-19 era, followed by an analysis of a (mostly) sociological survey/questionnaire. The book's "Czechness", I mentioned, is incidentally also reflected in the fact that the "Czech" chapter essentially repeats word-for-word entire long passages from the introduction (pp. 18–21 are duplicates of the pages in the introduction). Just as an aside: the boxes in each chapter contain relatively long (more than one page) reflections on some episodes from the pandemic years, but I did not understand (it is not stated there) who the author of these reflection is. One of the book's authors? One of the interviewees?

As a result, this already short book is, given the numerous repetitions and thoughtlessly inserted pages of reflections in the boxes, much shorter even, which, considering that the analyses of government policies in individual countries are random (the authors often rely on a minimal number of sources – typically the "Czech chapter" – and the book is based more on their impressions than anything else), makes the book somewhat problematic.

In conclusion, I am convinced that the book, whose editors are George Hays II, Joshua M. Hayden, and Milada Polišenská, deserved to be better handled both in terms of its assumptions and in terms of its execution. In its published form, I think it will become one of many contributions to the Covid-19 pandemic that will fall into oblivion: as quickly as Covid-19 fell into oblivion in the minds of many. I am convinced it is a pity in both cases.

Keywords:

Central Europe; Czech Republic; Slovakia; Poland; Hungary; Covid-19 pandemic; political leadership; expert knowledge; populism

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