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Czechoslovakia of the fifties and sixties: an introduction

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6 CZECHOSLOVAKIA OF THE FIFTIES AND SIXTIES: AN INTRODUCTION

A father and a son noticed something, so they bend down and find out there is a Colorado potato beetle on the road. This is it – the American bug, the most recent villainous agent of American barbarism... What do the American imperialists want? They want the most dangerous potato pest to destroy our potato industry so that our nutrition and animal husbandry, as well as the industries which depend on them, would soon collapse. (*Československé filmové noviny*)

The above is from a newsreel presented before the main feature film in movie theaters in communist Czechoslovakia. The newsreel *Československé filmové noviny* (The Czechoslovak Film Newspaper) was a weekly source of news from across the world. Usually focusing on news such as the anniversary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia or meeting yearly quotas at the local steel mill earlier than anticipated, the newsreel provided its audience with their regular dose of propaganda. Petr Kopecký notes that while the United States had to slog through the McCarthy era of persecuting everything un-American, the Czechoslovak state-controlled media – and therefore the firm grasp of the Communist Party – painted the country beyond the Atlantic Ocean as an entity devoid of morals (“Czeching the Beat” 97). Political trials were the norm, as the case of Milada Horáková showed³⁸, and those who dared to oppose the government’s policies were often victimized by the regime. One did not even have to actively oppose the Communist regime to be persecuted: as the fate of many Czechoslovak pilots flying in the Royal Air Force during the Second World War showed, just an association with the West could

38 Horáková was a politician who was tried and executed for plotting to overthrow the Communist regime. The charges against her were naturally fabricated.

lead to political persecution. Losing a job or the family flat, or not being able to study at a university were among the minor punishments, as the alternative was imprisonment or even forced labor. And all this was happening under the close supervision of the Soviet Union.

6.1 Art and Socialist Realism

To provide a lasting means of governance, totalitarian regimes must rely on propaganda to create conformity. Therefore, ideology was omnipresent in the everyday life of communist Czechoslovakia, and art was not an exception. While Czechoslovak artists retained their orientation toward the West after the war, in February 1948 the Communists organized a coup and established the government of one party. A few months later, President Klement Gottwald delivered a speech during the Congress of National Culture (Sjezd národní kultury) organized by the Czechoslovak Communist Party. During the speech, he denounced the elitism of bourgeois artists imitating decadent Western art and emphasized the necessity for artists to serve the needs of socialism and build a better future for the whole of humanity (qtd. in Svašek 385–86). Maintained by socialist realist criticism, art serves the people and is judged based on its effectiveness in doing so (Kubíček 127).

Soviet literary criticism had a profound impact on its Czechoslovak counterpart. The theater and literary critic Sergei Machonin, who eventually came to oppose the regime, was among the first to provide a thorough study of Soviet socialist realist literature in postwar Czechoslovakia. His essay then not only elaborates on the model which ultimately became the template for Czechoslovak socialist realism, but also helps explain Gottwald's understanding of art and its position in the public sphere. He explained that one of the defining features of Soviet socialist realism is the combination of a revolutionary sense of being and a romantic idealism, or "revolutionary romanticism" (241). There is no single protagonist in the works of revolutionary romanticism. Instead, the protagonists are all the characters combined into a single collective and even though these characters are parts of a larger whole, they do not lose their own identities as the identities help to shape the whole (244). This leads Machonin to argue that Soviet socialist realism's concept of the protagonist is an improvement over the bourgeois novel, which is flawed not only due to its characters but also due to its lack of ideology; this absence, Machonin adds, then shapes the overall nihilistic form of the bourgeois novel and causes the moral stagnation of the West (258). In contrast, because the art of socialist realism is a direct reflection of socialist reality, it does not suffer from such hindrances (245). This understanding of socialist realism consequently gives a specific purpose to its art: unlike the morally ambiguous novels of the West frequently giving voice to flawed individuals of sometimes de-

fective moral judgment, the socialist writer must take sides by having a clear and specific attitude – the attitude of the progressive ideology of Communism (247). A true artist, Machonin concludes, must lead by example through the incorporation of ideological and formal demands to accurately portray reality for the esthetic needs and requirements of the Soviet people (257, 262). This naturally also was true in Czechoslovakia, as characters in a work of art in the 1950s had to represent the values of a specific social group (Šámal, “Jak se stát” 55).

Naturally, the above also means that art could be reduced to the ideology it contains, and therefore its ideology was to define its quality. This was, however, the point of socialist realism, and was further perfected by numerous Party ideologues. Ladislav Štoll, a true Party hardliner and a leading literary critic of the 1950s, argues that ideology is unavoidable no matter what the author does (“Literatura a kulturní revoluce” 30). Therefore, Štoll explains, it is not a particular ideology itself, but rather the ability of the chosen ideology to “accurately” and “truthfully” depict the objective realities that truly matters. Importantly, the only ideology that in Štoll’s reading offers an objective portrayal of reality and a progressive view of the future is Communism. This had far-reaching consequences not only for journalism or history but also for art, as the presence or absence of *correct* ideology directly impacts the quality of a given work of art. The clearer the artist’s thinking is in terms of ideology, philosophy and politics, Štoll explains, the better his resulting art becomes (31). Finally, Štoll states the following maxim: “The closer an artist is to the people and life, the better he is artistically” (37). Of course, “the people” denote the *right* kind of people – those believing in the values of Socialism and Communism as emblemized by the Soviet Union, values which are, the Party maintains, in direct opposition to the decadence and immorality of the West. As a result, art should not only share the values of the public rather than those of an individual, but also represent the collective struggle of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie, which on a worldwide scale meant embodying the international fight of the People’s Democracies against the capitalist West (Svašek 386).

Using art, and therefore language itself, as a means of propaganda was proposed by Joseph Stalin himself. In his 1950 essay “Concerning Marxism and Linguistics,” Stalin makes it perfectly clear that language is a tool waiting to be used: “[L]anguage has been created precisely in order to serve society as a whole, as a means of intercourse between people, in order to be common to the members of society and constitute the single language of society, serving members of society equally, irrespective of their class status.” Guided by socialist realism, art and language then served to unify the people under a common ideological banner.

Therefore, the philosophy and application of socialist realism puts art under significant constraints. The problem is twofold: it must conform to expectations of the given literary art form, such as expectations regarding characters or plot

development in literature, but it also must fall within Party rhetoric. Propaganda, symbol manipulation, and dissemination of political ideology is inherent to the official art of totalitarian regimes just as it is found in totalitarian governments themselves (Budil 9). In such regimes, language is often reduced to a set of predetermined questions and answers, resulting in a fictional account of reality being hailed as more truthful than reality itself (Kubíček 129). Through such ritualization, language ceases being an open communication tool, resulting in a broken system of codes and symbols.³⁹ By using socialist realism as the artistic standard, the Czechoslovak communist regime suppressed individual thinking and banned many works of art for their supposed ideological flaws (Alan 17). As a result, official art denotes not only the Party's specific concerns, but also connotes its rules and hierarchy through the use of various codes and symbols. The need to represent Party ideology led to specific art forms being considered inadequate and therefore simply banned, which was especially noticeable in painting; as Maruška Svašek notes, the gatekeepers of art deemed all non-figurative styles such as Impressionism or Cubism an affront to reality (388). Since the content and themes are clearly set, the mass culture of totalitarian regimes is then determined directly by the state rather than the audience, which causes many artists to be entirely dependent on the state for their livelihoods (Alan 39). This not only means that artists who wished to continue in their work were forced to further disseminate Party doctrine, but also the definition of appropriate art was in the hands of the Communist cadres and not the people as Gottwald argued (Svašek 386). In other words, for Communist ideologues literature represented “merely another ideological discourse” (Cerce 155). The stale and dogmatic art which resulted from such constraints then leads to a paradoxical situation, as it is the direct opposite of the revolutionary ethos promised by Communism (Lindey 73).

Since language and literary criticism are viewed as tools with specific purposes – to contribute to the improvement of socialist countries – it naturally opposes literary criticism not dedicated to such a task. Jan Mukařovský was formerly one of the leading members of the structuralist Prague Linguistic Circle and thus more than familiar with the structuralist concepts first put forward by Ferdinand de Saussure; however, after the communist takeover of Czechoslovakia in 1948 Mukařovský expressly denounced structuralism and its approach to literature. Mukařovský explains that the reason Marxist literary criticism focuses on the language of literature is relatively simple: by improving literary language literature

39 This interpretation of totalitarian language, however, should not be applied to literature in a completely uncritical manner. Petr Poslední notes that such an interpretation might lead to viewing totalitarian literature of the Stalinist era as pseudo-religious utilitarian texts rather than actual literature and therefore the study objects of cultural sociologists rather than literary critics (37). This kind of approach is in danger of simplifying historical development, thus committing similar reductions as those made by totalitarian regimes (38).

itself can better portray the real and therefore contribute to its reformation (“Ke kritice” 152). Language in this view does not merely follow an ideology, but it is purposefully and carefully examined and reviewed so that it can be used in an even more effective manner to promote socialist ideology. As a result, the view of esthetics is also affected. As Mukařovský writes in his essay “Estetika jazyka” (The Esthetics of Language), esthetic norms presuppose the existence of a consensus among a population as to which esthetic approaches are desirable and which not (71). Since Structuralism was not applied to determine which esthetic norms are the most viable ones for socialist realism and since it did not conform to its esthetic and ideological notions, it was deemed undesirable and unable to serve the needs of the new literature (Brabec 11–12, Jungmann 123).

In other words, the role of the artist in communist Czechoslovakia was firmly controlled by the ideology of socialist realism. As a direct consequence, a large rift between official art and the art that failed or did not wish to meet the requirements was therefore created (Alan 17). Importantly, the Czechoslovak communist regime was so dependent on its symbols and ideologies that there was no mechanism in practice to cope with arising nonconformity. Essentially, Alan argues, a permanent war was waged between the totalitarian power and those artists who chose not to follow the basic doctrines in their art. One such writer who did not subscribe to the notions of Socialist Realism was Josef Škvorecký. His novel *Zbabělci* (*The Cowards*), which was written in the late 1940s but published in 1958, describes the uprising in a small Czechoslovak town during the final days of the Second World War from the point of view of the adolescent Danny. Instead of possessing revolutionary fervor common in Communist narratives, however, Danny views the events unfolding around him with a mix of disinterestedness and irony and joins the end-of-war uprising mostly to impress his platonic interest, which unsurprisingly landed Škvorecký in trouble. While the initial reviews of the novel were lukewarm but not negative, in the early days of 1959 the novel spawned a furor among official critics (Janoušek et al. 17). Focusing on the novel’s failure to follow socialist realist ideology, Štoll was one of the first to denounce the novel:

[The novel] is in its spirit entirely foreign to our beautiful democratic and humanistic literature. It is a thing artistically dishonest, untruthful, and cynical. All of this is not because of the chosen topic, the main protagonist or the first-person narrative, but mainly because of the author’s *ideological standpoint*, that is the *ideological repository*, which is also the cause of the imitative provincialism of the novel’s expressions. (“Literatura” 37)

Jan Nový, another literary critic deriding the novel, was even blunter in his criticism. Škvorecký does not try to portray accurately the historical events covered in the novel, Nový claims. Instead of focusing on the revolutionaries sacrificing their

lives in the uprising against the Germans, Škvorecký directs the novel's narrative on cowardly and narrow-minded teenagers interested in girls and jazz music (46). What especially troubles Nový is not just Škvorecký's failure to offer an alternative to the morally dubious characters, but also the writer's inability to mock these unsavory individuals by disassociating himself from them (48). Instead, Škvorecký seems to agree with the main protagonist's cynicism and nihilism, Nový claims, therefore not providing a sufficient commentary on how to understand the novel's characters.⁴⁰ Eventually, the controversy surrounding the novel led to the tightening of Party rhetoric around literature and literary production, purges in the editorial boards of several literary magazines and the abolishment of others, and censorship of planned and previously approved publications deemed potentially defective (Janoušek et al. 18–21).⁴¹

Škvorecký, naturally, was not the only one who drew the ire of Party's ideologues; the work of Arne Novák was criticized in a similar fashion. Novák, a prominent literary critic during the interwar period, was condemned by the socialist realist critic František Buriánek for his reactionary writing and promotion of individualism (61, 63). As Buriánek further explains, individualism is the cornerstone of bourgeois ideology and the middle class and therefore should not be tolerated. Nevertheless, adherence to Party lines sometimes produced rather bizarre criticism. For instance, Jan Štern, a communist hardliner later disillusioned with the regime's ideology, sees literature as being in the service of history, which is why newly minted authors must face up to the challenge and make sure to describe the emerging Socialism in an accurate manner (7). This position in turn causes Štern to view the most recent poetry collection by Jiří Kolář as flawed, since it does not mention the beginning of the two-year plan for rebuilding the economy (11).⁴² Simply put, the strict rules for artists in the postwar period affected the the-

40 It should be noted, however, that the ambiguousness and anti-ideological outlook also shocked many democratic reviewers in exile (Janoušek et al. 283).

41 The last point should not be underestimated. Starting in 1953, Czechoslovakia adopted the Stalinist model of planned production in literature, which bound the national chain of state-owned bookseller *Knihy* (Book) to purchase books from the state publishing houses not according to actual demand, but to the current importance of the ideology within. Yet this was not the only limitation imposed on the book industry. Other problems stemming from the planned economy of the nation included a lack of quality paper for a given publication (since the production of paper was planned in advance without regard for demand, the available quantity and quantity at a given moment was limited, therefore publishers often obtained the paper in stock rather than the one they needed), decisions of censors to suddenly interfere with a series of books sent to printers (therefore long-term projects such as large encyclopedias of several volumes were often left unfinished), and the poor planning of print-runs based on wildly inaccurate surveys conducted almost one year before the actual publication date (thus many sought-after books barely scratched the surface of their demand, while other books, usually those closely following Party ideology, were simply unsellable) (Janoušek et al. 54–57).

42 Miroslav Kovařík provides one more example of the frequently ludicrous standards of literary criticism: "We were particularly concerned with the Party idiots, who were simply everywhere. One censor asked me if Beethoven was born in East Germany or West Germany" ("Hrabětův svět").

matical and ideological content of art, and a strict adherence to such guidelines frequently revealed the grotesque logic behind socialist realism.

Importantly, the standards of criticism levied against domestic authors were applied to foreign writers as well. In the first decades of Czechoslovak Communism, the decisions whether to publish an American writer or not had little to do with artistic merit but rather with the ideology contained within (Kopecký, “Literary America” 68). Therefore, the writers who were persecuted or blacklisted during the McCarthy era were often among those being published; in addition, many African-American authors portraying racial inequality in the United States were also translated, which allowed the government to spread its message – that the United States is the enemy of freedom and the people – even further (68, 70). However, since all parts of the book industry – from producing the book to reading it – were under the direct control of the state, each foreign publication “had to undergo a radical ideological revision before it was allowed to be published” (Cerce 155). To make sure foreign authors were read in the “proper” way, either an afterword was used to shape the reader’s experience of the text to one condoned by the Party, or the author’s work, as was the case of Langston Hughes, was thoroughly searched for the most fitting texts from the author’s oeuvre and heavily editorialized (Kopecký, “Literary America” 70–71; Kopecký, “Czeching the Beat” 98). Importantly, unlike other American left-wing writers such as Alexander Saxton or Victor J. Jerome, the Beats were never used by the regime for its ideological purpose. Despite their critical tone, the Beats were, Rauvolf argues, simply too anarchistic for communist propaganda (“Prague” 182).

Naturally, not even substantial editorial cuts were able to appropriate all Western art, which in its nature was individualistic and frequently voiced dissent (Lindey 107). However, even then the critics following the Party line knew that such a work of art could be useful, as the resulting critique would comment on what art should *not* be. A template for such an approach is Jaroslav Bouček’s *Trubaduri nenávisti: Studie o současné západní úpadkové literatuře* (Troubadours of Hatred: A Study of the Contemporary Decadent Literature of the West). Written in 1952, the ideological pamphlet heaps abuse not only on Jean-Paul Sartre, Jean Genet, and John Steinbeck, but also on comic book characters such as Superman and Captain Marvel. For Bouček, the decadent intellectuals and writers of the West create a morality which is simply unacceptable to the average person (10). This immorality is then constantly perpetuated in Western art, for example in the “despicable” characters of Steinbeck’s *Cannery Row*, which in turn allows American imperialism to instill in its population “hazardous individualism and terrifying and deadly hatred toward mankind” (20, 35). Following Bouček’s lead, Petr Pujman in his 1960 essay on Nabokov’s *Lolita* writes that the novel’s publication in the West “is a great opportunity ... to recognize the vast difference in the way we understand literature and the way it is understood in the West” (231). Accus-

ing Nabokov of writing a pornographic work and condoning the violence of the novel's protagonist, Pujman admits that even though *Lolita* is a great work on the technical and stylistic level, it ultimately fails on purely moral grounds (232–33). “The moral center” is missing – there is no critique of the protagonist's actions or of the society that created him; instead, the work is an ode to young nymphomaniacs and the middle-aged men that seek them out (233). For Pujman, the novel is simply “excrement in elaborate wrapping” and the fact it enjoys critical and commercial success in the West is telling (233). In other words, while Western literature was to a small degree accessible in Czechoslovakia, the selection was limited, since it still had to abide by the standards of socialist realism. “In the bipolar world of the Cold War era,” Kopecký elaborates, “America became the arch-enemy of the newly formed Soviet Bloc” and since neither of the superpowers wanted to risk an open armed conflict, literature replaced actual armed conflict as one of the many fronts where the ideological warfare between the two sides was fought (“Literary America” 66).

6.2 Changing the Tide

Nevertheless, things were slowly changing during the 1950s. In 1956, Nikita Khrushchev criticized Stalin for abusing his powers and creating a cult of personality. Khrushchev had a far-reaching effect on life in the Eastern Bloc, leading to a thaw in society as the Party was loosening its grip on the everyday lives of its people (Kopecký, “Literary America” 72–73). While this did not stop hardliners such as Štoll from trying to uphold their control over literature during the Škvorecký controversy, in 1961 a second wave of Stalin criticism denounced ideological dogmatism and called for a revision of contemporary practices (Janoušek et al. 23). For instance, because of the liberalization, jazz had become prominent due to its influence on poetry and its effect on Czech writers who had grown up during the Protectorate (Novák 2).⁴³ Information regarding Western literature was scarce, yet it was becoming more and more available due to the diligence of the literary journal *Světová literatura* (World Literature); importantly, other journals soon followed (Vlček 208). These journals played an invaluable role in disseminating Western art amongst Czechoslovaks. For instance, it was *Světová literatura*

43 The importance of tolerating jazz should not be overlooked: jazz was bourgeois music originating from the West, and therefore unacceptable. After all, one of the criticisms aimed at Škvorecký was that the author's alter ego Danny listens to jazz. Similarly, in the 1952 the propaganda movie *Zítva se bude tančit všude* (Tomorrow, People Will Be Dancing Everywhere), the antagonist villainous tendencies and his opposition to the values of socialist Czechoslovakia are clearly defined at the beginning of the film through the art forms he prefers: his apartment is adorned with cubist paintings and he likes listening to jazz.

that first introduced to the public writers such as Henry Miller, Carl Sandburg, and, importantly, several Beat Generation authors including Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Allen Ginsberg (Kopecký, “Literary America” 73). The publication of Western texts was also clearly politically motivated, although this was naturally not disclosed by the editors and translators working in such periodicals. As Škvorecký notes, *Světová literatura* published texts which either could be read in a different – that is anti-communist – manner than the one suggested by the text’s authors or the accompanying critique, or it published texts which were deemed simply unacceptable according to socialist realist standards (qtd. in Quinn 117). In addition, as the 1960s progressed, these journals were broadening their scope and often commented on wider socio-political issues (Janoušek et al. 64). In other words, these journals played a crucial role in spreading Western literature and thus providing an alternative to official art and its ideology. Ultimately, art during the 1950s and 1960s was defined by the power struggle between Stalinist hardliners and more liberal artists and critics, with the latter gaining more and more exposure as the 1960s progressed. (Svašek 383).

While these changes naturally occurred in individual steps and the changes were at first slow, more and more voices were being raised against the dogmatic approach toward literary criticism and art in general. For instance, Ferdinand Peroutka was among several critics who courageously stood up to Štoll and defended Škvorecký’s *The Cowards*. Peroutka was in direct opposition to state-approved criticism by describing the novel as the first fully mature Czechoslovak novel (53). He sees the novel as anti-cultural, anti-societal, selfish, and anarchistic, and the novel’s characters as using harsh language too often; nevertheless, he also argues that it is the most powerful novel of the last twenty years from a strictly literary perspective (53–54). Peroutka then makes an important point: not only does the novel describe characters who are clearly anti-ideological in their refusal to participate in state-regulated life, but the novel also describes the first anti-ideological generation of Czechoslovakia (57–58). All the young generation wants is to be left alone and this wish is shared among youth across the world, Peroutka adds. Such a critique of hardliner Štoll would have been unprecedented in the early 1950s, and this change thus anticipated the wholesale refusal of Štoll’s dogmatic attack on structuralism in 1966 and 1967 (Janoušek et al. 151). These continuing changes in art criticism thus signaled the slow liberalization of Czechoslovak society.

The way the young generation affected public opinion can best be seen in the example of the Majáles festival. The festival’s tradition is essentially built on the political activism of university students and an anti-systematic stance toward the government independent of the period (Svatoš 92). Ever since the Communist takeover in 1948, the organization of the whole festival had been kept under close scrutiny. The Majáles of 1956 was the first time the student festival was held after Khrushchev’s critique of Stalin, therefore it was an important milestone because it

hinted at the increasing erosion of the totalitarian state and rising nonconformity of the young generation; importantly, over 100,000 people came to observe the festivities (Svatoš 93).⁴⁴ Later, the 1965 procession was the first *Majáles* in years directly organized by students, which many of those in attendance used “to express their political views by means of a provocative jape” (Blažek 39). As a result, the student parade accompanying the festival featured many political slogans and prankster-like mottos with double meanings (41).⁴⁵ The regime tried to supervise the festival from a distance; nevertheless, it proved difficult to exercise control over the students. The state supervisors could only stand by and watch as the 150,000 people in attendance cheered students carrying thinly-veiled criticism of the state (Blažek 41).⁴⁶

After observing the festivities, the Party arrived at the consensus that the youth showed abandonment of official traditions and values (Kudrna 10). As Kudrna adds, such a development was partly due to the regime’s inflexible approach toward the students, and Party officials were aware of this issue. Citing the Party’s internal analysis of the 1965 *Majáles*, Kudrna points out that the regime had failed to provide an alternative to young people when faced with their opposition to traditional values (10). Furthermore, the report itself acknowledged that the regime is inflexible in adapting recent cultural trends from the West for its own purposes, and especially when it comes to the sudden emergence of rock and roll music.

However, freedoms were not guaranteed despite the gradual liberalization process. For instance, the *Majáles* of the following year was yet again under strict supervision, and all the signs and slogans had to be pre-approved in order to be featured in the parade (Svatoš 100). Furthermore, the regime was faced with another threat – that of adolescent men sporting long hair. Often wearing jeans, the symbol of the decadent West, and listening to rock music, men with long hair were dubbed “*vlasatci*” or “*máničky*” (“long-haired ones”) and in 1966 became the largest public enemy to the socialist regime (Kudrna 12). Their nonconformist look connoted otherness and a sense of individualism and therefore it had to be harshly punished – men with long hair were not only mocked by the state-controlled media, but they were also exposed to continuous discrimination which, while technically illegal, was only encouraged by the state (Kudrna and Čuñas,

44 The officials organizing the 1956 festival were surprised by the degree of nonconformity of the students as well as the criticism levied toward the state through the use of various slogans or chants; as a result, the Party rather than the students became the organizers of *Majáles* from then on. Nevertheless, this move was not successful in curbing the individualism of the students, as illegal gatherings were taking place in the early 1960s around Petřín. Since attendance at these events increased each year despite systematic repressions, the regime was forced to relent and allow an official celebration to avoid further public disturbances. For more information, see Svatoš 93–98.

45 The slogans chanted by the students included “Soviet hermit, our model,” “Long live the enemies of students” or “We greet the Public Security – and the non-public” (Blažek 41).

46 The official May Day parade was attended by 400,000 people (Blažek 41).

“Zásah” 27–28).⁴⁷ This systematic harassment would frequently lead to the police forcibly taking the youth to the nearest police station, where their hair was cut against their will. Adding insult to injury, they also had to pay for the procedure (Kurdna 12–16).

6.3 The Beat Generation and Communist Czechoslovakia

Despite such harassment, the process of liberalization was inevitable: rather than being the result of isolated and sudden incidents, the changes in the general population and especially among students were gradual and had been gaining momentum for several years, as the Party itself acknowledged (Kurdna 3). While it is difficult to highlight a single event from the gradual process of liberalization leading toward the Prague Spring, one such event must be analyzed in more detail: Allen Ginsberg becoming the King of May during the 1965 Majáles festival.

Ginsberg visited Czechoslovakia twice in 1965. His first arrival in Prague, on February 18, was purely coincidental. Before Prague he had stayed in Cuba; however, after protesting the treatment of Cuban homosexuals, he was expelled from Cuba and put on the first flight out of the island. As luck would have it, the flight was a Czechoslovak Airliner on its regular flight from Havana to Prague (Rauvolf, “Prague” 185). Since a few of his poems had been published in magazines and a collection of his poems was in the works, Ginsberg’s contacts were able to make him the official guest of the Union of Czechoslovak Writers; as a result, Ginsberg even received pay for the magazine publications, which allowed him to stay in the capital for several weeks.⁴⁸ Ginsberg’s stay was written about in several of the nation’s newspapers and the poet became a mainstay of Prague’s Bohemian circles. On 19 March 1965 Ginsberg left Czechoslovakia for Moscow, where he stayed for several weeks. Finally, on 29 April 1965 Ginsberg returned to Prague after a short stay in Poland.

Ginsberg did not intend to stay for long; however, as he was waiting for his plane to New York, Ginsberg was asked to participate in the King of May elections of the Majáles festival by none other than Škvorecký who had to turn down the offer of the student organizers because he had fallen ill (Blažek 40). Ginsberg was

47 As Kudrna and Čuňas note, long-haired youth was frequently barred from public transport or denied service. In addition, women sometimes had to undergo humiliating STI examinations (28–29).

48 While Rauvolf notes that the reason Cuban authorities put him on the flight to Prague is “a mystery,” Blažek explains that the answer is rather simple: there were no direct flights to the United States due to the blockade, therefore he was flown to a city where he could change flights to New York (“Prague” 1985; 35). It should also be noted that the two acquaintances Ginsberg contacted upon his arrival and who helped him obtain the official invitation from the Union were Jan Zábřana, who had been the first to introduce Ginsberg to Czechoslovak audiences, and Josef Škvorecký, the author of the controversial *The Cowards* and contributor to various literary magazines including *Světová literatura*.

first displayed on a truck bed in the procession, then, after chanting Buddhist mantras to thousands of people, was elected the King of May. As Blažek explains, the reason the communist regime let the King of May happen was their desire to avoid having to break apart unofficial student celebrations, as doing so was not only costly, but was frequently reported by Western radio stations, thus tarnishing the country's image abroad (39). However, Ginsberg's election became a huge phenomenon and the poet himself was deemed so influential that the authorities decided to deport him with the help of clandestine practices by the Czechoslovak secret police; the official explanation for his deportation was the corruption of youth (46). The state-run newspapers then used this accusation, backed by excerpts from his diary discussing homosexuality, to smear the poet as well as the translators and writers who introduced Ginsberg to the students.⁴⁹ Even though Ginsberg was deported, the importance of his election to be the King of May should not be underestimated. As Andrew Lass argues, the election was an important symbol and a political statement, because it gave people the ability to actually choose ("Allen Ginsberg" 44).⁵⁰ Furthermore, Ginsberg was active both before and after the election, as he visited various theaters, cafés and wine bars, and met with Czech writers, poets, and translators. While some of these meetings were of rather a personal character, others, such as Ginsberg discussing with students at student dormitories on the night of the election, were clearly political; importantly, all these activities were carefully monitored and subsequently documented by the secret police (Svatoš 99).

Despite the regime's best efforts to discredit and therefore silence Ginsberg, the damage had been done, as the poet and other members of the Beat Generation had already made a profound influence on Czechoslovak cultural life in the sixties. The emergence of rock music, alternative theater, improvisation performances, or poetry readings – all these were influenced by the Beats (Rauwolf, "Beat po česku" 22). Beat poems by Ginsberg or Ferlinghetti were not only presented on national radio or television, but also recited at various cafés and wine bars (Kopecký, "Czeching the Beat" 99). One such place was the Viola café in Prague, which under its founder Jiří Ostermann frequently hosted Beat poetry recitals and where the poets Inka Machulková, Václav Hrabě and Vladimíra Čerepková, accompanied by jazz music, read their Beat-influenced poetry (Novák 4); importantly, these three poets, together with Milan Koch, are often referred to as the Czechoslovak Beat poets (Rauwolf, "Beat po česku" 24). Miroslav Kovařík, the founder of the Docela malé divadlo theater (A Rather Small Theater) in the

49 See Vodrážka and Lass for the transcript of the internal memo of the secret police regarding Ginsberg.

50 Interestingly, Andrew Lass, who was present during the elections, suggests that someone from the organizers decided that Ginsberg should win the popular vote by controlling the voting machine ("Allen Ginsberg" 43–44).

city of Litvínov, was another person responsible for the popularity of the Beats. Not only was he among the first to perform Kerouac's and Ginsberg's poetry, but the Beats were also regularly featured in his Litvínov theater. The Beat Generation was through its very existence – as only a limited number of poems were available – an important catalyst for Czechoslovak poetry, because they represented a certain mode of writing which was quickly adopted by the country's poets (Dvorský 131–32). Outside of poetry, the influence of the Beats was felt among the various emerging subcultures. For instance, the translation of Ginsberg's *Howl* was released precisely at the time when the hippie subculture was at the height of its popularity in Czechoslovakia (Vlček 208). Rauwolf also argues that the Beats significantly helped popularize hitchhiking in the early 1960s (Rauwolf, "Prague" 184). Overall, the sixties signified the country's return to Europe, Miroslav Kovařík clarifies, and the Beats played a substantial part in this liberalization process ("U kávy").

Consequently, the emerging subcultures in the second half of the 1960s, which would later form the loosely-organized underground movement of the 1970s, were greatly affected by Ginsberg's deportation, as it fueled rather than extinguished the growing dissent in Czechoslovak society (Machovec, "Avantgarda" 171).⁵¹ Ginsberg's popularity thus signified a general trend of Czechoslovak society – the movement toward liberalization at the expense of the regime's diminishing power. This trend soon culminated in the Prague Spring, a period of liberalization and reformation starting in early 1968. Under the leadership of the reformist Alexander Dubček, the newly elected First Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, the Party proposed reforms toward a more democratic socialism under a program later known as "Socialism with a human face." This program planned steady progress toward democratization and political liberalization, ultimately leading to the official abolishment of censorship. Suddenly, Czechoslovaks were able to enjoy domestic and foreign art unbridled by censorship and discuss politics openly. Nevertheless, these provisions were not enough, according to some critics. In June 1968 Ludvík Vaculík published "Dva tisíce slov" ("Two Thousand Words"), a manifesto denouncing the involvement of many of the hardline Party members in the reforms. The manifesto argues that the reforms are in the hands of the wrong people – those not only unsuited for such a role, but also directly responsible for the dehumanizing effect of the regime's policies leading to a loss of mutual trust and interest in politics (460–61). Importantly, Vaculík accuses Party members of essentially becoming the new ruling class and subsequently encourages the public to pressure hardline Communists through demonstrations,

51 The term "underground" generally refers to a number of artists, mostly poets and musicians, around the poet Ivan Martin "Magor" Jirous and the band The Plastic People of the Universe. These artists programmatically refused to take part in the establishment of the normalization period and usually shared certain esthetic features; see Machovec "Podzemí a underground" for more information.

strikes or public critiques to step down from office (461, 464). Dubček and others, however, denounced the manifesto for being too radical and even if they had not, it would not have mattered. On the night of August 21 of the same year, the armies of five Warsaw Pact countries invaded Czechoslovakia, thus stopping all the reforms. One year later, Gustav Husák replaced Dubček as the first secretary and started a long period of normalization – the return of the status quo and the rule of the Party.

6.4 The Normalized Czechoslovakia

The effects of normalization on everyday life and entertainment were enormous; one of them was the significant purge in the books available on the market. Unlike the 1950s, the sixties experienced a boom in foreign literature and one could barely read all the titles available: works by writers such as Graham Greene, Franz Kafka, Ernest Hemingway, or Samuel Beckett, but also philosophers including Theodor W. Adorno, Friedrich Nietzsche, or Sigmund Freud could suddenly be purchased on the quickly proliferating book market (Měšřan 67–69). This availability, however, was not limited to older titles. Many of the foreign releases were translated into Czech a relatively short time after being published, which was made possible by the diligence and hard work of numerous translators; the 1970s and 1980s, in contrast, went back to the old model of government supervision and limited availability (70). In addition, almost all literary magazines and journals, many of which were established (and sometimes even re-established after previous purges) in the more liberal sixties, were simply banned; only two periodicals, the closely supervised *Literární měsíčník* and *Tvorba*, were available (Kubíček 133–34). Reading thus suffered on numerous fronts.

Naturally, the smaller number of existing periodicals made it easier for the regime to oversee the content, thus discarding the pluralism of the sixties. The best example of the radical shift back to the “norm” of the communist regime is the first issue of the 1971 *Světová literatura*. The issue not only featured a completely new editorial board, but also included a short leading article that addressed the changes in the magazine: the task of the journal is to use “a socialist viewpoint in order to describe the most important progressive trends and writers in world literature in as complete and accurate manner as possible” (2). Importantly, the article also stated that the previous editorial board had failed to fully establish the journal as “supporting the noblest cause of mankind – socialist humanism.” “Accuracy,” “truthfulness” and “objectivity” are more important than relativistic objectivism not following any principles, the text further claims. Decrying many of the works of Western writers as a short-term fad, the new editorial board closes the essay by proclaiming the full commitment of themselves and the journal to the

values of socialist society. As a consequence, the amount of space in the literary magazine dedicated to American literature – and Western literature in general – was extremely limited from then on (Semínová). Unsurprisingly, among the editorial board was none other than Ladislav Štoll.

At the Czechoslovak Communist Party plenum a month after the Warsaw Pact invasion, a resolution prepared by Moscow was read that bluntly defined the purpose of the government as controlling the media and therefore shaping the ideas and opinions of its people: “The press, radio, and television are first of all the instruments for carrying into life the policies of the Party and state” (Bren 29). The media again were an instrument of the official ideology and therefore any act not approved by the state was automatically considered to be against it. However, the social shift of the sixties was irreversible, and the regime had no choice but to adapt and change its tactics. Milan Jungmann notes that the legacy of Ladislav Štoll was simply too impractical during the normalization period: the people who experienced the liberalization of the regime as well as the youth who rose against the preceding generations and their values would not be swayed by such a heavy-handed approach (124). As a consequence, the government chose a slightly less restrictive approach to its citizens, which resulted in a slightly more liberal yet still prohibitive regime. In order to pacify its citizens, the regime gave them more consumer choices in the market than before. Most people were therefore relatively free in their domestic spheres, especially when compared with the earlier decades; however, this was true only as long as they did not wish to interfere with the regime’s governance in any way, whether by focusing on human rights or free speech, or by a simple desire to experience Western culture.

This ideological shift – or rather a change in application of ideology – was naturally reflected in state-sponsored culture. Long gone were the times of socialist realist movies such as *Anna proletárka* (*Anna the Proletarian*) in which the main antagonists were the cartoony capitalist factory-owners who exploited the workers. Instead, the antagonists of the normalization period were often operating from within the government structure. For instance, the television series *Okres na severu* (*The District Up North*) centers on Josef Pláteník, a regional secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, and in one of the episodes Pláteník exposes a communist official for taking bribes and using public funds for personal gain; corruption and dishonest comrades, the show claims, are some of the factors inhibiting economic development and therefore the well-being of the people (“Případ”). Therefore, the regime avoided explicit authoritarian messages in favor of a slightly more nuanced way of presenting the same ideology to the public.

A significant number of citizens seemed to agree that some consumer freedom was still better than none and the regime was able to retain its control over the country’s political life as a consequence. However, such a system of governance – showing its citizens a mirage of personal freedoms while keeping them in check

through the ever-present ideology – is arguably more oppressive than a traditional dictatorship controlling the biopower of its population in an explicit manner. In his seminal essay “The Power of the Powerless,” Václav Havel dubs the post-1968 government “post-totalitarianism” and argues that its complex structure and intricate dissemination of ideology resembles an organized religion rather than a means of governance (129). Post-totalitarianism is omnipresent in Czechoslovakia, yet it handles its subjects while wearing “its ideological gloves” rather than with brute force, which then in an Orwellian fashion twists the daily dehumanization into virtues (135–36). Ultimately, post-totalitarianism represents a nihilistic stance toward the truth itself:

Because the regime is captive to its own lies, it must falsify everything. It falsifies the past. It falsifies the present, and it falsifies the future. . . . As the interpretation of reality by the power structure, ideology is always subordinated ultimately to the interests of the structure. Therefore, it has a natural tendency to disengage itself from reality, to create a world of appearances, to become ritual. (136–37)

For Havel, life in Czechoslovakia had to be lived in constant defiance of reality. Ultimately, Czechoslovak society after 1968 essentially returned to the conformity and authoritarian governance of the 1950s, a situation that lasted until 1989.