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## The reception in Czechoslovakia

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## 7 THE RECEPTION IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA

The first public mention of the Beats is most likely a short text in *Literární noviny* (Literary Gazette) published on 2 May 1958. The anonymous text provides a very brief description of the events leading to the trial of *Howl and Other Poems* by explaining that the publication was seized because it was deemed pornographic and Ferlinghetti was jailed for trying to sell such a pornographic work (“A jak to dopadlo”). The article then ends in a somewhat sardonic tone: “Everyone who knows American ‘men’s magazines’ will be quite surprised by such news.” The article takes a jab at the “moral bankruptcy” of the West, which on the one hand bans poets from freely expressing their thoughts, yet on the other allows pornographic magazines such as *Playboy* to flourish. Apart from being the first mention of the Beats, the article is important for another reason. While *Howl and Other Poems* was ruled not obscene by Judge Horn on 3 October 1957, the text does not even mention the verdict despite being written seven months later. Whether this omission was intentional or not, it shows that news regarding Western art was mostly unavailable to the public.

Since Western literature also had to undergo careful revision in order to be printed, the first thorough analysis of the Beats, Igor Hájek’s “Americká bohéma” (The Bohemians of America), was a truly landmark text not only in terms of the Beat Generation and their readership in Czechoslovakia, but also in the wider context of the availability of Western art as a whole. In other words, the study not only promoted the Beats among Czechoslovaks, but also showcased them as important representatives of Western literature in general. As a consequence, the Beats’ initial position in Czechoslovakia was significantly different from that in their home country: they lacked the aura of controversy omnipresent in the United States, which only worked for their benefit.

Hájek and Jan Zábřana, another translator of Beat works, thus played a crucial role in popularizing Western literature. Their roles in making Beat Generation texts available to Czechoslovaks cannot be understated; as Kopecký points out, the Beats achieved the status of “poetic celebrities” due to the public exposure provided by the two translators (“Czeching the Beat,” 99). Writing for *Světová literatura*, they both also knew that they had to be extremely careful when dealing with Western literature and especially potentially explosive artists like the Beats: after all, Josef Škvorecký worked as the deputy editor-in-chief of *Světová literatura*, and he lost his job after the controversy surrounding *The Cowards*. Therefore, they tried to avoid the censors’ gaze by packaging the Beats in socialist realist terminology. Yet, as the 1960s progressed, their reliance on socialist realism loosened, and their critique became substantially more direct. Their various texts on the Beats, such as essays, introductions, or afterwords, thus not only document the changing representation of the Beats during the period, but also the changes that Czechoslovak literary criticism as a whole was undergoing. The Beat Generation, in transition from an overtly ideological reading to a more formalist one, and the liberalization of Czechoslovak society in the 1960s are thus firmly intertwined.

### 7.1 Placating the Censors - The Early Critiques of Jan Zábřana and Igor Hájek

Written in 1959, Hájek’s “Americká bohéma” is a truly comprehensive study and the first of its kind: its twenty-five pages contain a vast amount of biographical information on the Beats and several excerpts from their work, while Hájek’s critical analysis is interspersed throughout the text. The essay starts by mentioning the *Howl* trial and its outcome on the publicity of the Beat Generation, then it continues by discussing the Beats, namely Ginsberg, Kerouac and John Clellon Holmes, and provides excerpts from their works. In addition, Hájek also briefly discusses the social and cultural background of the Beats such as the effects of McCarthyism, the threat of the atom bomb, or the emerging executive culture and the corresponding conformism (211–12).

On the surface, Hájek’s reading does not hide the influence of its Štollian focus on ideology – the clear-cut difference between good and evil, the communist and the capitalist (Brabec 17). It is therefore unsurprising that the essay begins with a critique of American society and its artists: the United States is the matrix of “heartless, anti-human, mechanized” society which exploits the masses and which, as Štoll’s concept of art enforcing social change states, should be the target of contemporary artists (208). Nevertheless, most contemporary American artists, Hájek continues, are writing either conformist fiction or stylistically excellent yet completely amoral novels (212–14). Consequently, these artists not

only fail to discuss the realities of their countries, but ultimately also fail to be true artists.

However, the Beats do not fall into this category. The ability to critique Western society is, in Hájek's reading, the most important aspect of the Beat Generation, and they are the only current American writers who dare to face and criticize the dangers of consumerism, conformism, and Capitalism. Starting with Ginsberg, Hájek argues that while "Howl" is by no means a pleasant work of poetry, it is by no means a "phantasmagoric creation of a mad Bohemian" (208). On the contrary, Hájek argues that the agonizing imagery of the poem is a manifestation of a pain coming from within a person sensitive to their surroundings and it is this pain which is often used as a vehicle for criticism. *Howl*, even though it is rather naturalistic, thus depicts "a terrifying and apocalyptic vision of the emotional upbringing in the USA," while the poem "America" resembles in its tone and demands for social justice the works by progressive leftist poets (208, 210). In addition, instances of good-natured humor, poetic descriptions of town and countryside, and sympathies toward ordinary people are among the successes of Kerouac's *On the Road* (219). The ability of the Beats to create a new esthetic – an esthetic focusing on the oppressor and the oppressed, on everyday experiences and honest emotions – is what accentuates their writing and makes it important for the public. In Hájek's reading, ordinary Americans, pummeled by a heavy dose of propaganda about the country's apparent successes, became too numb and blind to important social struggles and the Beats are seemingly the only ones who can wake them up (227). The Beats are then heralds of the fall of capitalism in their own country.

The above being said, since a Štollian reading informs Hájek's critique, the Beats – being Western artists – had to possess certain flaws, namely a lack of political awareness and an inability to utilize their critique in a direct mechanism of change. For instance, while Hájek claims that Ginsberg's exceptional sensitivity allows him to notice what most of his nation tends to ignore, the poet is able to present only a bleak and nihilistic outlook rather than a solution to the injustices of the world (210). Similarly, the incessant drive of *On the Road*'s characters toward new experiences and encounters reveals the shallowness of their "hip" philosophy because, Hájek argues, this leads to their all-encompassing nature which is effectively unable to distinguish the more important aspects of life from those deserving less attention (219). Their move outside society is mostly an "inner emigration from American conformism," Hájek further clarifies, and their decision not to privilege some experiences over others is a hindrance rather than a blessing, as it robs the novel's characters of order and purpose (219). In other words, the protest of the Beats is mainly defined by negation rather than by offering possible alternatives to the status quo they criticize.

The lack of vision is precisely the reason why Hájek chastises Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums*. While the critic hails the novel for offering the most straightfor-

ward commentary on freedom in the United States among Kerouac's work, to the novel's detriment it is an individualistic rather than collective freedom that Kerouac strives for (220). Despite his sensitivity to the constraints of 1950s America, Kerouac is unable to envision a functioning society and therefore cannot reform it; his only refuge is sleeping under a clear night sky. By wanting to be free from the society, Hájek explains, Kerouac also wants to be free from the need to change it. Ultimately, the biggest flaw of the Beats is then their refusal of progressive politics in favor of individual bohemianism. In Hájek's reading, their flight from American suburbia and conformism ignores the class struggle that informs the very things they oppose, and because the world of American capitalism with its omnipresent threat of nuclear war is the only world they know, they are unaware of other, positive approaches in which the masses are the makers of their own futures and therefore offer only bleak visions of the world (215, 227). Despite stemming from a completely different understanding of art and the role artists have in society, Hájek's critique of the Beats echoes the same arguments made by some of the New York intellectuals such as Trilling or Podhoretz. Instead of offering an actual solution to the consumerism and conformism they criticize in their work, the Beats decide to simply drop out of society instead of trying to fix it. Nevertheless, Hájek's reasoning behind their deficiencies— that they are unaware of the liberating nature of socialist ideology, which would set them on the right path toward a different society – is definitely a line of thought the New York intellectuals would not make (227, 230).

Even though Hájek claims that the Beats are lacking in terms of their ideological viewpoints, he argues their writing should not be entirely dismissed. While the Beats did not set out to reach a specific goal, their efforts to “stir things up” and “reveal the filth so common in the USA” should be appreciated (211). Hájek also singles out Kerouac's social commitment as one of his strengths (221). After all, the Beats often use the characters of downtrodden, everyday folk not in a derogatory way or as mere symbols of a greater suffering, but rather as an ideal which one should strive for (230). Ultimately, while the Beats are unable to rein their anger into a more positive and truly progressive attitude, they signify the first American youth rebellion that does not criticize only certain aspects of capitalist life but rather life in capitalist America as a whole (228). Therefore, the Beats may be able to join the ranks of truly progressive writers, which is why Czechoslovak readers should not give up on them just yet (330).

Taken at face value, Hájek's essay seems to be a typical, if slightly forward-looking, product of socialist realist criticism. Nevertheless, such an interpretation is highly problematic for several reasons. First, Zuzana Semínová suggests that while numerous critical analyses in line with communist ideology were the product of the actual opinion of a given critic, politicized statements were simply necessary in order for the critiqued texts to be translated and published. Other critics agree

with Semínová; for instance, Josef Rauvolf argues that several of the passages quoting Soviet literary critics or criticizing the Beats were added to the essay in order to appease the censors and ensure the essay's publication (“Vyvázat se” 4). Navigating the politics of publishing foreign writers was a truly precarious activity, and it was especially delicate with writers who did not fit the mold of socialist realism, such as the Beats.

The observation that Hájek actively employed socialist realist rhetoric to bypass the censors is also supported by a more direct analysis of the text. For instance, the excerpts in the essay, which include portions from “Howl” or sections of *On the Road*, show that Hájek carefully curated the Beat texts available to him and chose only those sections which would support the socialist realist reading, and this is particularly noticeable with the excerpts from “Howl” (Rauvolf, “Prague” 180). As Rauvolf further explains:

The first [excerpt] finishes with “who disappeared into the volcanoes of Mexico,” leaving out the verses about “super communist pamphlets” (What would the authorities have thought of that?!) as well as the ones about sexual pleasure and insanity. The translation continues with Part II, but without any footnote (again, probably due to content merging the holy asshole and cock with holy Moscow and the fifth International). (Rauvolf, “Prague” 180)

Yet it is not only the careful selection of the excerpts which problematizes attempts to understand Zábřana's essay as an exemplary piece of socialist realist criticism. While it is omitted by other scholars, the essay is followed by translations of a few beatnik caricatures made by William F. Brown from his book of caricatures *Beat! Beat! Beat!* (1959). The caricatures generally poke fun at the Beats for their non-conformism and alleged emotional immaturity.<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless, in *Světová literatura* they are also accompanied by a short explanatory text; while anonymous, it is sensible to assume it was written by Zábřana. The text states the following:

“Like every new literary movement, the Beat Generation irritates the bourgeoisie. One of the ways it protects itself from the influence of new thought is through demeaning jokes. However, we believe that the most talented members of the Beat Generation will soon find their way from unrestrained protest to conscious social protest” (“Beze slov”).

This commentary thus belittles Western critics of the Beats for their shortsightedness, thus further validating the Beats in the eyes of the government censors. The

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52 Tellingly, the book concludes with one of the beatniks abandoning his nonconformist identity by shaving his beard, wearing a suit and tie, and getting a job.

careful selection of texts least insulting to the censors as well as the critique of the Beats' critics thus shows Zábřana's systematic textual strategies used to ensure that the Beats actually get published in the journal.

Lastly, the reading of Hájek as carefully navigating socialist realist rhetoric is also supported by Hájek's own life and actions. During the 1960s, Hájek was the foreign editor for *Literární noviny* which was one of the literary periodicals forcibly terminated following the Warsaw Pact invasion. Hájek himself had been in Great Britain when the invasion took place, and since he was among the numerous writers blacklisted from ever being mentioned in print, he was forced into exile. The same must be stated about Jan Zábřana, another frequent translator of the Beats. His parents were imprisoned for several years after the communist takeover in 1948 and Zábřana himself was unable to pursue a university education due to political reasons ("Jan Zábřana"). While Zábřana did write the afterword to *Pátá roční doba*, the anthology showcasing radical American poets openly sympathizing with Communism, the politics of publication are simply too complex to be viewed in a reductionist manner. As Quinn points out, it is more than likely that Zábřana saw this publication as an anti-communist act and personally read the poems contained within in such a way (Quinn 117–18). Faced with a complex situation to navigate in a highly politicized setting, Hájek and Zábřana simply chose the best strategy which allowed them to spread Western literature in the totalitarian country. As a result, some of the "communist buzzwords" appearing in the early Hájek and Zábřana critiques, such as the emphasis on "displaying the truth," being "progressive," or offering "an answer" to the ills of the world, are mere ploys aimed at appeasing the censors.

Subsequently, these critiques, while echoing the official socialist realist ideology of the Party, are aimed at a different audience – those who are able to read between the lines. As Kopecký points out, Hájek thus should be recognized for bringing the Beat Generation to Czechoslovakia, especially considering that the poems presented in the essay were not only extremely different from traditional Czechoslovak poetry, but also provided domestic writers with inspiration which later formed their future works ("Literary America" 76). Semínová adds that the translated excerpts from *On the Road* and "Howl" in the article were for a long time the only available translations of these two texts. This naturally only emphasizes the crucial role "Americká bohéma" had in popularizing the Beats in Czechoslovakia and therefore the Czech Republic.

Soon after "Americká bohéma," several profiles of other Beats and their excerpted works were released. The first Beat to be profiled was Lawrence Ferlinghetti, whose selection from his early poetry collections accompanied by a short essay was printed in a 1960 issue of *Světová literatura*. Written by Zábřana, the essay starts by noting that while Ferlinghetti is often considered by his home country to be among the foremost Beat poets, his poetry is actually vastly different from that

of his peers (“Lawrence Ferlinghetti” 17). After analyzing the minimalist and direct nature of Ferlinghetti’s poetry, Zábřana continues by discussing Ferlinghetti’s politics; however, the discussion is rather brief; the standard Beat notions of Bohemianism and anarchism are boosted only by a glancing mention of the long and explicitly political poem “Tentative Description of a Dinner Given to Promote the Impeachment of President Eisenhower.” While Zábřana notes that the poem is a direct attack on the “military psychosis” that might hint at future developments in political poetry, he then goes back to discussing the specificity of Ferlinghetti’s poetic language and form, thus avoiding an explicit discussion of Ferlinghetti and politics. Perhaps to instill more explicitly political rhetoric to Ferlinghetti’s profile, the poems are followed by a set of photos chosen to help illustrate the feelings of the Beat Generation (Souček 18). Importantly, the short text introducing the photos is concluded by the following:

This photography is often naturalistic when it wants to be realistic or sugary when it is aiming for optimism under the threat of an imminent nuclear and space war. It is raw and dark and is accompanied by a flow of both costly and cheap printing ink from conformist introductions. At times, however, it is a flow of blood, sweat and tears – a flow which accompanies every art daring to say its NO to the Potemkin villages built by official American art around the continent and its endless roads. (18)

This short text, together with the explicitly political “Tentative Description,” is a paratext used to provide a “correct” reading of Ferlinghetti’s work. “The Potemkin villages” of the United States are thus revealed through the photography accompanying Ferlinghetti’s poems – and therefore also through the poems themselves – in a manner worthy of every engaged and progressive member of a socialist society. On the surface, this enables a reading legitimizing the Beats to the censors; however, it also helps distribute anti-authoritarian art to Czechoslovak readers.

The translation of Kerouac’s poem “October in the Railroad Earth” was available in the third 1961 issue of *Světová literatura*, though it was not accompanied by a commentary. Later that year, Gregory Corso was profiled in *Světová literatura*. In the short introduction to the selection of his poetry, Zábřana is mostly concerned with the formal aspect of Corso’s poetry and his improvisational style. Nevertheless, what Zábřana finds fascinating about Corso is his “fate of a poet,” that is Corso being “a son of the proletariat” and being brought up under harsh conditions (“Gregory Corso” 78). Subsequently, when compared to Zábřana’s previous text on Ferlinghetti, the short bio takes a slightly politicized turn. Noting that Corso’s life was extremely difficult – for example, he grew up essentially as an orphan and at the age of thirteen was jailed in the Tombs, the infamous jail in Lower Manhattan – Zábřana continues by expressing amazement at the fact that



the young people who challenged the hegemony of the academic poets did not come from a life of luxury with flats “illuminated by the corpse-like glimmer of television screens” but rather from underprivileged backgrounds (80). He then continues by claiming that despite the faults of Corso’s style, the poet’s talent and fate will put his challenging experiences, given to him “unselfishly by his capitalist homeland,” to good use (80). As opposed to this rather politically-charged account, LeRoi Jones, the African-American poet later known as Amiri Baraka, received a slightly toned-down treatment in 1963. Most of the short profile is concerned with Jones’s biography and style, the latter being described as “absolute” and “maximalist” (Zábrana, “LeRoi Jones” 18). While Zábrana points out that his race is somewhat unique among contemporary poets, therefore placing Jones into a slightly different position, the remainder of the profile is concerned with the subjects of Jones’s poetry and the way he approaches them. Corso’s profile and especially the collection of photography accompanying Ferlinghetti’s poems are explicit in advocating the esthetics of socialist realism and, as a result, the ideals of the communist government; in contrast, by focusing mostly on the poet’s style, the profile of LeRoi Jones does not possess most of the traces of more traditional socialist realist criticism. The change in tone of Zábrana’s criticism also indicates the lessening of constraints imposed upon art as the 1960s progressed.

In 1962 Ferlinghetti’s *A Coney Island of the Mind* was translated by Zábrana, thus making it the first Beat work published in Czechoslovakia outside of excerpts in *Světová literatura*. A quick glance at the afterword for *A Coney Island of the Mind* makes it clear that it is among the more explicitly political. After mentioning Julius Fučík, the Czechoslovak communist activist who was tortured and executed by the Nazis, and his affinities for American poetry, Zábrana continues by describing the Beats as protesting the “fossilization” and “stagnation” of American literature in general and poetry in particular (“Jen mrtví se neangažují” 119). He describes the Beat Generation as leading the revolt against stilted American art, which soon changed into a rebellion “against the consolidated and orderly society ... for leading art to a dead end through its domesticity, ignorance and idiotic pursuit of material prosperity” (119). The afterword thus contains a strong “us versus them” rhetoric, which is further emphasized by his description of “Howl” as an act of mourning for the young intellectuals of America who were doomed from their birth (120).

Zábrana’s afterword does not hesitate to criticize the Beats when describing their philosophies. For instance, the translator claims that the anarchic gestures of the Beats cannot have a longstanding effect, as they are a far cry from the “revolutionary perspectives” required for complex social change (121). In addition, he castigates the Beats for their frequent focus on drugs or for their interest in the “fad” of Zen Buddhism.<sup>53</sup> And while Zábrana acknowledges the turn toward

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53 It was Gary Snyder who studied Buddhism and other Eastern philosophies, and who is credited

politics in Ginsberg's recent work, he describes the results as rather shabby, even though these poems might be deemed progressive by Americans (122). The Beats, in their anti-establishment stance and their emphasis on the moment, seem to be too chaotic for Zábřana's tastes. However, after this "required" section utilizing socialist realist standards, Zábřana goes back to Ferlinghetti and his poetry. Among Ferlinghetti's notable features, the translator states, is the fact that unlike some of his peers, Ferlinghetti is not afraid to show delicate human feelings (124). Ultimately, one of the qualities defining Ferlinghetti's poetry is the importance of life and its dignity (125). Ferlinghetti, however, is not a Marxist nor is he interested in left-wing politics; as Zábřana continues, one might even have reservations about some of his verses. Still Zábřana concludes on a positive note. Unlike his peers, the poet is not afraid to be directly engaged with politics, and staunchly fights against the ruling class so that he does not become their instrument of power (125). In Zábřana's reading, it is this characteristic of Ferlinghetti's poetry that not only sets him apart from his contemporaries, but also energizes his poems with a vitality frequently absent in the work of his Beat acquaintances. Since this vitality is also inherent in the literature of the more democratic powers of the world – that is communist countries led by the Soviet Union – Hájek argues that it makes Ferlinghetti's poetry more relevant to communist Czechoslovakia than that written by other Beats.

Zábřana's essay for the poetry collection then contains numerous points informed by a socialist realist approach. However, as Zábřana points out, the translation of *Coney Island* was the first time in postwar Czechoslovakia that a collection of an American poet who started writing after 1945 had been published ("Jen mrtví se neangažují" 118). Since it is very likely that censors would pay special attention to a poetry collection by a still relatively young and therefore untried American writer, it can then be reasonably assumed that Zábřana chose to be especially cautious when preparing the collection. Therefore, Zábřana noting that Ferlinghetti does not seem particularly interested in leftist politics is a rather daring defense on behalf of the poet rather than a mere aside.

A year later the ever so prolific Zábřana published a short defense of Ginsberg against the popular and critical backlash in the United States as a way to introduce a selection of his work from *Kaddish and Other Poems*. The text starts by renouncing Ginsberg's American critics for stubbornly clinging to the esthetics of the past ("Allen Ginsberg" 55). Zábřana points out that the criticism is so polarized that none of the two views of Ginsberg – him being either the greatest American poet since Whitman or a mere "bearded charlatan and mad drug addict" – can be correct (55). Zábřana proposes a middle path between the two extremes: readers

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for being among those who introduced these to American public. However, due to the extensive nature of his expertise – for instance, he spent several years in a Buddhist temple in Japan – his preoccupation with Zen Buddhism can hardly be described as a "fad."

should try to view Ginsberg critically but without unnecessary vitriol. This may appear rather innocuous at first, but when reading between the lines, Zábřana actually suggests abandoning the notions of socialist realist criticism when approaching Ginsberg's work.

Such an interpretation seems tenuous at first, as a substantial portion of the text follows in the footsteps of socialist realism. For instance, Zábřana writes that faced with the "Moloch of money" and "the well-oiled cogs in the machine of the capitalist country," Ginsberg and his poetry represent a clash of values and therefore emphasize that current conditions in the United States are simply unsustainable (58). However, he then adds that even though Ginsberg is very familiar with Communism through the influence of his mother, he never manages to fully embrace the idea of the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat despite being more than familiar with the concept (60). Ginsberg's inability to see *the way* of liberating humanity from the clutches of capitalism is then "the ball and chain" of Ginsberg's work and a necessary fact to acknowledge in order to fully "understand and properly evaluate some of his incorrect and for us unacceptable opinions which are at times present in his poetry" (60).<sup>54</sup> Although Ginsberg and his fellow Beats criticize the United States and its society, one should not, Zábřana concludes, sympathize or even identify with their worldviews when it comes to their opinions on politics. In the end, Zábřana argues that Ginsberg's work has essentially two uses for the Czechoslovak public. First, it allows them to experience the unconventional esthetics of a leading avant-garde artist of the West. Second, it serves a historical purpose, as it is a testimony of the current state of the United States and a segment of its population. For non-Americans, Allen Ginsberg's poetry is proof that capitalism is simply untenable.

Yet again, Zábřana carefully mixes socialist realist rhetoric with a cautious but deliberate defense of the poet. For instance, he blames Ginsberg's shortcomings – not embracing the truly progressive humane values of communism – on "the poisonous apples of America" which has filled the American public with an unhealthy dose of skepticism (59–60). While the Beats manage to resist the omnipresent push toward conformity, their "needless relativism" is to be blamed on the capitalist country which has robbed them of ideals and faith (60). Furthermore, Zábřana makes it clear that by now, several years after the publication of *Howl*, Ginsberg is not esteemed only by a few eccentrics, nor is he merely a fashionable fad (56). Zábřana thus warns against a simplistic reading of Ginsberg's work, as his poetry is clearly the work of an educated man who not only possesses a clear understanding of poetics, but also ponders even the smallest details of his composition (56–57). Ginsberg should be hailed as creating a new understanding of poetics, dubbed by

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54 Here Zábřana singles out Ginsberg's insistence that poets should not meddle in politics as especially harmful.

Zábřana “thematic obligation,” which stems from an understanding of the poet as a social critic who is obliged to critique his surroundings (57). Finally, Zábřana argues that Ginsberg and the Beats, both as a literary movement and a vaguely defined youth subculture, are unmistakably American, which further defines not only their modes of expression but also the form of their protest (59). By explicitly supporting a contextual reading and suggesting that readers critically view Ginsberg’s work for themselves, Zábřana implicitly turns the established criticism on its head. One should not then view the Beats through the prism of socialist realism, but rather make up his or her own mind instead. This might seem one small step for a reader, but it was a giant leap for readers in Czechoslovakia.

This modest yet important shift in critical discourse on the Beats is even more evident in the 1964 afterword to an anthology of Gregory Corso’s poetry. From the very beginning, Zábřana argues that even though “burying” the Beat Generation is currently fashionable, the Beats will withstand this pressure and turn out to be a historical milestone and an important literary movement (“Fakta, poznámky” 129). As is usual for Zábřana, Corso’s style is also discussed; it is hailed not only for its sense of everydayness, but also for the poet’s ability to maintain a deeply personal and uncanny vision throughout his poetry, often balancing between odd practical jokes and semi-apparent satire on the one hand and requiring faith in his poetic style from his readers on the other (133–34). The small yet clearly visible difference in the discussion of the Beats lies in the way Zábřana describes the message of Corso’s poetry and how one might understand his work. Reminding readers that the Beats protest “all forms of rigidity, apathy, alienation or appropriation of modern society,” Zábřana continues by arguing that Corso’s poetry “does not aspire to understand the world in its entirety” (132, 134). However, unlike in Zábřana’s previous work, this statement is not followed by a critique of shortsightedness in terms of the Beat’s worldview. Instead, Zábřana claims that even though Corso might be limited in his understanding of the world, he still helps readers to comprehend the world better by offering them a new point of view from which the world can be experienced (134). The perceived flaws of the Beats in Zábřana’s previous texts – that is the inability and unwillingness of the Beats to actively engage in politics to make the world a better place – are here set aside in favor of a reading that emphasizes the positive application of Corso’s work.

The avoidance of socialist realist vocabulary is further highlighted by Zábřana’s brief mention of Ginsberg’s interest in Eastern philosophies. In the afterword to Ferlinghetti’s *Coney Island*, the translator chastised Ginsberg for what he imagined to be a temporary obsession; however, now Zábřana only states that Ginsberg’s poetry is shaped by his Jewishness and his interest in Zen Buddhism and Hinduism (138). Again, this omission of interpretation – Zábřana merely *describes* rather than *interprets* – is telling. It hints at the gradual change in Czechoslovak literary criticism; that is the decline of socialist realism in favor of a more

formalist reading. Ultimately, this change then mirrors the liberalization of society as a whole.

## 7.2 Abandoning Socialist Realism

As the 1960s progressed, the ongoing changes were becoming more and more visible; the days when literary journals had to quote Soviet literary critics as a way to ensure that the analyzed text received “a stamp of approval” seemed to be long past despite actually being very recent (Rauwolf, “Vývázat se” 4). One such text was the essay “Bez minulosti a budoucnosti” (Without Past and Future) by Soviet literary critics Raisa Orlova and Lev Kopolev. Published in 1961 in *Světová literatura*, the text analyzed the ongoing trend of rebellious youth among Western writers in the Angry Young Men or the Beat Generation. Unsurprisingly, the essay argued that since the majority of Western literature is simply unsuitable for the revolutionary proletariat, such movements will inevitably fail unless they take their cues from “the truly progressive democracies of today” (22).

Published in 1961, Orlova and Kopolev’s texts follow the traditional axis of socialist realist criticism; in contrast, articles published in the following years of the decade show a vastly different approach to literary criticism and therefore also the extent of the changes in the social climate of 1960s Czechoslovakia. Kopecký explains that in 1963 the Congress of the Union of Czechoslovak Writers signaled this shift in literary criticism by removing the traditional socialist realist critics such as Ladislav Štoll from their positions of power and replacing them with their critics (“Literary America” 77). Some of the changes stemming from the criticism of a dogmatic socialist realist reading were palpable immediately: after all, 1963 is also the year in which Škvorecký’s *The Cowards* was republished, albeit with a few minor changes, and the author himself was rehabilitated (Kosková 124–25). Other, at first less pronounced changes took place in literary journals such as *Světová literatura* or *Literární noviny* and their treatment of Western literature. While these still somewhat subscribed to politicized readings during the early 1960s, starting in 1963 these journals started portraying the United States in a more objective manner (Kubíček 126). Consequently, socialist ideology was progressively losing its influence over Czechoslovak literary criticism and by 1967 it was generally understood by literary critics that literature has only one purpose – literature itself (Kubíček 134). This naturally had a profound impact on the understanding of the role of the critic. The purposes of literary critics of the past, setting an example for progressive politics or emphasizing the struggle of the masses, were then gradually supplanted by an interest in a work of art on its own terms.

Igor Hájek’s short text “Z bradburyovského světa” (From a Bradburian World), published six years after “Americká bohéma,” is a prime example of the gradual

shift in Czechoslovak literary criticism. The text from the very start clearly eschews socialist realism by pointing out that because the Beat Generation reacts to social and historical realities which are unique to the United States, the way it is perceived in the USA is possibly vastly different from the impressions it has made in Czechoslovakia (2). Hájek does mention the radical stance taken by the Beats and many of their followers, that is abandoning programmatic social change and finding refuge outside society; however, his tone is contemplative rather than judgmental. Importantly, the Beats' notion that *any* authority or social order is inherently oppressive is treated similarly: while previously in "Americká bohéma" Hájek criticized them for not being political enough, now he merely presents the stances and philosophies of the Beats and invites readers to draw their own conclusions. Nor does Hájek challenge Ginsberg when he asserts that one of the efforts of the Beats is to perceive the world without any ideological lens distorting the view; importantly, this also includes Marxism.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, instead of lambasting the Beats for their preoccupation with sexuality, Hájek claims that their focus on sex and sexuality is only a reaction to the omnipresence of media and Puritanism in American culture, which are unable to address human sexuality directly, thus commodifying it instead (3). Contrary to previous texts on the Beats, Hájek also notes that the young generation inspired by the Beats is actually political, and then finishes by stating that Ginsberg's visit to Czechoslovakia "reminds us that the complexity of this world does not permit us to close our eyes to a single human problem" (3). The Beats then are not simply a tool used to point out the deficiencies of the immoral West and the superiority of progressive socialist policies; instead, Hájek encourages the reader to be engaged with Ginsberg's ideas, a notion further emphasized in the essay by incorporating Ginsberg's own words into the text and using them as answers to the issues Hájek raises. Providing Ginsberg's own answers may seem unimportant, yet it again shows the development of Czechoslovak literary criticism: Hájek here abandons the position of the socialist realist critic – the interpreter of the "correct" truth – and leaves readers to assess Ginsberg's answers on their own. This decision of the critic not to interfere between the author and the reader during the process of interpretation is truly symbolic: the poet and his work are presented on his own terms, and the people get to form their own opinions of Ginsberg's work. This would have been simply unprecedented a few years before.

Similar changes can be observed in the preface to the anthology *Obeznámení s nocí: Noví američtí básníci* (Acquainted with the Night: New American Poets) written by Stanislav Mareš and Jan Zábrana. Even though it was published in 1967, the

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55 Hájek simply notes that Ginsberg critiquing Marxism should be expected: "He is not, after all, a Communist, albeit he grew among them" (5). This sentence turned out extremely problematic for Hájek following Ginsberg's deportation several weeks later, as he was criticized in the newspaper *Mladá fronta* for not pointing out the deficiencies in Ginsberg's stance.

preface itself was written two years earlier and therefore Mareš and Zábřana are at times seemingly ambiguous in their discussions of the goals of the anthology. Nevertheless, the intent behind the anthology is clear: to present new American poetry without being inhibited by socialist realist ideology. The preface starts with a careful discussion of anthologies in general and the challenges editors face when putting one together, then continues by stating the following thinly-veiled criticism of past approaches to literature in Czechoslovakia:

One of the mistakes, which were, in our opinion, committed by the majority of previous anthologies, was the effort to provide the widest-possible selection of chosen poetry in terms of chronology, that is the decision not to focus solely on the poets of a single period and to ignore various tendencies and trends of the given national poetry in favor of joining together various protagonists from different time periods; conversely, another mistake was to focus exclusively on a part of poetry *selected through extraliterary reasoning*, for instance focusing solely on radical poets. (9–10, emphasis mine).

As Mareš and Zábřana explain, the emphasis should be instead on current poets who are established but have not been publishing poetry for more than twenty years; that is poets such as John Ashbery, Robert Creeley, or the Beats.<sup>56</sup> Such an open critique of forced politicized readings is a truly remarkable step by the editors and a sign of the liberalization and openness of the society, as Petr Kopecký points out (“Literary America” 80). Mareš and Zábřana also note that their choice not to use any other criteria than the contemporaneity of the poets contributed to interesting contrasts in the anthology, one of them being Donald Hall and Allen Ginsberg, both sworn poetic enemies, being present (16). They close their preface by stating that they hope the anthology would contribute to “the establishment of new values that we are currently witnessing in this country” (16). In other words, if their divorce from the ethos of socialist realism had not been clear from earlier passages, their open acknowledgement of “new values” makes their dismissal of politicized readings more than evident. Although short, the preface is markedly different in its rhetoric from the criticism discussed earlier. Interestingly, the editors mention that they refused to organize the poets according to the movements or groups they belong to, preferring to present them in random order instead (15–16). While this might be simply interpreted as editorial pragmatism, it is more likely a refusal to offer a lens through which to interpret the poets in the anthology. Instead, the poetry should stand on its own, uninhibited by any outside influence that might affect its reading, such as labeling Ginsberg or Corso as Beat

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56 The Beats present among the twenty-four poets in the anthology are Gregory Corso, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Allen Ginsberg, LeRoi Jones, Michael McClure, and Gary Snyder.

poets. Put differently, representing poets as belonging to certain social or historical movements has been replaced by an emphasis on individual reading.

While not solely focusing on the Beats, the anthology *Jazzová inspirace* (Jazz Inspiration) published in 1966 was yet another sign of the overall changes.<sup>57</sup> Edited and introduced by Lubomír Dorůžka and Josef Škvorecký, the anthology focuses on poetry influenced by jazz music. While it contains several Czechoslovak authors such as Škvorecký, Josef Kainar and Vítězslav Nezval, the collection's main focus is on Western authors: Carl Sandburg, Langston Hughes, Tennessee Williams, but also the Beats LeRoi Jones, Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti, and Kerouac are among those included. Importantly, Dorůžka and Škvorecký in their introduction pay no heed to socialist realist criticism, and instead hail jazz as a new esthetic and means of expression. They not only note that jazz goes against the bourgeois European understanding of beauty and harmony, but also equate jazz with resistance to oppression, whether such oppression is forced labor during the *totalerinsatz* in the Third Reich or the lives of African-Americans in a racist society (10–11, 22–23).<sup>58</sup> Ultimately, jazz is in direct opposition to society's conformity and to conservative art critics denigrating jazz as a mere cacophony – in Dorůžka and Škvorecký's reading, jazz poetry is the manifestation of life itself (23–24).

Granted, the introduction does contain a few socialist realist attributes; for instance, it mentions that jazz through its improvisation is opposed to the sensibility of the petit bourgeois (10–11). Yet the way the text is composed makes it clear that Dorůžka and Škvorecký do not talk about Western bourgeois or Western conservatives and their inability to see the exhilarating nature of jazz, but about conservative critics in general. The conformist critics relying on old-fashioned and banal standards of beauty in their evaluation of jazz are thus also socialist realist critics desperately clinging to the dogma of their ideological interpretation. Therefore, it is not only the publication of jazz poetry itself, but also the open denunciation of the socialist realist relics by the two editors which truly highlight the groundbreaking changes taking place in the country.

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57 Rauvolf mentions that the anthology was published because it had been approved before Ginsberg's visit and could not be cancelled because production of books was a lengthy process for the country's planned economy ("Prague" 198). It is true the regime was inflexible in its cultural production; for instance, the 1970 film *Ucho* (*The Ear*) by Karel Kachyňa was immediately shelved after it had been cut, even though it was clear during the film's production that it would not be put in theaters. Nevertheless, this does not explain the swift cancellation of the planned release of *Howl and Other Poems* after Ginsberg's deportation. Therefore, a slow liberalization rather than the regime's inflexible economy was most likely at play here.

58 The reference to forced labor in Germany was most likely penned by Škvorecký, as he was among the 400,000 Czechoslovaks who were brought to Germany to labor in the war industry. Importantly, the reference to the totalitarian Third Reich can also be read as an allusion to Communist Czechoslovakia.



Literary critics were especially open in their essays the closer they got to the Prague Spring. Even though they were often faced with controversial themes such as drug use or obscenity, they were abandoning politicized interpretations in favor of a more formalist reading, thus presenting their points in a significantly nuanced way without having to shy away from controversial topics (Kopecký, “Literary America” 80–81). Simply put, gone was the careful, diplomatic tip-toeing around the issue at hand. Nevertheless, after the armies of the Warsaw Pact intervened in order to deal with the supposed counter-revolutionaries, it soon became clear that such freedoms would not last. Despite that, Zábřana managed to write several texts on the Beats in 1969, that is when the state had not yet fully regained its control over the country’s media outlets. The first and shortest one is an introductory essay “Pound & Beatnici” (Pound & the Beats) prefacing Ferlinghetti’s and Ginsberg’s accounts of meeting with Ezra Pound in the late 1960s. Another text also published in *Světová literatura*, “Případ Beatnici” (The Case of the Beats), serves as an introduction to a study by Fernanda Pivano, Ginsberg’s Italian translator. The general tone of the article is that of a matter-of-fact portrayal of the Beat Generation and its end as an organized movement. Zábřana starts by pointing out the simple fact that all movements end sooner or later and that while it might be the end of the road for the Beat Generation, it is not the end for its individual authors, as they have already shown their worth (114). In hindsight, Zábřana also agrees that the Beats in fact had an ideological program in mind despite them stating the opposite: this program argued not only for a complete disregard for authorities and hierarchies of any kind, but also – by extension – for trying to understand each work of art on its own terms (114). This note is therefore not only the swan song for literary criticism outside the Party’s influence, but also shows that the role the Beats played in defining Zábřana’s approach to literature was not negligible. As a result, the remainder of the text rejects a judgmental tone in favor of simple descriptions and observations. This is especially noticeable when discussing some of Ginsberg’s poems. Even though these often feature an amalgam of drugs, sexuality, the Vietnam War, or the conformist establishment, Zábřana simply describes rather than interprets, leaving the reader to do the interpretation himself.

Zábřana’s last text of 1969, the long essay “Básník, který neodešel” (“The Poet Who Has Not Left”), is something of a coda to the Beat Generation as a movement and a clear establishment of Allen Ginsberg as a poet who surpassed most of his contemporaries. As the title suggests, the text is also a defense of Ginsberg and his work, which is especially notable considering the text includes reworked passages from Zábřana’s earlier critiques. Zábřana starts in his usual way; that is by pointing out Ginsberg’s unwavering relevance for current American poetry even when several of his critics predicted the opposite (205). The most telling parts of the essay, however, are the passages lifted from Zábřana’s previous essays and updated into their current form; these reworked passages indicate the

change in the social climate. For instance, as was noted above, his 1963 essay on Ginsberg in *Světová literatura* chastises the Beat for professing an almost apocalyptic hopelessness instead of trying to achieve change through political engagement, and for possessing worldviews which are simply incompatible with those of Czechoslovaks. However, the updated passage in “Básník, který neodešel” provides a refutation of the first claim – Ginsberg, unlike his peers, actually imagines a brighter future and hopes for a better tomorrow – and completely omits the second point (215).

Moreover, the essay also incorporates the majority of “Případ Beatnici” and it is again significantly revised: while the initial version of the text simply summarized his most recent poetry, the updated version also attaches a simple description of one of his poems. This essentially serves as a definition of Ginsberg's work and a way to silence his critics – the poem, *Zábrana* explain, tries to ultimately expose the “corruption of speech” which leads to a crisis of the self as well as of society as a whole (219). Since it is speech itself that corrupts, it cannot be trusted even when serving the purposes of a righteous ideology. Therefore, it is rather unsurprising that this essay also refuses an ideological interpretation in favor of a reading without prescribed esthetic notions in the strongest and most direct fashion among *Zábrana*'s essays. As a consequence, the short essays on the Beats of the 1950s and 1960s not only help document the changes taking place in society, but also actually disseminate the anti-authoritarian texts of the Beats which contribute to the overall liberalization documented in the very same texts.

It is obvious, then, that as the 1960s progressed, the language of the texts on the Beats had become progressively critical of the standards of socialist realist criticism. This naturally mirrored the developments of Czechoslovak society as a whole, yet the influence of the Beats on freethinking writers and translators such as Škvorecký, *Zábrana*, and Hájek should not be underestimated. Primed to detest the totalitarian regime even before their encounter with the Beats, these then further helped disseminate the rebellious message of resistance and anti-authoritarianism among Czechoslovaks. While perhaps not overtly political, the texts of the Beats took a highly political turn in the hyperpolitical Communist state: the insistence of these three critics on a more formalist reading was at that time a dangerously political act.

### 7.3 Newspaper Treatment of Ginsberg's Visit

The Beat Generation in general was only rarely mentioned in the government-controlled media. As a result, Ginsberg's two visits to the country and the coverage it produced offers an invaluable insight into the representation of the Beats in the country. Initially, the media treated Ginsberg favorably during his first visit.

However, the Beat's appearance at Majáles and the subsequent deportation led to the poet's downfall in the official press: despite being already prepared for print, a collection of Ginsberg's poetry had to be abandoned by the publishing house Odeon for political reasons (Rauwolf, "Beat po česku" 22–23).

One of the first texts to cover Ginsberg's stay in Czechoslovakia in the mainstream media was a short article in the official newspaper of the Communist party *Rudé právo* (Red Law). The article opens by describing Ginsberg as an "important American poet" and a member of a "beat" group of authors who have a positive role in today's American literature. ("Na besedě s Allenem Ginsbergem" 2). Painting the poet's visit as an exceptional opportunity to teach the Western of the progressive ways of the Eastern Bloc, the text mentions Ginsberg's wish to become familiar with Czechoslovak "reality" and his desire to continue the exploration of "socialist space" by visiting Moscow. As with all official texts, it does not forget to use American artists in its propaganda against the "rotten" West. As a result, William Carlos Williams, who was one of the topics of Ginsberg's discussion with students, is described as a poet who "drew inspiration from specific sources of life" and for whom poetry "must live in the present." Finally, the article concludes in a rather exhilarating tone that Ginsberg's *Howl* is currently being translated and is soon going to be available to the Czechoslovak readership.<sup>59</sup> Tellingly, while the article skimps on the details of Ginsberg's departure from Cuba, it does mention that the poet had substantial problems in his home country before being allowed to fly to Cuba in the first place. In other words, the article then uses Ginsberg and other Beats as one more piece in its propaganda by providing a government-approved representation of Ginsberg as a progressive poet and vital critic of the West.

In three days' time, on 6 March 1965, a photo of Ginsberg was featured on the front page of *Literární noviny*. The caption describes him as "the most peculiar representative of non-academic American poetry," thus pushing Ginsberg further into the spotlight (Pařík).<sup>60</sup> Later that month, *Svobodné slovo* (The Free Word) reported on Ginsberg's visit to Bratislava. The rather ecstatic tone of the article further emphasizes the portrayal of Ginsberg in the popular press as an American progressive who fights for the socialist cause in his home country. It starts with the following anecdote: during Ginsberg's poetry reading in a local theater the poet requests the lights to be turned on; however, once a spotlight is aimed at him and the book he is holding, Ginsberg clarifies that he wants the lights to be turned on in the whole auditorium so that he could see the audience (Poláčková 2). This wish "to see who he is writing for," the article claims, is what drives Ginsberg and

59 Unfortunately for Ginsberg and his readers, this was never meant to be. As it was already mentioned, after his deportation from Czechoslovakia all preparations for publishing *Howl* in book form were withdrawn and it was not until 1990 that it was available (Semínová).

60 While no actual article on Ginsberg was included in the issue, in two weeks the magazine printed the eventually problematic "Z bradburyovského světa" by Hájek.

what caused him to travel from Cuba to Moscow via Czechoslovakia. Importantly, Ginsberg's kind and egalitarian demeanor is linked to a politicized account of his work: this "master of modern Beat poetry" surprised the audience with his "modesty and education" when discussing "the new non-academic poetry" and the challenges it had to face. Ultimately, not only did Ginsberg discover Czechoslovakia, the text concludes, but Czechoslovakia also discovered in Ginsberg "a true luminary" and an important figure in American progressive literature. Again, *Svobodné slovo* shows the ability of the totalitarian government to appropriate a Western artist as a valuable ally to the government and people of Czechoslovakia in their fight against the decadence and immorality of the West.

As stated before, the way Ginsberg was discussed changed dramatically after his deportation. Still, even though Ginsberg was deported on May 7, it took the press more than a week to comment on the event. The first to do so was *Mladá fronta* (The Young Front) and it gave the deportation a rather exclusive treatment: unlike most of the previous mentions of Ginsberg's tour through Czechoslovakia, the exhaustive text covered the entire page. Titled "Allen Ginsberg a morálka" ("Allen Ginsberg and Decency"), the article starts by recounting the day Ginsberg was deported and then proceeds to provide a brief summary of his stay in Czechoslovakia, ending with a note that on May 3 he was arrested by the police for disorderly conduct (5).<sup>61</sup> Tellingly, the article also quotes Igor Hájek's "Z bradburyovského světa," namely the part where Hájek simply notes that Ginsberg argues against Marxism. Harkening back to official literary criticism, the article then claims that Hájek failed in his duties as a journalist and literary critic, since he did not adopt a stance toward Ginsberg's views despite providing him with an outlet for his ideas. Subsequently, the article introduces two anonymous people who voice their opinion on Ginsberg and his poetry. While the first is described as Ginsberg's "admirer" and regards him as a "great humanist," the other one offers a scathing critique of the poet: "My stance toward Allen Ginsberg is extremely negative. In my opinion, he is not a poet, never was one, and can never be one. His ideals are not only inconsistent with the ideals of the current socialistic man, but they are also in direct contrast to the common sense and sentiment of all healthy and rational people." The remainder of the text paints Ginsberg as a morally corrupt and despicable individual. It aims to achieve this by quoting from the letters of parents whose children were allegedly negatively influenced by Ginsberg's presence and as a consequence required psychiatric treatment, then by referencing a psychiatric report detailing the treatment of these youths, and finally by quoting extensively from Ginsberg's diary, which was reported stolen and

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61 Since Ginsberg did not have any documents on him, he was taken to a drunk tank so that his identity could be established. However, despite the wishes of a plainclothes officer, Ginsberg was not admitted due to not being severely intoxicated (Blažek 43).

then later found by a random passerby.<sup>62</sup> The text quotes several passages from the diary, focusing especially on Ginsberg's homosexual encounters with university students but also mentioning brief passages criticizing the regime, only to state that it cannot continue to do so because many of the entries are explicit and the editors of *Mladá fronta*, unlike Ginsberg, are still bound by moral constraints.<sup>63</sup> The text concludes by the following:

“His diary slanders our government representatives, our party and even our people. It is a testimony to acts which are in direct opposition to the laws of our country and to the civilized world as a whole. These acts are frequently punished in a significantly harsher way; Ginsberg's visit ... might have ended in an entirely different fashion.”

Apart from the overall ferocity, the conclusion is especially worth emphasizing for the thinly veiled threat contained within. This threat is undoubtedly aimed at Ginsberg's supporters, starting with fellow poets or translators such as Igor Hájek and finishing with students inspired by the Beat.

The article “Kocovina s Ginsbergem” (“A Hangover with Ginsberg”) published a day later in *Rudé právo* also rides the waves of appealing to common decency by portraying Ginsberg as an immoral deviant. Explaining that Ginsberg was deported from Czechoslovakia as *persona non grata*, the text argues that while Czechoslovakia wishes to be hospitable and welcoming to its visitors, it simply cannot tolerate indecent manners (3). Ginsberg simply overstayed his welcome by setting

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62 The passerby was in fact an agent of the secret police, which demonstrates that all the events surrounding Ginsberg's deportation were carefully orchestrated by the officers of Státní bezpečnost (State Security), the plainclothes secret police of the regime (Blažek 43). It also shows the ruthlessness of the regime: since the first arrest on May 3 did not lead to a larger controversy, a more elaborate plan to deport the poet, inconvenient for example because of his anti-regime remarks at student discussions, had to be devised. Firstly, Ginsberg's diary was retrieved after several agents got the poet drunk in the Viola café; subsequently, Ginsberg was attacked in the Prague streets by another plainclothes officer yelling homophobic remarks so that the state police had to be called and he would be taken to a police station for questioning. Next, since yet another plainclothes officer had “found” and handed the diary in to the police, the police were permitted to inspect the diary to identify the owner. In turn, this perusal of the diary allowed the police to read the diary in full and later use the personal entries within as one of the reasons for Ginsberg's deportation. Furthermore, the secret police prepared in advance the medical profiles of the youths who, contrary to the claims in *Mladá fronta*, sought psychiatric treatment before actually meeting Ginsberg. The testimonies of these youths and their parents, many of whom were among the Communist elites and therefore certainly eager to write such reports, were then added to the reasons justifying Ginsberg's deportation (Rauwolf, “Prague” 188). For more information on the orchestration of Ginsberg's deportation, see Blažek 43–47. It should be noted that there exist alternative accounts of the secret police's involvement. For instance, Andrew Lass, an American living in Czechoslovakia who translated for Ginsberg during his stay, claims in an interview that the diary was lost while Ginsberg was attending a show of the rock band The Beatmen (Lass, *Na plovárně*).

63 Regarding the regime, the diary stated the following. “Terror like in Cuba, only better camouflaged. All capitalist myths about communism are true. I have started to feel that communism is everywhere a big restraint. There is whispering going on everywhere” (Vodrážka and Lass, 195).

up homosexual orgies and therefore “grossly violated the standards of common decency.”<sup>64</sup> Similarly to *Mladá fronta*, *Rudé právo* mentions that some youths required psychiatric assistance due to Ginsberg; after describing the reactions of their distressed parents and the opinions of psychiatrists on Ginsberg and his influence, the text also concludes by pointing out the contents of Ginsberg’s diary.

Opting for a somewhat less adversarial tone than the article published in *Mladá fronta* a day earlier, “Kocovina s Ginsbergem” matter-of-factly claims that now the poet’s true colors have been shown, it should be simple for all to judge the Beat’s *true* character and therefore approach his poetry from a new, *more accurate* viewpoint. The role of the state in Ginsberg’s deportation and therefore its involvement with art in Czechoslovakia cannot be overestimated. As Rauwolf notes, Czechoslovakia’s president and head of the Communist Party Antonín Novotný delivered a speech a mere day after Ginsberg’s deportation, and the speech clearly stipulates that Western artists of dubious morals as well as those Czechoslovaks trying to spread their work will not be tolerated (“Prague,” 189). This is not merely the removal of an inconvenient artist, but also a call by the state via the newspaper it controlled for a return to the norm – a return to the omnipresent socialist realist discourse. Although unwittingly, Ginsberg was therefore at the center of something more than “just” freedom of expression – it was an incessant fight over the act of interpretation itself.

## 7.4 The Impact of the Beat Generation

Critics agree that Hájek’s “Americká bohéma” was a crucial text that helped popularize the Beats in Czechoslovakia (Kopecký, “Czeching the Beat” 98; Rauwolf, “Beat po česku” 22). Together with other Beat poetry translated by Zábřana and published in *Světová literatura*, this text ensured that the Beats were relatively well-known in the mid-sixties. The Beat Generation is, after all, one of the aspects typical of the sixties that Juraj Šebo lists in his memoir as having a major influence on the younger generation of the period (11). Young people around the world wanted to break from preceding generations and the Beats were a significant part of this effort. Socialist realist art did not fare well with Czechoslovak youth; instead, they preferred Remarque, Camus, Greene, or Ferlinghetti and Ginsberg (31). By the

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64 As intercourse between two consenting adults of the same sex was decriminalized in the country in 1961, the public condemnation of Ginsberg’s homosexuality shows the regime was willing to break its own rules in order to achieve its goals. Tellingly, the text then adds that Ginsberg was expelled from another country for similar homosexual orgies earlier that year, which is a clear reference to the poet’s stay in Cuba. However, Ginsberg was deported due to his open discussion of freedom of speech and the rights of homosexuals rather than organizing homosexual orgies; for more information see Ginsberg, “Beat Reporter.” This also shows that at some point during Ginsberg’s visit the regime had become aware of the true nature of his arrival in Prague, yet it had still decided to paint Ginsberg as a possible ally of the government for political reasons before Majáles took place.

time Ginsberg arrived in Czechoslovakia, he was a notorious figure, as he had to be popular to be chosen by the student body as one of the nominees for the King of May elections (143).

One of the places clearly influenced by the Beats was poetry readings accompanied by jazz music. While these readings originated in the literary café Viola, many cafés and theaters, such as Kovařík's Docela malé divadlo, soon followed suit, thus poetry readings accompanied by jazz music became more commonplace; this in turn also documents the gradual liberalization of society (Rauvolf, "Beat po česku" 22). The popularization of jazz poetry even led to the publication of the "Poezie a jazz" (Poetry and Jazz) LP in 1965, which includes poems by Corso and Ferlinghetti accompanied by jazz music. Petr Kopecký points out there were several reasons for the Beats becoming so popular in sixties Czechoslovakia, one of which was the unconventional form of their poetry, which helped emphasize the vast difference between the ideas present in Beat poetry and those in the official art following Party guidelines ("Czeching the Beat" 99). Beat poetry was radically different in both form and content from the majority of the officially-sanctioned poetry available. Nevertheless, the influences of the Beats also go beyond their art. For instance, Allen Ginsberg is often credited for helping to popularize the trend of young men wearing long hair: while it was somewhat fashionable even before Ginsberg's visit in 1965, his presence in Czechoslovakia and especially his part in the Majáles festival was seen by the government as a factor that further popularized long hair among men (Šebo 81, Blažek 47). The importance of this trend should not be underestimated: rather than being a mere fashion statement, it was an outward and explicit sign of a growing discomfort among the country's youth. Albeit relatively short, Ginsberg's stay therefore had a profound impact on Czechoslovak society (Kudrna 9).

In terms of influence on other artists, numerous Czechoslovak poets were not only affected by Beat poetry, but some of them, such as Jan Skarlant or Václav Hrabě, included direct references to the Beats in their own poetry (Rauvolf, "Beat po česku" 23). Due to the large exposure Ginsberg's poetry enjoyed in the sixties, it is only logical that a few Czechoslovak poets, most notably Milan Koch, took many stylistic cues from the Beat's work (24). Josef Vlček also adds that the poet and musician Pavel Zajíček is essentially Ginsberg's protégé, or that the novelist Bohumil Hrabal bears similarities to Kerouac's work in the way he idealized the people living on the margins of society (215, 208). Plenty of other artists were not directly influenced in terms of style, but still referenced the Beats in their work; for instance, the folk singer Wabi Daněk in his song "Na cestě" (On the Road) references being with Sal and Dean in spirit while he is traveling.<sup>65</sup> In other words,

65 Other singer-songwriters who acknowledged the Beats as important for their artistic development include Vlastimil Třešňák and Jaroslav Hutka (Rauvolf "Beat po česku" 24). Numerous of these artists performed at the popular Porta folk and country festival (first taking place in 1967), and the connec-

not only direct influences, but also references and parallels were certainly present in Czechoslovakia in the sixties and later.

Since the art of the Beat generation was unavailable for long periods of time, their influence often takes the form of general impressions or attitudes rather than specific formal approaches to literature or programmatic attitudes. Josef Rauvolf explains that while the Beats were only one of the many sources shaping the imagination of these illegal artists, they were certainly a powerful inspiration for the underground movement of the normalization period. (“Vývázat se” 4). As Martin Machovec further elaborates, there are some parallels between the underground art of the normalization and the Beats, especially Allen Ginsberg (“Podzemí” 4). Still, these similarities were mostly in a shared attitude, or a certain point-of-view and life experiences (Rauvolf, “Beat po česku” 23). Similarly to the Beats, belonging to the Czechoslovak underground was then expressing a certain attitude to life, or, as Vodrážka defines it, a “new sensibility” (16). The emphasis on an overall impression of the Beats rather than the particulars can be best seen in the following definition of the Beats in the second issue of the illegal magazine *Vokno* (Window): “A movement of American youth after the second world war. The Beats were initially Bohemian in nature and revolted against bourgeois morals, ideals, and attitudes. Later they protested the mechanization of civilization and the constant fear caused by wars, finding refuge in traveling, drugs, sex, and mysticism” (✓sun/ 57).

The official discourse can also serve as a vehicle through which the Beat Generation can be judged, and the final report undertaken by the secret police during Ginsberg’s deportation further portrays the impact of the Beats on Czechoslovaks. While he was staying in Prague, Ginsberg was extremely popular among university students, the report documents, and they were especially enthusiastic when Ginsberg spoke about the importance of freedom and its lack in Czechoslovakia; in contrast, Ginsberg’s theory of “psychosexuological philosophy” was not received with such understanding (Vodrážka and Lass 189). The students simply chose the aspects of the Beats which were the most important for them and their lives. What mattered most was the lack of personal liberties, as this was felt every day in the totalitarian regime; the poet’s discussion of unusual philosophies was in such a context an impractical luxury.

The regime’s insistence on the discourse of normativity, however, had been gradually abating during the seventies, as the publication of Kerouac’s *On the Road* in 1978 proves. The novel was so popular that the first printing of 20,000 copies quickly sold out and soon readers were signing petitions requesting that additional copies of the novel be made; surprisingly, the second edition was published

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tion between the Beats and singer-songwriters experienced in the US is present in Czechoslovakia as well: the festival’s master of ceremonies of 25 years was Miroslav Kovařík.



two years later (Rauwolf, “Prague” 195). Still, the regime remained determined to shape the Beat’s discourse. The dust jacket of the second edition thus describes the novel as “the fundamental literary work of the so-called Beat movement.” It further contextualizes the text by framing Kerouac as belonging to a segment of youth who started to critique the American government: they refused the “ideal of ‘a young and successful American’ with a firmly-set and unchangeable goal,” choosing instead to escape civilization to “a modern primitivism” in protest. Noting that the Beats tried to find solace in experiencing the present, the dust jacket also describes this effort as hopeless. Therefore, “*On the Road* is nowadays an account of the desire for a better life, freedom and happiness,” and as such, the dust jacket concludes, brought important impulses to American novels that followed.

Rather than banning it outright, the regime accompanied the novel with its preferred reading, thus guiding its readers along the *correct* path so that they did not stray from the preferred interpretation. The regime was determined to remain in control of its readers and the reading strategies they might have employed. While the short dust-jacket description is certainly less explicitly ideological than the socialist realist critiques of the 1940s and 1950s, it is, however, also significantly more politicized than the readings promoted by Zábřana and other critics toward the end of the 1960s. These “moderate” readings were in place for a relatively long period, and it was not until the Velvet Revolution that the regime was changed – and with it its readers.