

The Struggle for Human Rights in the Microregion of Communist Czechoslovakia in the 1980s

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ABSTRACT: Czechoslovakia was part of the Eastern Bloc during the Cold War. Since 1948, the country has been ruled by a monopoly Communist Party that controlled all aspects of daily life. The ruling party enforced the official culture, the official political and social discourse. Opponents were punished by the communist regime. During the 1980s, more and more opposition groups began to circulate in Czechoslovakia and many young people began to speak out against the ruling communist regime and its power. But the situation in Czechoslovakia did not develop as quickly as in Poland or Hungary, for example. This paper focuses on the perspective of the micro-region. It presents the life stories of dissidents and young people who opposed the communist regime in the locality of a village or small town. Two examples of happening resistance are also presented in the text. The historical stories are reconstructed primarily because of recorded oral history interviews with the actors of the events, but also because of archival research.

KEYWORDS: Czechoslovakia, Communist, Oral History, Human Rights, Resistance

Introduction

This article discusses the topic of the struggle for human rights and dissent from a micro-regional perspective. The aim is to introduce: the research topic, the methodological issues involved and to reflect on the general contribution of this study to researchers around the world. This article is a basic methodological insight into research on white spaces in contemporary human history, in this case primarily in relation to regions where human rights have been or are being violated. History often focuses only on the "big stories" and the main protagonists, but to better understand the times, it is necessary to follow the life stories of people on the periphery.

The historical context

Between 1948 and 1989, Czechoslovakia was part of the Eastern bloc of states that fell under the sphere of influence of the Soviet Union. According to the constitution, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia was the sole ruling force in the state. It had an absolutely dominant position in society: it used the secret police, the army, and armed popular militias of workers. The monopoly also manifested itself in propaganda, in the education system, in the censorship of culture. Citizens of the state could not travel freely, or even decide freely about their studies or employment. The ruling regime controlled everything. Czech historians most often identify two phases of communism in Czechoslovakia. One important milestone is 1968, when a process of democratization took place, but was soon brutally suppressed by the occupation by Warsaw Pact troops with the Soviet Union as leader. Before 1968, many citizens believed in communist ideology and thought they had their own state autonomy. But the occupation proved that this was wrong thinking. From the early 1970s, the regime began to reassert its power and control over the public life of the population. For many citizens, however, the regime was no longer credible. Its authority was thus built solely on fear, as illustrated, for example, by the essay *The Power of the Powerless*, written by the leading Czech dissident and playwright Václav Havel. He writes, for example, about a vegetable

seller who has a sign in his shop window with a propaganda slogan of the Communist Party. According to Havel, this vegetable seller does not believe the official propaganda, but is very afraid of the regime. Displaying official propaganda was an obligation, especially on important days, such as Labour Day or the anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution. If citizens did not participate in the celebrations, they were threatened with sanctions. As a result, many people learned to publicly declare what the regime demanded. These people thus ensured a peaceful life. Havel points out that although most of society did not believe the official propaganda, socialist Czechoslovakia appeared internationally as a unitary and stable state. In the essay *The Power of the Powerless*, this situation is named "Life in a Lie" (Havel 2015).

This study is about the 1980s. The situation in the Eastern Bloc was fluid due to the frequent changes of the Soviet Union's general secretaries. When Mikhail Gorbachev took the helm of the communist superpower, major changes were set in motion in terms of market liberalization and easing of censorship. In Poland, Hungary and the Soviet Union, gradual democratization processes were taking place. The rulers of Czechoslovakia and East Germany reject significant changes. These states are led by conservative communists who do not want to lose their monopoly of power. However, communist rule in both countries is unsustainable.

This is largely the result of the attitudes of the younger generation and new trends in culture or civic activism. Teenagers and twentysomethings in Czechoslovakia were already growing up in the post-occupation period, a time when the regime did not have real strong support across society. New artistic movements, mainly musical genres (rock, metal, punk, new wave, etc.) began to arrive in the Eastern Bloc countries. Young people are also encountering new fashion trends, but new ideas are also coming from the West. The biggest of these ideas is ecology. It became popular not only in Czechoslovakia but practically in the whole Eastern Bloc after the Chernobyl tragedy. In the second half of the 1980s, the first protests for a better environment took place in Czechoslovakia. It also became very popular to organize happenings to ridicule the ruling regime. Waldemar Fydrych, who was active in the Polish city of Wrocław, is considered to be the founder of happening performances against totalitarianism in the Eastern Bloc (Kenney 2002). Later, protests also began to take place in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic (Blazek 2022).

Grey zone theory

Czech sociologist and leading dissident Jiřina Šiklová (1935-2021) created a basic division of Czechoslovak society in the 1970s and 1980s. She writes that society consisted of 1) communists, 2) dissidents, and 3) people who tried to live an apolitical life. Šiklová refers to this third group as the "grey zone". This zone was the largest group of the population. The oscillation between dissent (direct and active resistance) and the grey zone is typical of the Czechoslovak anti-communist resistance. Indeed, the most important dissident protest initiative never became a mainstream issue (Šiklova 1990). It was a petition called Charter 77, which was issued on 1 January 1977. Charter 77 called on the Czechoslovak communist government to respect human rights in response to the fact that the government had committed itself to human rights at the 1975 international conference in Helsinki, Finland. Leading figures in the petition were: playwright Václav Havel, philosopher Jan Patočka, and former 1968 foreign minister Jiří Hájek. Charter 77 was signed by around two thousand citizens, but it failed to reach hundreds of thousands of people as, for example, the Polish trade union organization Solidarity. This was also due to the fact that Charter 77 was written as a philosophical and intellectually oriented text that appealed to ethical and moral principles.

Research specifics

Specific were the various forms of anti-communist resistance in the environment of a small town or village. While the "great history" of the occupation or Charter 77 has been described in the books of many historians, the life stories of dissidents from the periphery have long been neglected (Bolton 2012). It is only in the last decade that scholars have looked more closely at the lives of dissidents in the micro-regions. Approximately four districts out of a total of seventy-six districts are well covered these days. What might be the causes?

1) In the Czech Republic, the topic of communism is still topical because most of the living population remembers life under this regime. Many scholars and memorials of the events want to avoid working on studies that will cause controversy in society and in their neighborhood.

2) Researching dissent in the micro-region is a difficult multidisciplinary work. In this case, the researcher cannot use the rigid procedures of only one discipline, such as history or sociology. He must combine them. The first step should be the study of archival sources; in the Czech Republic there are extensive holdings of the Archive of Security Forces, which will make available the police personnel files that were kept on individual dissidents to researchers. These contain many documents and detailed information on the activities and movements of the suspect. The archive also offers researchers other communist police documentation, such as reports on potential risks or reports on repressive actions. These documents must be read critically, however, because they were produced by a repressive organ of a totalitarian state and represent only one biased view. Archival research must therefore be supplemented by the study of illegal and samizdat materials. However, a very important part of the research is the recording of oral history interviews with witnesses of the events. Thanks to this multidisciplinary combination of procedures, the researcher can work with plastic material and has a great deal of space for interpreting the story (Portelli 1998).

3) Dissent research in the Czech Republic today is mainly carried out by professional historians, among whom there are still disputes about the validity of the interview method (oral history). This is the reason why many scholars have avoided researching this topic (Vanek and Mucke 2021).

Examples of protest happenings

If a researcher decides to combine the study of archival sources with interviews with the actors of the events, he or she can uncover white spaces in contemporary history. An example of this is the two protest events that occurred in Czechoslovakia in 1989. Both protests took place in the region around the small town of Náchod, located near the border with Poland. All the protagonists knew each other, they formed one broader community that lived parallel lifestyles.

The first protest action was the participation of a group of dissidents in the official Labour Day celebrations. This was always celebrated on 1 May in communist Czechoslovakia. Representatives of the citizens marched through the streets of the towns: primary school pupils, policemen, workers, farmers, teachers, civil servants and so on. All citizens had to celebrate demonstratively. People carried banners with signs that glorified the communist regime or the Soviet Union. The procession of citizens had to wave cheerfully at the spectators. The communist regime wanted to demonstrate its strength and unity outwardly by this act. The town of Česká Skalice, in 1989, had about four thousand inhabitants. On Labour Day, a local group of young men decided on a happening form of protest. When a parade of celebrating citizens marched through the streets of the town, the young men joined them. They then pulled out a banner, which one of them had hidden under his T-shirt. They then raised the banner above their heads. However, what was unique was the fact that the banner

was all white. No text, no nothing. The young men wanted to draw attention to the fact that there is no freedom of speech in the country. They can't read what they want, but most importantly, they can't say their opinions out loud. They didn't last long in the parade because they were escorted out by police officers. Subsequently, the young men began to be followed, and some of them were threatened, for example, with the loss of their jobs. This is just one of the stories whose background (and the motivation of the actors) could not be retrospectively described without oral history interviews with the witnesses. There must have been many more similar happenings in Czechoslovakia.

The second protest this study presents is the publication of a provocative advertisement in the pages of the Communist Party's main ideological newspaper, *Rude pravo*. A young man, Petr Rýgr, who lived in the countryside, had an idea to make fun of the official propaganda. Together with his wife Eva, they created a cryptic text in which they congratulated the leading dissident and playwright Václav Havel on his birthday. The cipher had to be created in order for the advertisement to pass censorship and be printed on the pages of the propaganda newspaper. The name "Václav Havel" was therefore replaced by the name of a character from his play: "Ferdinand Vanek". This advertisement actually passed the censorship and was published in the pages of *Rude pravo* in October 1989. When the ruling Communists found out, they were humiliated. The police became interested in Petr Rygr, but he was lucky, because a month later the Velvet Revolution began in Czechoslovakia, which led to the fall of the communist regime (Jirousek 2022).

As in the previous case, there are not many surviving written sources about the publication of the advertisement. Only recorded interviews with the initiator of the event reveal his personality, motivation, life story and attitudes. The correct conduct of the interview (as a qualitative research method) in terms of methodology, objectification and validity is very important. The researcher must compare the narrators' accounts with the recollections of other individuals, but also with written sources. In the case of human rights struggle research, there is a dichotomy of heroization of the life story, where actors can make their role in events larger and more significant than it actually was. If a long time has passed since the events, the researcher must also reckon with the selectivity of memory (Thompson 2017).

The methods and research procedures described in this thesis on the example of communist Czechoslovakia are applicable in all countries of the world where human rights were violated. Documenting and interpreting the life stories of dissidents is not only an inspiration to many, but also a preservation of the testimony of the events themselves and their impact on society. The scholarly community must also pay attention to peripheries, micro-regions and rural areas that have been forgotten for decades. Especially in the context of Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe.

Conclusion

This article introduced the issue of research on human rights struggles and dissent from a multidisciplinary perspective. The author presented the context of historical events in Czechoslovakia during the Cold War. Using this country as an example, he introduced the research specifics of the topic and described the procedures that can be used to conduct relevant research. In this context, he highlighted the use of the qualitative method of interviewing (oral history) but assumed the correct methodological approach. At the end of the article, the author presented two examples of protest actions, the background of which could be uncovered precisely within the framework of the research carried out by the specific scientific procedures mentioned above. The text is an inspiration for researchers from other countries in which inhabitants had to fight for the quality of human rights - in the past, and in the present.

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