Momentous ‘eights’ in Czecho-Slovak history

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27 December 2018

For Czechs and Slovaks, the years 1918, 1938, 1948 and 1968 carry deeply mixed memories – an ambivalence reflecting anxieties about the past and the future of the two nations. Historian Jacques Rupnik reads the Czechoslovak ‘eights’ as a seismograph of the European predicament at crucial junctures during the twentieth century.

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Et n’oublions pas le Goofus Bird, oiseau qui vole en arrière car il ne se soucie pas de savoir où il va, mais d’où il vient.

J. L. Borges, Le livre des êtres imaginaires

Anniversaries can be an occasion or a pretext to look back and reflect upon the past and present. This is even more the case when – as in the case of the Czechoslovak ‘eights’: 1918, 1938, 1948, 1968 and 1989 (almost an eight) – we are faced with a combination of historical turning points to be examined simultaneously, and when questions about their interplay are to be confronted. Each generation, aware of the debates of the previous one (or in reaction to them), tends to reformulate these questions in the light of new evidence and new concerns.

Commemoration, as we know, tends to reveal more about the commemorators than the commemorated. The Czechoslovak ‘eights’ provide an occasion for government and state institutions to formulate their ‘memorial policy’ and define its place in the dominant historical narrative. For historians, they are an opportunity to revisit past events with the benefit of hindsight, like ‘a distant country’ (Racine).

Czechs’ ambivalence about what it is they are actually commemorating, as a nation-state now constrained by its entanglements within the European Union, reveals certain anxieties about the crises of the past, which are conflated with anxieties about the future. In the Czechoslovak narrative, the ‘eights’ contrast moments of hope and euphoria (as in 1918, during the Prague Spring of 1968, or in the ‘Velvet Revolution’ twenty years later), followed by tragic set-backs, defeats and self-defeats, which breed collective depression
and strategies of survival. But before we plunge into this history, two caveats.

First, it is a twentieth-century Czecho-Slovak trajectory and therefore, at each turning point, you get a different reading from politicians, historians and public perception, depending on whether you are in Prague and Bratislava. This is a story of a country that became two. [1] Post-war surveys asking Czechs and Slovaks to identify the most glorious period of their history reveal very contrasting readings of their history. Second, perceptions change over time. Thus, on the eve of 1948 (in 1946), Czechs valued most the Hussite period (the 15th century), followed by the reign of Charles IV (14th century). In 1968, they valued most the 1st Republic (1918-1938), followed by the Hussite period and Charles IV. By 2008, they rated the Charles IV era first, followed by the 1st Republic and the nineteenth-century ‘national revival’. [2] That is most likely the dominant perception today.

I will not attempt to provide a potted history of twentieth-century Czechoslovakia through its greatest hits, known as the ‘eights’. Nor will I try to do the opposite: to fit the Czecho-Slovak experience into a ‘global history’ – in other words, view the small, twentieth-century central European country from the perspective of the global century in which we now live. Patrick Boucheron has recently published a collective volume entitled *Histoire Mondiale de la France* [3] (‘A Global History of France’), which provoked a widespread debate about the purpose and fate of national narratives and attempts to deconstruct them. Instead, I propose an in-between approach: the connection/interaction between the Czech (Czecho-Slovak) and European dimensions. Put another way: to see the Czechoslovak eights as a barometer, a seismograph, a révélateur of the European predicament at crucial junctures during the twentieth century.

I’ll confine myself to the twentieth century, though one could – and perhaps should – connect them to another ‘eight’: 1848, the Spring of Nations, the first time Czechs, moving from culture to politics, explicitly confronted the question of the relationship between the nation and democracy. They (wisely) opted for Palacky’s version of ‘Austroslavism’, at a safe distance from both the Russian tsar’s combination of autocracy and pan-Slavism and the parliament in Frankfurt, whose guiding spirits tended to confuse the progress of democracy with that of Germanization. Or should we look as far back as 1618, when the Thirty Years War – a truly European war! – starts in Bohemia, with the Prague defenestration? The famous Czechoslovak eights are an integral part of all the turning points of twentieth-century European history, revealing major European dilemmas: between East and West, between capitalism and socialism, between democracy and totalitarianism. To examine how these issues played out in the Czech context can provide insights into Czech ways of belonging to Europe and, more generally, can deepen our understanding of European history in the past century.

During the Prague Spring of 1968, the student paper conducted a survey asking leading protagonists of the reform movement the philosophical question: ‘Where from, where to, with whom?’ To which Ivan Svitak, the philosopher and enfant terrible of 1968, gave the most concise answer: ‘From Asia to Europe. Alone!’ This sense of uniqueness and isolation is perhaps the sharpest contrast with the ‘Velvet Revolution’ twenty years later, where the Czechoslovak ‘return to Europe’ was very much part of a collective, Central European endeavour. As Timothy Garton Ash put it: ‘Poland ten years, Hungary ten
months, East Germany ten weeks, Czechoslovakia ten days’!

On the eve of the 100th anniversary of the foundation of Czechoslovakia, the Czech Academy of Sciences presented a study entitled Cesko na Ceste [4] (‘Czechia on the road’). It was not meant as a beatnik-style narrative – a wandering, meandering journey from Czechoslovakia to Czechia. Rather, the title was meant to suggest that the country is heading somewhere – though most contributors seemed to refrain from actually spelling out the European or western destination, as if to suggest that questions concerning its geopolitical orientation remain open. And indeed they do, as do those concerning the country’s founding principles.

A historian approaching the subject should thus try to avoid two traps: that of romantic historiography, which inherited from the nineteenth century the idea of Czech democratic exceptionalism and which the new the First Republic of 1918 to 1938 embodied. [5] And, conversely, the opposite inclination, which is ‘presentism’: you read the past from the perspective of your present concerns. This could lead one to conclude that since the Czechoslovak state was unable to sustain itself both in 1938 (mainly under external pressure) and in 1992 (for internal reasons), it was doomed from the onset to become a ‘failed state’. [6]

1918: The making of a state

The birth of Czechoslovakia is the illustration par excellence of the interplay between what has been the dominant national narrative: the fulfilment of the national aspirations, the nineteenth-century revival of the nation and part of the remapping of the European continent after the demise of the empires. Tomáš Masaryk, the founder of the state, provided during the World War I the justification for its creation as part of the new Central Europe of independent nations. He launched in London (with the historian R.W. Seton-Watson) a publication appropriately entitled The New Europe, [7] where he argued that the German imperialist project of Mitteleuropa stood for Central Europe under German authoritarian hegemony. In Masaryk’s reading, this extended to the Balkans and Turkey: ‘the Berlin-Baghdad axis’, as he called it, bridging Central Europe to the Middle East (echoes of Donald Rumsfeld’s ‘new Europe’ enrolled in the Iraq war). Austro-Hungary, in his eyes, had become merely a part in this project, which heralded the former’s end.

What we need instead, Masaryk argued, was a Central Europe of independent democratic nations tied to western democracies. In 1918 he published his book Nova Evropa, stanovisko slovanské, [8] in which the argument is spelled out. The Czechs had looked East to a Slavic community of nations, a cultural pan-Slavic moment which had led some conservatives to wish for a Romanov on the Czech throne. An overwhelming majority in the political class, on the other hand, had hoped to reform and democratize Austria from within. Both strategies had been exhausted. A federation in Central Europe could come about only by the free association of independent nations. War was still raging, but with his New Europe, including a new Central Europe connected to the West, Masaryk was formulating for the western leaders their war aims and thus helping to shape the contours of the future political map of Europe.

The second Masarykian contribution in 1918 was to combine national emancipation with
universalist democratic principles. Masaryk read the war as a victorious confrontation between western liberal democracy and illegitimate authoritarian semi-feudal empires without legitimacy. Shortly after the war, in a book revealingly entitled in Czech World Revolution and in the English translation more soberly The Making of a State, the professor-president interpreted 1918 in a way that perfectly captures the duality of the first ‘eight’. The founders of the Czechoslovak state conceived it as part of a universal democratic movement on which a new European order would be based. In short, this was the Czech combination of Wilson’s Fourteen points, including the right to the self-determination of nations, with his famous speech to the Congress in 1917 about ‘making the world safe for democracy’. Two founding principles for Czechoslovakia, the combination of which proved to be difficult to sustain.

This teleological reading of 1918 is, of course, strikingly reminiscent of the 1989 version of democratic triumphalism known as the ‘end of history’. It revealed its flaws later, in the context of the economic crisis of the 1930s and the rise of Hitler, though some observers pointed them out right away. While Masaryk called for central-European cooperation among the newly established states, Oskar Jaszi, the historian and political thinker and a Hungarian Masaryk of sorts, warned of the dangers of Kleinstaaterei – unviable and feuding statelets, ‘quarrelling with each other, divided inside, which could easily become pawns in the games of power politics’. Hugh Seton-Watson (son of Robert) later described the situation as eastern Europe’s ‘private civil war’. [9]

The fragility of the new state born in 1918 was not just due to the imbalances of the European order; it also had to do with the key question of the definition of the nation. 1918 can be described as an attempt by the founding fathers – an unsuccessful attempt as it turned out – to shift from a cultural-linguistic definition of the nation to a civic, political definition. One can read Czech political history from the late nineteenth century onwards and Masaryk’s role, as precisely such an attempt. However, at the same time, 1918 brought to the fore the official thesis of a ‘Czechoslovak nation’ meant to legitimize the state with a two-thirds Slavic core. It should be pointed out that this concept was shared by the Slovak political leadership. In the Declaration of the Slovak National Council of October 1918 the formula is ‘a Czechoslovak nation composed of the Czech and Slovak nations’.

Beyond the classic Franco-German debate contrasting the ethnic and civic concepts of the nation, this provided all the ingredients of the contradictions at work in the crisis to come:

1. The Czechoslovak nation, instead of including all the citizens, focused on its Slavic core, which of course made it all the more difficult for German and Hungarian citizens to identify with Czechoslovakia (a state which, to put it mildly, they had not really welcomed).
2. A ‘Czechoslovak nation’ made of two nations is like two branches growing on opposite sides of the same tree-trunk. The term stretches the limits of creative ambiguity to a breaking point, as developments post-1938, post-68, and mainly post-1989 have amply demonstrated.

1938: The Munich complex
Both aforementioned aspects provide the background to historiographical debates concerning the crisis of 1938: the interplay between the internal vulnerabilities of the interwar Czechoslovak state and the external forces that brought about its dismemberment. A Czechoslovak democratic island in the heart of Europe, amidst rising varieties of nationalist and authoritarian regimes (‘The little dictators’ [10]), abandoned by western democracies that had helped to bring it about. Munich became the symbol, in Europe and beyond, of the vulnerabilities of liberal democracies when they fall prey to the idea that they can preserve themselves and their values while failing to oppose an expansionist totalitarian power at their doorstep. Munich was a defining moment for Europe: the sacrifice of principles and commitments to save ‘peace in our time’ as the appeasers had it; dishonour to avoid war but eventually bringing about ‘dishonour and war’, as Churchill famously put it in his speech in the House of Commons.

Perhaps only ‘Yalta’ has acquired in East-Central Europe a similar connotation, as a symbol of being abandoned by the West. And, as happens to powerful symbols associated with tragic turning points in European history, ‘Munich’ has since been used and abused many times. ‘Never again Munich’ was the Czechoslovak communist’s post-war case for a pax sovietica. In the West it was the other way around: the Helsinki Agreement of 1975, of which the dissidents later made such good use, was signed amidst warnings about ‘another Yalta’ or ‘a new Munich’. Similarly, it was used to condemn the reluctance of some western European countries to join the war in Iraq.

In the internal Czechoslovak context, Munich raises two issues: one concerns the internal vulnerabilities related to the inclusiveness of its democracy; the second concerns the dilemma ‘capitulate or fight’. Indeed, Czechoslovak democratic exceptionalism in interwar central Europe should not dispense with a critical examination of its internal weaknesses. Czech democracy combined institutional features of liberal democracy and what became known as ‘people’s’ democracy’. [11]

We thus have a dual legacy of the First Republic and its demise at Munich, which impacted on the Czechs’ relationship to democracy and on an already weak liberal tradition. This, in turn, accentuated certain attitudes towards the state and the rule of law. Petr Pithart traces Czech attitudes towards the constitution and the legal order to a tendency to consider the state as ‘foreign’. This makes sense to the extent that the post-1918 legal order and bureaucracy were inherited from Austria and is interesting when extended to the communist period. However, one might also imagine that the strong legitimacy that the new state had after 1918 among Czechs and Slovaks would have been sufficient to facilitate an identification with the state and its legal order.

However, these weaknesses of Czechoslovak liberal democracy turned out to be secondary compared to the main issue, its inclusiveness. In one line of questioning, you can stress the trend of 1920 till the early-mid 1930s, where you had both Slovak and German parties brought into government coalitions. You may argue that without the international economic crisis of the 1930 and Hitler’s seizure of power, this inclusiveness could have developed and eventually created a common polity. Leaving aside arguments focusing primarily on Czech nationalism as a ‘culprit’ on the road to 1938, which implies nothing less than a delegitimization of Czechoslovakia from the onset, there are also historians and philosophers who propose rethinking Munich and the internal vulnerabilities of the state. Among them was Jan Patočka, who in his Co jsou Češi?
offered a different reading of the problem as a missed opportunity with fateful consequences. Following Emanuel Radl, Patocka argued that Czechoslovakia failed to abandon traditional linguistic nationalism in favour of a democratic concept of the nation. [12] That option, had it been taken, would not of course have offered any guarantees. Nor does the failure to democratize help account for the internal weakening of the state, which became evident in the final crisis of the late 1930s.

However, the main thrust of the Czech discussions about Munich concerns less the diplomatic fiasco than its aftermath, less the causes than the response to the diktat. Articles on what historian Jan Tesař has called ‘the Munich complex’, [13] and essays on Beneš’ decision to give in to the diktat of the great powers, could fill libraries. This is not just because of Munich, but because of the ‘capitulation syndrome’, which repeated itself with Beneš in February 1948 and with Dubček in August 1968. Munich was the beginning of Czechoslovakia’s tragic decade. This second line of questioning thus concerns not how Munich puts an end to the democratic order established in 1918, but how it sets the scene for 1948.

For historians, Munich is actually the beginning of the war it was supposed to avoid, one which brought about a complete geostrategic recasting of East-Central Europe. As Sebastian Haffner put it: ‘without Hitler no divided Germany and Europe’ – and, one might add, no Sovietisation of Central Europe. Indeed, debates about what could have been done to stop Stalin in 1945 refer back to the question of what was not done to stop Hitler a decade earlier.

Munich is the start of the country’s foreign policy reorientation eastward. This is where emotions, ideology and geopolitics interact. Jan Masaryk, the son of the former president and ambassador to London, crying the morning after on the shoulder of Soviet Ambassador Maisky, who described the scene in his diary: ‘(Masaryk) rocked on his feet and fell all of a sudden on my breast, sobbing bitterly. I was taken aback and somewhat bewildered. Kissing me, Masaryk mumbled through his tears: “they’ve sold me into slavery to the Germans like they used to sell Negroes into slavery in America”’. [14]

Beneš’s was not an emotional response to the Munich trauma, nor was it an ideological conversion to the merits of Soviet-style socialism – although there was a good deal of wishful thinking about its alleged transformation during the war. No, for the cool-headed diplomat Beneš (as for most of the Czech political elite), the issue was above all the geopolitical predicament of a country between Hitler and Stalin. [15]

Undoing Munich 1938 was Beneš’s obsession – widely shared – which eventually led him into the Soviet sphere of influence. The accompanying theory was for the country restored in 1945 as a bridge between East and West in a post-war era. This convergence, a kind of ‘third way’ between capitalism and socialism, between the western democracies and the Soviet Union, all transformed by the war, turned out to be an illusion. While Beneš, like others in Europe at the time, mused about convergence and the ‘Third Way’, Gottwald and the communists were already seizing control of the state, the economy, and of social organisations. They already had all the levers of power in 1945 and could thus delay the actual seizure of political power until February 1948.

1948: the ‘elegant takeover’
The ‘Prague Coup’ – prevrat as it is known – was the last straw in the launch of the Cold War. Poland had been its origin and the main bone of contention; the Communist takeover of Czechoslovakia marked the end of any hope of avoiding the division of the continent into two rival blocs.

That is a familiar story. The more interesting or disturbing question is: Was it just a coup? How to account for the ‘elegant takeover’, as Pavel Tigrid put it: pretending to solve a crisis of government (replacement of non-communist ministers who had resigned) while addressing a crisis of the regime. Here several specific Czechoslovak features should be pointed out. The ‘democratic interlude’ between 1945 and February 1948 did indeed provide a degree of pluralism incomparable to that in other countries of the region, which were much more promptly Sovietized. But it was made possible not just by the acceptance of the slide into the Soviet orbit, but by three factors implemented upon Beneš’s return to the country in April 1945, all of which represented a major break with the legacy of Masaryk’s pre-war republic:

1. The post-war republic was a democracy, but without an opposition, since the National Front coalition was to remain in place after the elections.
2. The expulsion of some three million Sudeten Germans in 1945 was a radical departure from the founding principles of the state in 1918. Indeed, it was more than that if one recalls that the interaction with the Germans was a key to understanding the ‘meaning of Czech history’. It was the conclusion in 1945 of a drama started in 1938, marking the destruction of the Czech-German (and Jewish) mix in Bohemia going back to the Middle Ages.
3. As of 1945, the Communist Party controlled all key levers of power in the state (in particular, the defence, interior and information ministries). In other words, under the narrative of continuity with pre-war Czechoslovakia, the state restored in 1945 revealed radical breaks which account to a large extent for the ‘elegant takeover’. The whole decade from Munich 1938 to 1948 can be seen as a slide from democracy to dictatorship.

Clearly, in 1948, Czechoslovakia’s fate had been sealed by the logic of the Cold War. But we should still note some specific features with implications for our understanding of the following two decades. The Russian troops that liberated the country in May 1945 returned home in December of that year (they came back to Prague in August 1968). In other countries of the region, like Poland and Hungary, the Communist Parties were small groups that seized power with Soviet backing, generating a widely shared narrative among the population that the country had moved ‘from one occupation to another’. By contrast, Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ) emerged from the war with strong domestic backing: in the 1946 elections, the KSČ polled 40% in the Czech lands, and 30% Slovakia.

This raises interesting and disturbing questions about indigenous sources of support for the Communists in an advanced industrial country in the middle of Europe with a strong pre-war democratic tradition. The Czech case is not unlike France, where the communists emerged as the strongest party in the first elections of 1946 elections. Indeed, the KSČ and the PCF share many features: originating in a majority split in the social-democratic party after WWI, developing a strong Stalinist shield against the ‘reformist’ temptation, and claiming post-war credit for not being associated with a pre-war order. They were
The twin brothers of European communism. Understanding those domestic sources of post-war support for communism helps to explain the way a substantial part of society could, for some time, provide support for an authoritarian regime; and it helps explain why Czechoslovakia remained quiet during the regional upheavals of 1956.

The Czechoslovak Spring came late, but with a vengeance.

**1968: Prague Spring revisited**

‘Czechoslovakia in 1968 represented an important moment in human history, it did not represent an important international crisis’. [16] The verdict of two eminent British professors of international relations written immediately after the tanks of August put an end to the Czechoslovak experiment with ‘socialism with a human face’ was brutal but accurate. The division of the continent was confirmed and a new version of East-West ‘détente’ could be launched. However, the significance of the Prague Spring cannot be measured only by its defeat. Indeed, like the previous eights, its contribution should be understood in the interplay between Czecho-Slovak and European dimensions. 1968 might not have been a ‘major international crisis’, but it certainly was the year that shook Europe.

Three aspects deserve to be mentioned in this respect:

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

The Prague Spring was not what you read about in textbooks: starting with the election of Alexander Dubček as Party leader on 5 January 1968 and concluding with the Soviet-led invasion of 20th–21st August. Rather, it should be understood as a process starting in the early 1960s, with converging pressures for economic reforms identified with the name of Ota Šik; with Slovak resentment of Prague centralism (hence Dubček); and with the gradual autonomization of the cultural sphere from the stronghold of ideological censorship, accounting for the golden age of Czech cinema, theatre and literature, which made a significant and lasting impact throughout Europe. The culmination of this three-pronged process brought about political change, starting with the abolition of censorship and the separation of party and state. In other words, 1968 was not just a parlour game for reform-minded party bureaucrats; it was, in Václav Havel’s words, ‘above all a civic renewal, a restoration of human dignity, the trust in the capacities and possibilities of citizens to change society’. [17]

The interpretations of the democratisation process revived several versions of Czech exceptionalism. The first could be summed up as the triumph of Czech and Slovak culture over the communist structure. The emancipation of the cultural sphere from the diktat of censorship, without being subjected to that of the market, produced a powerful cultural background to the political and societal changes associated with 1968. A related version
of the argument concerns the enduring democratic character of Czech political culture. Authors like Gordon Skilling, in his monumental study of the Prague Spring, have argued that the legacies of pre-war democracy, followed by a ‘democratic interlude’ between 1945 and 1948, left values and beliefs, and a political culture in society (and even in large parts of the KSČ membership) which were in conflict with the Stalinist regime. These eventually came to a head in the 1960s and helped bring about a break with Soviet-type communism. [18]

The third and possibly most interesting debate about the meaning of 1968 opposed two leading Czech intellectuals – Milan Kundera and Václav Havel – a debate that is worth re-reading half a century later. [19] Kundera’s assertion that the reformist project could survive the invasion were mercilessly dismissed by Havel as sheer delusion. But the meaning of Spring 1968 is worth revisiting.

For Kundera, the Prague Spring was of significance to Europe as a whole was because, beyond the Stalinism of the East and the capitalism of the West, it tried to combine socialism with democracy. Neither a mere remake of the ‘third way’ nor a blueprint for a radiant future, the Czechoslovak heresy was crushed. But the far-reaching significance of the project for the future of the European Left remains. Havel’s take, in contrast, was more sober: restoring basic freedoms was no doubt wonderful, but in most civilized European countries something that was considered ‘normal’. For some thirty years, most Czechs preferred Havel’s lucid realism to Kundera’s messianic vision for. Yet today, with communism long dead and western ‘normalcy’ in crisis, Kundera’s plea for a ‘Czechoslovak possibility’ (Ceskoslovenska moznost) acquires new resonance.

Another way to highlight the European dimension of the Prague Spring is to interpret it through the prism of the rebellions which in 1968 shook the political establishments throughout the continent. There was May ‘68 in France, the Polish events of March 1968, Berlin, Belgrade. The common denominator of these movements was the search for alternative models of society with contrasting, confusing and often contradictory references to socialism: from self-management in the workplace, to the Christian-Marxist dialogue, or discussions about the impact of science and technology on the evolution of modern societies East and West. And there were not insignificant Czech contributions to all of the above. For example, Karel Kosík’s Marxist humanism (influenced by Patočka’s phenomenology) and a civilizational pessimism, which focused on the dehumanizing role of science and technology; or, on the contrary, Radovan Richta’s civilizational optimism about a ‘scientific and technical revolution’. [20]The former proved incompatible with the ‘normalization’ of the 1970s, while the latter’s faith in the progress of science blended in easily. Both were the most internationally influential Czech thinkers of the late Sixties, and both were part of what Jan Patočka had in mind in when attempting to frame the Prague Spring reforms in a European context, calling for a dialogue between intellectuals East and West. Patočka’s contribution was a piece entitled ‘Intelligence and opposition’ and a lecture given in spring 1968 in Germany, in which he stated that ‘the position of intellectuals in the East is better because they do not consider basic democratic rights as a mere means towards an end, but an end in itself’. [21]

That indeed proved to be the main contrast between 1968 in Prague (or Warsaw) and Paris (or Berlin). To be sure, there is a whole aspect of 1968 which can be interpreted mainly in terms of generations. The Prague Spring indeed had youth, particularly the
student movement that was its radical wing, but its driving force was the previous
generation, which had experienced (i.e. supported or had been on the receiving end of)
1945/1948 and its aftermath. A. J. Liehm elaborated on this concept of political
generations in 1968 in the introduction to a splendid volume of his interviews with the
leading intellectual figures of 1968; it is among the best guides to the politics of culture
of the Prague Spring. [22] Many – by no means all – among those who were entering
adulthood just after the war and had backed the Communist takeover in 1948 and found
themselves frustrated and disappointed with what was a revolution from above, and
helped in the 1960s to bring about a revolution from below which culminated in 1968.
[23]

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

Paris’s May ’68 was an explosion of revolutionary lyricism. The Prague Spring was
the explosion of post-revolutionary scepticism ... May ’68 was a radical uprising
whereas what had, for many a long year, been leading towards the explosion of
the Prague Spring was a popular revolt by moderates. [24]

While western radicals looked to the Third World, European identity was part of ’68 in
Prague. Again, in Kundera’s words:

Paris in May ’68 challenged the basis of what is called European culture and its
traditional values. The Prague Spring was a passionate defence of the European
cultural tradition in the widest and most tolerant sense of the term (a defence of
Christianity just as much as of modern art – both rejected by those in power). We
all struggled for the right to maintain that tradition that had been threatened by
the anti-western messianism of Russian totalitarianism.

However, the contrast highlighted here should not cause us to forget the intellectually
and politically important convergence between the western ’68ers who, in the following
decade, abandoned Marxism and became anti-totalitarian liberals of different shades and
post-68 Czech dissidents around common issues concerning human rights, civil society
and overcoming the partition of Europe.

Finally, there is another dimension of the Prague Spring of 1968 as the ‘supreme stage’
of reformism in the Soviet bloc and its implications for the divided Europe. Zdeněk
Mlynář, one of the architects of the political reforms and in 1968 the youngest member of
the politburo, described how Brezhnev and the Soviet leadership explained to Dubček
and his colleagues the reasons for the invasion:

It is precisely because the territorial results of the last war are untouchable to us
that we had to intervene in Czechoslovakia. The West will not move, so, what do
you think will be done on your behalf? Comrades Tito, Ceauşescu, Berlinguer, will
make speeches. Well, what of it? You are counting on the Communist movement
That part is familiar enough. Indeed, Tito and the Eurocommunists in the West protested and claimed that they were continuing the legacy of the Prague Spring, as a way to enhance their democratic credentials. However, the real legacy returned with a vengeance twenty years later. Gorbachev, Mlynář’s friend and former roommate during their student days, became leader of the Soviet Communist Party and sought inspiration for his perestroika in the Prague Spring of 1968. Asked about the difference between his reforms and those of Dubček, the spokesman for Gorbachev replied simply: ‘19 years’.

That was not good enough to rehabilitate ‘socialism with a human face’ in the eyes of sceptical Czechs and Slovaks twenty years on. But it did matter for what was unfolding in Moscow and its relationship to its dependencies. Jiří Dienstbier, a prominent Czech journalist in 1968, became minister of foreign affairs in December 1989. At his first meeting with Gorbachev, he referred to the hopes of 1968 crushed by Moscow. To which Gorbachev replied: ‘We thought that we had strangled the Prague Spring while in reality we had strangled ourselves.’

The Prague Spring was seen as a chance to save the system. Its crushing thus prevented reform at the very centre, and accounts for its intractable crisis. In other words: the 1968 invasion, preventing reform in Czechoslovakia, prepared the ground for the unravelling of the Soviet system. To be sure, there is tough competition for the title of ‘who contributed most to the demise of the Soviet empire’. The Hungarians point to the revolution of 1956, the Poles see Solidarity in 1980. The contribution of the Prague Spring, despite being crushed violently, should not be underestimated.

**1989: Continuation of 1968 or 1918?**

The ‘velvet revolution’ counts among the fateful eights of the country’s history; circumstances and Gorbachev’s procrastination probably account for the minor delay. Although it was understood as the undoing of the legacy of the communist takeover of 1948, it was not framed as a continuation of the ‘interrupted revolution’ of 1968. To be sure, some sidelined ‘68ers and a number of western observers were inclined to stress that continuity. But the main protagonists of 1989 in Prague were eager to distance themselves from the ‘illusions of 1968’. The aim was no longer the democratization of socialism, but simply democracy. Instead of searching for a ‘third way’ between capitalism and Soviet-style socialism, the goal was the introduction of markets without adjectives: ‘the third way leads to the Third World’ said Václav Klaus, a promoter of radical free-market reforms. And, translated into foreign policy terms, the ‘return to Europe’ was no longer about extending the space for manoeuvre between East and West, but about joining western (‘Euro-Atlantic’) institutions as quickly as possible. Václav Havel, rather than Alexander Dubček, became the president and the embodiment of these goals.

The reasons are understandable: it was not easy in 1989 to identify with a project that failed tragically and was followed by twenty years of relentless ‘normalization’. All one can add is that 1968 was the last Czech attempt to propose not a blueprint but a vision (albeit later deemed utopian or inconsistent) that transcended the country and concerned
Europe as a whole. In contrast, 1989 was the first revolution not to propose a new social project. A revolution without violence and utopias, but also without a new idea. It was, as historian François Furet called it, a ‘revolution-restoration’; or, as Jürgen Habermas called it, a ‘Nachholende Revolution’ (‘revolution to catch up’). The aim was to restore national and popular sovereignty, the rule of law, private property and imitate the western model. For that reason, the ‘Velvet Revolution’ of 1989 has been considered in Prague since the 1990s as an ‘anti-1968’; today the commemorations concern the tragedy of the invasion of August 1968 rather than the hopes and aspirations of the Spring.

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

Clearly, the only eight 1988/89 could reconnect with, symbolically and politically, was 1918. And that was indeed the version most Czechs identified with. Yet, as soon as sovereignty and democracy were restored, it was Czechoslovak statehood that was put into question. To be sure, the Czecho-Slovak divorce, unlike the Yugoslav break-up, was a ‘velvet’ one; but it challenged the thesis about continuity with 1918. Following Ernest Gellner, the Prague-born specialist on nationalism, one can of course argue that it was a bad marriage anyway: size does not matter, Czechoslovakia was a mere phase in the formation of nation-states. [27] After multinational empires came nation-states that were not. The war, the Holocaust, the expulsion of the Sudeten Germans brought a homogenization of Central European states, including Czechoslovakia, now turned into Czechia. Alone at last! There are multiple reasons for the break-up, not least the rise of Slovak national assertiveness and nationalism, exploited by the Slovak political elites led by Vladimír Mečiar. But there is also one conclusion to be reflected upon in Prague: Czech political elites in the twentieth century proved unable to sustain a state that would transcend Czech ethnicity.

Like Masaryk in 1918, Václav Havel was convinced that Czech statehood and democracy are inseparable, and that they have a meaning precisely if they are able to transcend the ethnic definition of the nation. Havel, who became Czech president in January 1993, was proud to have imposed such a formulation in the Czech Constitution: ‘We, citizens living in Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia...’ But Havel’s civic principle was introduced at the very moment when it had clearly failed with the break-up of Czechoslovakia.

Masaryk and Havel were outsiders in Czech politics who became the embodiment of statehood in exceptional circumstances. Both stood for a civic concept of the nation which was undermined (or simply rejected) during their term in office. That obviously casts a shadow on the continuity thesis between 1918 and 1989 and has implications for the understanding of the recent attitudes of Czech politicians and the broader public to the migrant crisis or, more generally, the European project.

The peaceful divorce of Czecho-Slovakia occurred simultaneously with the violent break-up of Yugoslavia. Both states created in 1918 tried unsuccessfully to create a political nation (Czechoslovak, Yugoslav); both introduced federalism as a means to cope with diversity under communist rule; and both faced the dissolution of the state in the
aftermath of collapse of the ancien régime. Their fate should not be seen as an East European, post-communist aberration, but as part of the post-1989 European trend, as the cases of Scotland or Catalonia (to mention the most obvious cases) demonstrate. In other words, 1989 was not just the end of Yalta, i.e. of the division of Europe; it was also the end of Versailles, i.e. the map of ‘New Europe’ associated with Masaryk’s name at the end of World War I.

The fateful eights are thus an invitation to reflect on the main turning points of twentieth-century European history. Each generation returns to them in search of answers about ‘our present crisis’, as Masaryk put it in 1894 and Karel Kosík again in 1968. How far back should one go back to understand our present predicament. And who is responsible? Who is ‘guilty’?

Each of the eights examined here has a tragic or problematic outcome and has different culprits. In 1968, Brezhnev and Soviet tanks crushed the hopes of the Prague Spring. In 1948, Gottwald and the Czechoslovak communists imposed their dictatorship. In 1938, it was Hitler’s ‘Drang nach Osten’ and the betrayal by Czechoslovakia’s western allies that were guilty. Or should one question the very foundation in 1918, and thus the capacity to sustain a democratic nation-state in a geopolitical space between Germany and Russia? According to which eight one considers to be decisive or fateful, one comes up against a different ‘culprit’ and, more importantly, a different reading of twentieth-century Czechoslovak history. One’s choice of fateful eight goes some way to defining who one is.

This article was first presented as a Keynote Lecture for the conference Momentous 8 at the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM) in Vienna. The conference was conceptualized by Ludger Hagedorn with the help of a grant by the Czech Foreign Ministry.

Footnotes

1. For a Slovak perspective on the major turning points of the twentieth century, see: Rudolf Chmel (ed.), Slovenska oazka v 20 storoci, Bratislava 1997.


4. Pavel Baran and Petr Drulak (eds.) Cesko na ceste, Academia, 2017, with contributions by historians such as Jan Kren and Jaroslav Panek, sociologists such as Václv Belohradsky, and jurists such as Veronika Bilkova and Petr Pithart.


was Ernest Denis.


11. Masaryk, as already mentioned, noted that the word ‘demokraticky’ se ‘uzivalo ve smyslu lidovosti’ and Eva Hartmann-Hahn even suggests that ‘people’s democracy’ was very much part of Czech political culture since the late nineteenth century.


13. Jan Tesař, *Mnichovsky komplex*, Prague 2000. The book draws on articles published in *Dejiny a Soucasnost* in 1969 (the parallels concerning occupation and collaboration were as obvious to readers then as they are now).


20. 1968 was the year Karel Kosik’s *Dialectic of the Concrete* (*Dialektika konkrétního*) and Radovan Richta’s *Civilization at the Crossroads* (*Civilizace na rozcesti*) were translated in western Europe.


23. Their radicalism in undoing what they had helped to bring about two decades earlier perplexed non-communists and particularly those belonging to an in-between generational group: cf the samizdat volume *Zivot je vsude, Almanach roku 1956*, Praha, Paseka, 2005 with contributions by Skvorecky, Hrabal, Julis, Kolar, Hirsal, Zabrana, Kubena and a certain Václav Havel.


**Published 27 December 2018**

Original in **English**
First published in **Eurozine**
Downloaded from eurozine.com (https://www.eurozine.com/momentous-eights-czechoslovak-history/)
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