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From '68 to '89

As the fortieth anniversary of 1968 draws to a close, the focus of interest shifts to next year's anniversaries commemorating twenty years since the fall of the Berlin Wall. On 30 May, a debate was held at the Academy of Arts in Berlin entitled "Crossing 68/89". The participants, leading protagonists of 1968 and 1989 in eastern and western Europe, were asked to discuss the Prague Spring and the student protest movement in the West in a European perspective — with particular reference to the cataclysmic year of 1989. First published in German in *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik*, Eurozine translates the debate into English.

Gert Weisskirchen: When we — especially those of us in the "West" — speak of '68, we usually think of Paris or the Prague Spring, which was suppressed with such brutality when the Warsaw Pact states invaded on 21 August. It is less well known that as early as March 1968 demonstrations were held in Poland — when performances of a play by the great Polish writer Adam Mickiewicz were banned. So 1968 evidently had a lot to do with culture. One of the students who protested, and was later imprisoned for doing so, was Adam Michnik. Adam, what was your experience of the beginnings of '68 in Poland?

Adam Michnik: The Polish reform movement really begins not in 1968 but as early as 1956. That year, which marks the beginning of de-Stalinization in Russia, opened the way for democratic reform. At that time Polish culture, the universities, theatres and cinemas were given considerable autonomy. Modern Polish cinema, with directors such as Andrzej Wajda, Jerzy Kawalerowicz and many others, has its origins in that period.

But then the sight of Budapest on fire after the invasion by the Russian army in 1956 showed us that these reforms have their limits. The communist regime of Wladyslaw Gomulka, who had himself been imprisoned under Stalin, was single-mindedly restricting cultural freedom by the end of that year. Books, poems or plays by our finest writers were repeatedly confiscated. But for us the banning in 1968 of a play by Adam Mickiewicz was the last straw and we took to the streets.

It's very important to note that the '68 generation had no memory of the war, the occupation or the Stalinist terror. When Stalin died in 1953 we were seven, eight or nine years old. So we never knew the fear that our parents had experienced. Our courage was rather the result of lack of imagination and the fact that in 1968 we had three terrible encounters with communism.

The first was the confiscation of the works of Adam Mickiewicz; this was followed by the unusually brutal crushing of the student demonstrations. This was a generational protest: for the first time since 1945 every university in Poland had resisted the authorities.

Secondly, we were faced with a new type of communist propaganda: a terrible attack on intellectuals and Jews. We were now seeing a quite different face of the communist party in Poland: it had never before used the language of anti-Semitism. This taught my generation a useful lesson about real-existing communism.

And the third experience was of course the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia. After this moment of disillusionment it was clear to people that you could not reform communism, but that you had to fight it.

Everything that happened after that — the various forms of self-defence against communism, the different ways of building a civil society that set up distinct areas of freedom, independent of the state — was the result of the lessons we had learned from these three events. The most brutal of them was the intervention in Czechoslovakia. For us — as people who grew up as patriots — it was particularly awful to see Polish troops invading Czechoslovakia and trampling the freedom of the Czechs and Slovaks underfoot. That was a shock from which my generation never recovered.

The culture of freedom

At this point I would like to mention three things. Firstly: the Polish culture of the generation of '68 was already a culture of freedom. We have some fine poems from this period and a marvellous body of essays. But we suddenly realized that we were living in a time of a divided culture and that the European part of it, in other words the the Polish part, was unattainable for us. Czesław Miłosz and Witold Gombrowicz were the writers whose works were confiscated at that time. But we must never agree to a ruling power banning what is most valuable in our culture.

Secondly: we had a different perception of the world around us from our counterparts in the West. When we met our friends from France and Germany we got on splendidly. But we didn't agree with their slogans at all. For us, demonstrations in support of Ho Chi Minh, Mao Zedong and Che Guevara were not acceptable. We looked at Czechoslovakia and saw hope there. We kept on repeating: the whole of Poland is waiting for its Dubcek! That was our chance!

Thirdly, we did not regard the United States, which was waging war in Vietnam, as our main enemy in the world. For us, the greatest danger lay in the totalitarian countries and especially in the Soviet Union, which had intervened in Czechoslovakia.

All the same, I well remember the meeting with Milan Horáček and Rudi Dutschke in Italy. We got on marvellously! Just as we did with Kushner at our meeting in Paris. Why? Because the fighting words of Guevara — "As long as this world is the way it is I do not wish to die in my bed" — had their effect. This was exactly how we ourselves felt. None of us wanted this world as it was. Our protest was a protest against the stultification of society. But this stultification was everywhere different: in western or eastern Europe, in America or in Mexico, in Japan or in Franco's Spain.

This feeling of stultification was a key factor for us Poles — particularly in connection with the Prague Spring, when doors and windows were suddenly flung open to let the fresh air in. And there was another key factor: at that time we found a new common understanding. Brezhnev had tried to teach us internationalism, but we built our own internationalism.

After the suppression of the Prague Spring, sentences were pronounced and I was put in prison. And what really ought to have saddened me actually heartened me. I read that five Russians had been punished because they had protested on Red Square against the intervention of the Soviet Union. It cheered me to know that so many people in so many countries were saying "no" to the communist dictatorship, in Poland, in Hungary, the Hungarian intellectual Janosch Kisch for example, and even in the GDR. The sons of Robert Havemann were found guilty because they had opposed the intervention in Czechoslovakia. In short: people in the countries of this supposedly monolithic block ceased to be a "population". They became citizens demanding to be given their rights.

I would like to mention two examples that well illustrate the tense mood of the time. The first is an anecdote. Brezhnev calls our then Interior Minister, Czeslaw Moczar, a hardline National Bolshevik, and asks him: "What's this? What are these demonstrations going on in Poland?" To which Moczar replies: "Well, a play by Mickiewicz has been cancelled." "Couldn't you arrest this Mickiewicz?" "But Comrade Brezhnev, Mickiewicz is dead!" "And that's why I like you, Comrade Moczar!"

And the second example, this time based on actual events. The terrible anti-Semitic riots in Poland were followed by Willy Brandt's legendary visit to Warsaw. But what is perhaps not quite so well known is that his definitive recognition, as German Federal Chancellor, of the Oder/Neisse border was a psychological breakthrough for the whole Polish nation. Previously the state authorities had constantly conjured up the old spectre from the past: "If you turn against us, the Germans will come and take away Stettin and Breslau again. Then the Soviet Union will form an alliance with Adenauer or with Kiesinger or whoever. So you must not rebel." But when Willy Brandt recognized the border the bomb was defused.

And there is something else: when Willy Brandt knelt in front of the monument to the Warsaw ghetto this was also — whether intentional or not — a slap in the face for the communist rulers. None of them had ever been to this monument. Today, by contrast, every ambitious Polish politician feels it necessary to remember those who died in the uprising. This is all thanks to Willy Brandt.

So Polish culture underwent a psychological change in 1968. But the rebellion remained.

No revolution in the West, no reform in the East

Gert Weisskirchen: When we think of 1968 in western Europe, the first thing that comes to mind is Paris in May. But whereas the motives for '68 from the point of view of central and eastern Europe consisted in constituting a civil society for the first time in the face of dictatorship, we in the West — and this is the question I would like to put to Lionel Jospin — seem to have been rebelling against a certain form of middle-class existence that was described as bourgeois. Everything appeared to be constricting, and it seemed as if we

had no chance of breaking out.

Lionel Jospin: First of all I would like to say that in 1968 I was not a participant in the strict sense. But I did of course experience the convulsions of '68. I was 31 years old at the time and was working in the Foreign Ministry. And it was the events of 1968 that caused me to reject an automatic career in the diplomatic service. I became a supporter of François Mitterand and joined the Socialist Party.

The fact that today, 40 years after '68, this anniversary is being celebrated, and not only in the United States, France, Italy or Germany but also in the Czech and Slovak Republics and even in Mexico and Vietnam, shows that this year was a highly significant global event. This global resonance is the expression of a chain of events.

In France, '68 started as a revolt by young people, students. After all, you don't often find old people building barricades. (Unless, of course, as currently in France, they want to protect their pensions.) But this protest was taken up by the workers' movement. That is what is special about May 1968 in France. The general strike gave what was originally a youth movement a class character.

At that time it had really seemed for a short while as if there would be a social revolution. It's a paradox: joining forces with the workers' movement ultimately led to its decline and its transformation into one that made traditional demands. So, unlike the events of 1789 or 1830 and the Paris Commune of 1870, 1968 was not a revolution. Or rather: it was perhaps the last revolution in France, as a country with a developed revolutionary culture — that is, the revolution that never happened.

Here you can draw an amazing parallel with the events in Czechoslovakia. '68 in France showed that violent revolutions in the developed democratic countries were a thing of the past. On the other hand, '68 in Czechoslovakia showed that the communist system was incapable of reforming itself. This, after all, was actually what the movement in Czechoslovakia was striving to achieve. So 1968 was enormously important for the Solidarnosc movement of the 1980s in Poland. By then the idea of reforming communism had been abandoned. In 1968 this illusion died. So on one side, the Western side, there was no revolution, and on the other, the Eastern side, there was no reform.

However, even if '68 in France was no revolution, it certainly was a massive questioning of power relationships: the authoritarian state power, the paternalist power of the enterprises, the bureaucratic power of the administrative institutions, power in the universities, patriarchal power in families and the division of power within personal relationships. This questioning of power relationships in their various forms was what made '68 what it was.

What was '68?

1968 was a great endeavour, not only in France, to achieve democracy, and a rejection of everything authoritarian. In France this meant a rejection of the Gaullist system. Secondly, it was a hedonist rejection of all that was puritanical, and of all commercialization and the dominance of the marketplace. And thirdly it was a romantic aspiration, which in France — more than anywhere else — had a whiff of revolution about it.

Here, of course, there are connections between the anti-authoritarian movements of East and West. They are both part of a common endeavour to create freedom and to push through their democratic demands. But it's one thing to be a rebel within a democracy, and quite another to come into conflict with a dictatorship. The events of 1968 in France had something of a party feel to them compared to the events in Czechoslovakia, where the year took a tragic turn on 21 August.

Today we can see that even now, 40 years after the event, there is no consensus on how 1968 should be remembered. It is a year that still gives rise to lively debate. When he was still the presidential candidate, Nicolas Sarkozy said that the legacy of '68 ought to be liquidated. What he was talking about is the lack of respect for authority, and about an increase in crime and the loss of "good manners". Yet if you ask the French today, 70 per cent of them stress the positive side. So the French have evidently taken on board the aspects of '68 that called for greater democratic liberality and freedom.

But even if '68 was an important event, what we have to do today is look at the state of present-day society: increasing impoverishment, precarious employment and senseless violence in the cities. By that I don't mean that these negative aspects are direct effects of '68 but that since then serious events have obviously occurred that have led to these grave consequences. All the significant developments that we know today — for example, uncontrolled urbanization and uncontrolled immigration — are tendencies that only emerged after 1968. '68 gives us the political key to an understanding of the contemporary world, but it is not the cause of all the global evils we have to contend with today.

Gert Weisskirchen: Lionel Jospin has already mentioned 21 August 1968, when the Russians invaded and the Prague Spring was suppressed. If we look at '68 solely in the light of this date, we would have to say that it was a terrible defeat. But surely the debates and discussions of '68 also yielded a host of new opportunities. True, these were destroyed when the tanks of the Warsaw Pact states rolled in, but under the surface they continued to exist and continued to have an effect. Would it not be true to say this was how '68 became the starting point for the development that led to Charta 77 and finally to the fall of the "real existing" socialist regime in 1989?

Jirí Dienstbier: That's true. And all the discussions and actions that are taking place this year throughout Europe show that more and more people are becoming aware of the significance of the Prague Spring.

For me '68 is an example of one of the finest traditions of our modern history. In essence it was an uprising that transcended nations, a struggle for freedom. It was really the whole Czechoslovak people that rose up. The number of those who were against it and who tried to put the brakes on was really absolutely negligible. Civil society formulated the aims and posed the questions. In Czechoslovakia, for example, there was much talk about the famous "2000 words" article. All of us — I myself was a journalist at that time — were fighting to see how far we could go and what changes we could force through. Sometimes people say it was just communists fighting among themselves. But that's nonsense. It was a fight to get rid of a bureaucratic regime that called itself socialist, but which was actually a system characterized by the oriental despotism that was forced on the country. And of course people noticed this immediately when the country became communist by the terms of its constitution in May 1948. We were, after all, the only country that introduced

communism on its own initiative, without having Soviet troops on our territory. At the last free election, in the year 1946, the communists achieved 40 per cent of the vote.¹

Moreover, before the war the educated elite of Czechoslovakia were members of the Communist Party: writers and poets as well as scientists, doctors, my own parents for example, who understood communism to mean the expansion of democracy into different areas of society. My mother, for instance, established the first free advice centre for mothers and children. She was convinced that in this way she was helping to build socialism. But these people very soon realized that what was happening was quite different from what they believed in and what they had been promised.

Despite this, at the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s everyone had caught the communist bug. You have to remember, of course, that at that time, when Stalin was alive, you could be sent to prison for thirty years or be hanged for absolutely no reason. But then, after the death of Stalin and Gottwald in March 1953, discussions began.

I was 15 at the time. I followed these debates with interest and grew up politically with the contradiction between what official sources tell you and what actually happens. In 1953, of course, there was the uprising in Berlin, and also demonstrations in Bohemia against the currency reform. These were put down by the police and the military police with considerable brutality.

The turning point of 1956 and the years of hope

The true beginning of the Prague Spring is the year 1956. It started with Nikita Khrushchev distancing himself from Stalin in his secret speech at the Twentieth Party Congress of the CPSU. That was the signal for discussions to begin on a wide front; thus after eight years the First of May Student Festival was held once again, as was the Writers' Congress. Then in June 1956 came the Poznan rising, which led to the "Polish October". These were all events that had an influence on each other.

This process of reform was, however, temporarily brought to an abrupt halt by the suppression of the Hungarian revolution in October 1956. But it was too late to stop it altogether. To that extent, the Prague Spring certainly didn't come out of the blue. It was the climax of the process that also began in Czechoslovakia in 1956 and achieved its goal in 1968, namely victory over Stalinism.

Even today many people in the Czech Republic say that the 1960s were the best years of their life. They were the years of hope. At that time we were actively involved; in radio we abolished one piece of censorship after another. And by 1966 or 1967 we really could speak openly about everything — except about criticism of the leaders of the state or the Soviet Union. But we did this indirectly anyway. And if you think of the new wave in Czechoslovakian cinema in the 1960s: Milan Kundera, Jirí Menzel, Milos Forman, and so on. It was an explosion. You can see from this that there was a certain inevitability about the year 1968.

However, as early as March or April 1968 Walter Ulbricht and Wladyslaw Gomulka called on Moscow to intervene. It was clear to them that the developments in Czechoslovakia could seal the fate of the communist regime.

The international freedom movement

Speaking of the international context of '68 it becomes clear on the one hand that of course we had quite different aims from the Paris students. On the other hand we understood and felt what united us — that we were each fighting against bureaucratic deformation in our respective countries. They wanted capitalism with a human face and could already detect the first signs of the crisis of democracy and the crisis of capitalism that we have today, from which there is no easy way out. In 1968 they sensed this in the West and fought against it — and their goal was the same as ours: human freedom. At that time it was clear in both the West and the East that without freedom there could be no solution to our problems.

The second international aspect was that decisive lessons were learned from the defeat and suppression of the Prague Spring. In the West, the illusions of leftwing intellectuals about the Soviet system were completely shattered. And what is incredibly important and yet far less well known is the effect that '68 had in Russia. On 21 August four Soviet correspondents in Prague criticized the invasion, as Adam Michnik has already mentioned. They were immediately bundled into a helicopter and taken to Moscow. They were fearful of what awaited them when they got there. But nothing happened. Juri Arbatov, who was then the Director of the American–Canadian Institute and a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, had them brought to his Institute and, so to speak, appointed them to be experts on America. One of them later became the ambassador in Washington during the Yeltsin period and chairman of the foreign affairs committee of the Russian Duma.

And now a personal experience. In October 1968 I was drinking with two Russian diplomats in Washington. We had been overdoing the vodka and started shouting furiously at each other. But in the end these two diplomats said: What you did in this free Prague Spring we must do at home too. And with the arrogance of a great power they then asked us: "How did you dare to do it without waiting for us?"

But still: we were all conscious that it couldn't go on like that. We were aware of developments since 1956: the Hungarians resisted and were beaten down, and later the same thing happened to the Poles — Michnik and many others protested in 1968 and were imprisoned and isolated. In 1970 Gomulka betrayed everything we believed in when he issued the order to fire on the demonstrators in Danzig. And we became conscious that if we wanted to succeed we could only do so by joining with others. And indeed the Helsinki process created space for this from July 1973. In Poland KOR was founded, in our country Charta 77 was founded on 1 January 1977, there were the Hungarian Helsinki committees, and we began to cooperate with each other.

It was quite a moving experience when we met somewhere in the mountains. On the *Schneekoppe* in the *Riesengebirge* mountains there was a path dedicated to Polish–Czech friendship, and we simply went walking along it, like any Czechs and Poles who just happened to have met there. Once — I recall that it was two degrees and pouring with rain — we met Adam Michnik. And he began to apologize for the fact that Polish troops had taken part in the occupation. We Czechs said to him, there's no need for you to apologize, it makes no sense for you to apologize. These things are done by the united politburos of this world, it's got nothing whatever to do with the people.

Adam Michnik: I remember a meeting with Vaclav Havel and Jiri Dienstbier. He said that we had to defeat communism if only so that we didn't have to tramp around in the mountains just to meet each other.

Jiri Dienstbier: That's right. Just one more comment on that. After 1968 a debate began in the Russian Communist Party the like of which had not been known since the 1930s, when Stalin wiped out the intelligentsia and refused to allow criticism even of the smallest things. Yevgeni Yevtushenko made a protest at the 1968 Writers' Congress and the debate spread throughout the Soviet Union. The result was that in the 1980s life at a Russian university such as Moscow or St Petersburg was just about as free as it had been in our country in the 1960s. So the 1968 movement went on, even if it was twenty years later. When I went to the Kremlin to see Gorbachev in September 1991 we talked about 1968. He made an interesting remark: "We thought we were suppressing the Prague Spring, but we were suppressing ourselves."

Gert Weisskirchen: One year after 1968 Willy Brandt became the West German chancellor. He concluded his inaugural speech by saying: "We are not at the end of our democracy, we are only just beginning." Does 1969 have something to do with the fact that there was a protest movement in 1968? Was it absorbed, was it picked up by the Liberal–Social Democrat coalition, or do you not see it that way, Oskar Negt?

Oskar Negt: It's difficult to say what actually happened or who was influenced by what. At any rate, I feel — like the two previous speakers — that it's very important to make a clear distinction between a protest movement in totalitarian and authoritarian systems and one that takes place in countries that guarantee democratic rights that one can claim. We're talking about grassroots democracy here — as opposed to what in totalitarian countries couldn't even be called representative democracy.

The tremendous effectiveness of the movement in Poland and Prague was also down to the fact that any movement and any independent behaviour on the part of the people endangered the power structure. It was different in the countries of the West. As Lionel Jospin has already indicated, France has revolutionary traditions. By contrast, we Germans have chiefly counter–revolutionary traditions — failed revolutions and successful counter–revolutions. This element of German history also enters into the protest movement, of course. At this level, the debate is very different in the different countries.

I do believe, though, that there are connections in people's attitudes. In every system, the motivation to claim democratic rights is probably connected with a need to overcome the rule of human beings over human beings. But in terms of concrete differences, in West Germany a protest movement arose in which for the first time the great mass of young people, students and others, inclined to the left. This had never happened in Germany before. The university, the National Socialist student league and even the student fraternities before 1933, as well as teachers and civil servants — in short: the whole of the educated classes, were previously rightwing. In 1968, for the first time in German history, the younger generation inclined to the left.

Generational revolt in West Germany

What, though, was meant by this expression "left and free", as Willy Brandt called it, in concrete terms in the Federal Republic in 1968? It meant a serious effort to grapple with the legacy of the "Third Reich". Up to 1963, up to the

Auschwitz trial, there had been absolutely no attempt to call to account the ruling elite who were now once again holding high office. These were not just men like Globke, the adviser to Adenauer, but included others such as Maunz, Larenz and Forsthoff² and the many disciples of Carl Schmitt — they had all long since been restored to office.

I mention this because it was an essential element in Germany — though not in France. This protest against their parents' past was an essential theme for German students who were trying to come to terms with their history, and it was they who made the literature that had been suppressed in the Third Reich — principally that of the Marxists and Freudians who had emigrated — available to readers once more. The fact that we were again able to read, at first by means of so-called pirate editions, emigrant writers who had been banned gave rise to something like a civil, self-evident culture of reading.

And bear in mind also that Theodor Adorno, truly a great talent, if not a genius, never received a call to a university chair in Germany; his professorship was approved by the regional government of Hessen under Minister President Georg August Zinn — and was only then included in the budget. That was the mood in Germany; in other words, the opening up of history is an absolutely vital element here.

Another cause of the revolt was the restoration of old authoritarian conditions in the lecture halls. Even an intelligent and indeed liberal man such as Carlo Schmid, who was then both a federal minister and a professor of political science in Frankfurt, broke off a seminar when he was asked a question that didn't suit him. Looking back on the incident today, I have to say that had I not witnessed it myself I wouldn't believe it.

What is "unfulfilled" about '68

Finally, I would like to focus on two observations regarding the current '68 debate in Germany. This debate is quite different from the one that took place on the thirtieth anniversary ten years ago. What troubles me today is that those who shouted the loudest at the time are now coming forward as converts and renegades to show us what the movement was actually supposed to have been about. We only need think of a work as absurd as Götz Aly's *Unser Kampf* (Our struggle).³ It's scandalous that he should have received such acclaim for it. But I would like to remind you of another misguided publication: *Lob der Disziplin* (In praise of discipline) by Bernhard Bueb. In this "polemic" he asserts in all seriousness that the '68ers did away with discipline and obedience, and that this is the real reason for the current plight of our schools. This wild assertion has led to the book being reprinted seventeen times in two years. So it's not only that people are betraying their own principles; there are evidently also people for whom '68 holds quite different associations; for them it is a field on to which to project quite different things, and do so for one single purpose: to settle scores. I think what is taking place here and now on the subject of '68 is a substitute debate.

For me, two things seem to express what really remains of '68. First, in view of the consequences of 1968 in eastern Europe, especially the events of 1989, I believe that these movements were the most powerful in modern history because they brought down whole systems. When the GDR collapsed in 1989/90 not a single shot was fired. These eroding systems were the kind of systems that Hegel would have denied were ever real states but merely constructions that were alienated from reality.

So what remains? I believe something remains that has a high truth content. If this was not so the whole complex affair of 1968 it would all be long forgotten by now. Bloch would say there is something there that is "unfulfilled". Never before has so much thought been given to values, to education and to culture as in this period.

Friedrich Schorlemmer: But there was also a lot of nonsense...

Oskar Negt: Of course, there was that too, as there is everywhere. But something has remained from the thinking in the area of education that is still unfulfilled — for instance the question: "What do we really understand by an inner directed person, or are we again about to generate authoritarian, achievement-oriented conformists?"

And secondly, the democratic impulse, the claiming of participation rights and of elements of grass-roots democracy — right up to the question concerning economic democracy. How can a democracy function if it is split in two? On the one hand you have a free vote and can vote for your member of parliament; on the other hand workers have no rights of co-determination, and the gates of the factories are shut in their faces. The dismantling of the rights of co-determination is something which the movement of 1968 rebelled against. This is something that has lasted. The undermining of a democracy that is not led from the grass roots is still a central problem of our democracy. This is a '68 initiative that I still regard as important.

Gert Weisskirchen: Friedrich Schorlemmer, does it seem credible to you that a Young Socialist committee sent a blazing letter of protest to Walter Ulbricht in late August 1968 informing him that the ties that had just been formed with the Free German Youth of Freital would be cancelled immediately — unless he opposed the invasion of Prague?

Friedrich Schorlemmer: I find that absurd, obviously. But when we speak of '68 and the GDR we should bear in mind the following. I lived in a country of which I have very often felt ashamed — a country that needed a wall and was led by the unspeakable Ulbricht, with his goatee beard, about whom all I miss are the jokes, surrounded by his unspeakable politburo. I still know all their names, Honecker, Hager, Hoffmann, Stoph, Mielke, Norden, Sindermann, Krenz and so on, and I know what this bunch of nonentities with their power and rigid ideology meant for the "*Staatsvolk*" of the GDR.

In 1968, when there was upheaval all over the world, Ulbricht was riding the crest of a wave. The least show of resistance was nipped in the bud by his regime, and with unbelievably repressive means. People who — like a friend of mine in Jena — had done no more than send letters saying "no" in the referendum on Ulbricht's constitution were sentenced to four years hard labour — they had to be "bought free" in the first phase of the politics of détente. The fact that the country had been smothered with "yes" posters from Cape Arkona in the north to Suhl in the south did not in itself make it a bad country. What was bad and made me feel ashamed was that 94.3 per cent of citizens personally put their cross in the "yes" box. So on his seventy-fifth birthday on 30 June 1968 Ulbricht was more firmly in the saddle than ever. With approval from the ballot box. Everything was under control, even if people were guilty of "fleeing the GDR" every evening through the medium of their radios.

As far as the GDR is concerned, today is the fortieth anniversary of the demolition of the University Church of Leipzig, the oldest in Germany. This

was an act of self-aggrandizement on the part of Ulbricht and Paul Fröhlich. "The thing must be got rid of", Ulbricht had decreed. I have met people today who served time because they protested against it. Or people who protested against the invasion of Prague, or, to be more exact, wrote polite letters and were promptly arrested.

The Prague nights

In its monolithic and intolerant ideology, the GDR had two enemies: firstly the forces that tried to construct an emancipatory form of socialism along the lines of the Prague Spring. And the second enemy was "social democratism". In those days any convergence of the systems, let alone a dialogue between ideologies, was uncompromisingly rejected and severely sanctioned. It was still the real Cold War.

In 1968 we had hopes in two directions. One direction was of course Prague. I myself saw a people becoming politicized in Prague and yet remaining level-headed. In 1989 I experienced in the GDR something I had never expected: a highly politicized people and state leaders who were prepared to go and talk with the people on the same level. The discussions I had on those August nights in Prague were an unforgettable experience; I saw how a dictatorship can be changed into a democracy without "purging" the previous rulers. In the end, though, Prague may have failed precisely because Stalinist methods were not used. But the way culture became politics and politics was practised through culture, these were things that I have never forgotten to this day. We in the GDR, walled in as we were, were happy if West German students managed to smuggle Kolakowsky, Fromm and Mitscherlich across the border to us.

I was rather angered by the behaviour of some from the far-Left in the Federal Republic. In the case of some "leftwingers" words almost fail me. When I think how many formerly radical left-wingers, with their utopian socialism, had always ignored the so-called "real existing" variety, but came to East Berlin and queued up to buy not only Marx but Lenin too, at the expense of the Ministry for Inner-German Affairs. There were various groups whom I had nothing to do with at the time and whom I still want nothing to do with today — especially if they now perform bizarre right turns and write sensationalist books that "turn things on their head", in the way Oskar Negt has just described.

Gert Weisskirchen: Jirí Grusa, you were a poet living in Prague in the 1960s, then in West Germany from the 1980s. What is your evaluation of everything associated with '68 compared with what happened afterwards? From your point of view, is what Oskar Negt has spoken of as "unfulfilled", which many see as romantic or lyrical, also something forward-looking and worth preserving?

Jirí Grusa: That is a very good question. I recall an interesting incident in Berlin. I was allowed to publish long before 1968, and then came this first approach — Jirí Dienstbier has already spoken about it. In 1967 I was given a 24 hour exit permit to West Berlin, together with a colleague, to take part in a discussion at the Technical University. To some extent we were curiosities. One student put his hand up and asked me: What is literature's job?

Literature's job, I thought. Good grief! You expect to find a stupid question like that in a communist party newspaper. Literature's job? Don't know. Possibly to protect the language so that people don't just talk a lot of nonsense,

I said. Whereupon the student stood up and said: "Why do you come here and spout this bourgeois claptrap?"

When the discussion ended, at about ten o'clock in the evening, the two of us from Prague left the building together with the students. And the ones that had just attacked us as bourgeois idiots got into their beetles and were off. We were left standing on the steps, and I said: "They think they can put the world to rights, what do they know!" There I was in Berlin, it was the first time I'd been allowed to see somewhere different, and by midnight I had to be on the slow train back to Prague. And the German students had all gone away. I was pretty fed up, I can tell you.

The global media network

But then I had quite a long think and asked myself: Aren't they simply better off than us, and isn't their bluster actually proof that they're not stupid? Further evidence of this was the incredible fact that none of the invitations we later received from the West were from conservative circles; they were all from people who knew more about Nicaragua than they did about Prague. It made us think: Good God, something's not right with the world.

But what did this new connection consist of, this new possibility that had been formed? In 1968 we were living in a changed situation in which the separation of the different worlds was beginning to be broken down. So far no one has mentioned one crucial point: the new media network. The Prague Spring could never have had the influence it did if it hadn't been for the transistor radio and Austrian television. Without them, the images would have simply been suppressed as they were during the Hungarian uprising in 1956. Now, however, it was no longer possible to separate the images from the people. And once the "wrong" image has been shown it is too late correct or retouch it.

This was the new opportunity that Prague offered. Suddenly the "human face" appeared. It was a typically Czech idea that you could fit this human face on to socialism — the Czechs believed they could persuade the Russians to let us do what we wanted. But in reality the public wanted the "human" as such — with nothing added. This was the catch with the Prague Spring, but it also gave us our chance to be reconciled with the prophets of the West and to forgive them for Nicaragua — on the basis that they reciprocated by sending a few books over to us.

Gert Weisskirchen: In conclusion, a brief question to each of you: If it is true that to this day there is something intractable about '68, that it is still controversial, what aspects of it will last?

Adam Michnik: I think that for this generation 1968 meant something comparable to what 1848 meant for that generation: a massive questioning of the ruling dogma. The world was disenchanted. But as citizens of post-communist Europe we should not delude ourselves that we are wiser because we allegedly knew better at that time and had both Auschwitz and Katyn on our doorstep. I also remember well all the silly speeches about Nicaragua and so on that Jirí Grusa has referred to. But only recently my colleagues from the anti-communist opposition took flowers to Pinochet. Each one of us must take responsibility for our own stupidity.

Lionel Jospin: The feature of '68 that lives on today? That seems to me to be eternal youth. The flame of revolt. The idea, or illusion, that it is possible to

change things and to change the world. What all this meant in concrete terms — the nights and the discussions in Paris or Prague — is the fraternal atmosphere: everyone talked and debated with everyone else. That is '68. But youth passes. Those who revolted had to show that they could be sensible. However, fraternal feelings and the idea that you can change the world, not by violence, but through getting involved as citizens, these ideas ought to stay with us. That is what remains of '68.

Jirí Dienstbier: History teaches that we Czechs are basically not revolutionaries. In our country historical knowledge is achieved by different and more circuitous paths. I was once asked in East Berlin: How is it that you are fairly successful whereas things are so catastrophic here? I said there were two crucial reasons: Firstly: we didn't have a wealthy brother and so had no one to rely on. And secondly: In Prussia, if you have rules, you obey them to the letter, whereas Czechs always find a roundabout way of muddling through. And if it suits us better not to keep to the rules, then we don't keep to them. These are different historical character traits that have continued to exercise an influence even after 1968.

But in relation to '68 there is something else: whether in 1968 in France or in our country, whether in Hungary or among the flower children of San Francisco — beyond all the concrete specifics, they all had something in common, namely, a powerful moral charge, however things may have turned out in the end. This is the legacy of '68 for today: if authority is lost and replaced with manipulation by the mass media, and if the emphasis is laid solely on material things, and the European Union continues to insist on measuring the curvature of bananas, then these ethical criteria, our ethical identity will be lost. That is what the events of 1968 are all about. This is where we can learn these things.

In the Czech Republic the ethos of '68 was carried over into Charta 77 and then into the events of 1989, but even before that it found its expression in the contacts with our friends in Hungary and Poland, and in the former GDR as well. But today all that is getting lost. We live in a world of advertising and not in a world of ideas.

Oskar Negt: I think the '68ers are like a thorn in the flesh of this society. Somehow, people still don't really get it. Some people overestimate their influence to such an extent that rational analysis becomes distorted. On the other hand, I would be really pleased if '68 had more meaning for the younger generation: it's astonishing how far the younger generation tolerates this neo-liberal impoverishment of our society in all areas, this business-oriented mentality that is spreading like the plague, for instance with the privatization of our schools and the return to authoritarian structures in universities. Why all this is simply accepted is a mystery to me. My wish — a wish that is linked with this debate — would be for '68 to be discussed and for people to have the courage to use their own understanding without relying on the guidance of others, as Kant put it.

Friedrich Schorlemmer: Just two things. Firstly: the world can be changed. Left and free — these two can be combined if people are sufficiently committed to human rights in their own countries as well as further afield. It is possible to combine these two things. For a joyful moment I experienced this in Prague. That remains for me a legacy of this year, together with a hope that must not be allowed to die.

Secondly: claims to absolute rightness are always obsolete. On 1 December 1989, with the setting up of the first central Round Table in Berlin, we definitively rejected the claim of anyone to be the sole rightful representative of power and truth. That must never be allowed to happen again. The truth begins where two parties come together. That's why dialogue is so important in society — dialogue that is not just a product of the media but arises out of civil society. For this we urgently need more people to take part, especially young people.

Jirí Grusa: When Dubcek returned from Moscow in 1968 everyone could see that he had suffered a defeat. After all, it wasn't possible to censor his face. He had just given in. He wasn't particularly gifted politically — he was a symbolic figure, with the charisma of a man incapable of a bolshevist type of murder: that was genuine. We knew then that we had lost. But at the same time we knew that we were not going to let ourselves be pushed around any more. And the global network, which was then just in its infancy, broadcast this experience to the world. In West Germany they soon realized that Green is more likely to succeed than Red ; they learned that these ideological concepts are unprofitable and that you have to try another way. In this sense the invasion of Prague actually was — ironically speaking — fraternal help.

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- ¹ At the elections of 1946 the communists won 40 per cent in the Czech lands and in the — smaller — Slovakia the Democratic Party gained 62 percent of the vote. This result enabled the communists to take important ministerial posts in Prague, and then in 1947 to sweep aside the Democratic Party and start taking the economy into state ownership. In February 1948 the communists seized power entirely, and the president, Edvard Benes, resigned. His successor was the Communist Party leader Klement Gottwald —ed.
- ² Theodor Maunz, Karl Larnetz, Ernst Forsthoff: lawyers and legal scholars who had played major role during National Socialism —ed.
- ³ As it's title suggests, Aly's book drew comparisons between the '68ers and the Nazi generation before them —ed.

Published 2008–09–03

Original in German

Translation by Gordon Wells

Contribution by Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik

First published in Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik 8/2008 (German version)

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