

# Transnational Moments of Change

Europe 1945, 1968, 1989

Edited by  
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and Padraic Kenney

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Alexandr (Saša) Vondra; (reclining, front) Danuta Winiarska, Jacek Kuroń

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62. Gilcher-Holtey, "Phantasie an die Macht," 304.

63. This brief synopsis of workers' councils in the Czechoslovak state is largely based on the following works: Vladimír Fišera, ed., *Workers' Councils in Czechoslovakia: Documents and Essays 1968–69* (London: Allison & Busby, 1978); Joseph and Vladimír Fišera, "Cogestion des entreprises et économie socialiste—l'expérience tchécoslovaque, 1967–1970," *Revue de l'Est* 2 (January 1971): 39–67; and Miloš Barta, "Les conseils ouvriers en tant que mouvement social," *Autogestion et Socialisme* 9–10 (September–December 1969): 3–36.

64. These and the following passages on the Portuguese Revolution rely on two key studies of the dynamics of "the revolution of the carnations," as the Portuguese Revolution came to be called: John Hammond, *Building Popular Power: Workers' and Neighborhood Movements in the Portuguese Revolution* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1988) and, more important yet, Gérard Filoche, *Printemps portugais* (Paris: Actéon, 1984).

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## 1968 East and West

## Visions of Political Change and Student Protest from across the Iron Curtain

*Paulina Bren*

The year 1968 was one during which politics East and West became, at least temporarily, a testing ground of new ideas and discoveries. In Prague, the ideological commotion was felt keenly in the details of daily life: Previously banned books went on sale; films from the West arrived in cinemas; music clubs filled with long-haired beatniks; students packed their bags and traveled West for the first time; and the previously ignored communist newspapers turned into lively forums of debate, selling out within hours. With the gradual cessation of censorship and the growing possibility of unrestricted travel, information and ideas moved east to west and west to east in a way that was unique in the experience of a postwar divided Europe.

While Czechoslovakia experimented with its politics, new visions for the future were being formulated simultaneously in the western half of Europe. Protests in France, Germany, and Italy did not go unseen by the Czech student movement. My central concern in the following essay is how Czech students during the Prague Spring looked on antigovernment youth protests taking place elsewhere during the same year, and how we might benefit from the juxtaposition of 1968 East and West in understanding this defining year of the postwar period that, after over thirty years, still remains curiously undefined and elusive.

My main focus will be the weekly newspaper of Czech university students, *Student*. Originally a faithful organ of the official Czechoslovak Youth Union, *Student* went on to become an independent and radically outspoken publication that the Soviets themselves took note of, later citing it as a political provocation. Indeed, the development of the weekly itself—its content, the political nature of its articles, its increasing awareness of student movements to the west of Czechoslovakia's borders—moved parallel with the Czech student

movement's own formation, expansion, and eventual factionalism. In the following pages, I trace how Czech students defined themselves and their politics on the pages of *Student*, particularly in relation to the simultaneous protests on the streets of Western Europe. My purpose is to expand our understanding of what happened in that pivotal year, not so much by focusing on the narrative of events in a single national context but rather on the interrelations of the political ideologies being played out East and West in 1968.

### THE 1960s STUDENT GENERATION IN THE MAKING

In comparison to Hungary, Poland, and East Germany after 1953, de-Stalinization in Czechoslovakia took place only slowly, hampered by the reluctance of government leaders to expose their own collusion in the 1950s Stalinist show trials. When political liberalization did finally come to Czechoslovakia, it appeared as a relaxation of not only political but also cultural boundaries. For example, at the 1965 student springtime festivities known as the *Majáles*—more absurdist theater than political demonstration—the American beatnik poet Allen Ginsberg was crowned king.<sup>1</sup> The journalist Tad Szulc described the spirit of 1960s Czechoslovakia as altogether synonymous “with jazz and the big-beat sound as if in retaliation against years of Stalinist monotony and boredom. . . . Blue jeans and beards appeared in Prague and Bratislava.”<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, what Prague's students were expressing in their daily attire of jeans and beards, as well as their recently reinstated springtime celebrations, was not a clearly articulated political thesis but a basic discontent to which they believed they had a right unlike any other generation before them. Journalist Alan Levy encountered this attitude in conversations with a nineteen-year-old who explained, “The Stalinists of the 1950's, they wrote off our parents, but they counted on us. They shouldn't have. I've lived all my life under one system, so I have every right to criticize it.”<sup>3</sup>

This young man's presumption was echoed in scientific surveys conducted for the Communist Party by a growing number of sociologists practicing a new field of research called “youth studies.” Based on this research, a 1965 internal government report, for example, asserted that contemporary youth were politically handicapped for never having experienced World War II or “the consequent class war” that, for their parents' generation, had functioned as “the greatest school of life.” The generation now reaching maturity in the 1960s instead had experienced, according to the report, “a complicated social and political development, particularly as of the year 1956.” For them, socialism was no longer an idealized political notion but instead a lived experience: “In contrast to the first postwar generation of young people, for whom socialism was primarily an imagined ideal . . . for today's generation of youth, socialism is an objective reality.”<sup>4</sup> For the 1960s generation,

the outcome of this firsthand experience with “socialism” was, according to the experts, an obsessive focus on “social economics” and “a desire for independent thought and communication that is then tied in with an increased level of criticism.” Like a cantankerous old man, this government report and others of its kind lamented youth's physical comforts, its ample leisure time, and its unending demands and saw warning signs in its tendency to ignore party-organized activities and instead to assemble in informal groups that “create their own norms for behavior which they then strictly hold and enforce.” As government reports confirmed, this generation unflinchingly critiqued the shortcomings of socialist society. They were, unlike European youth west of the border, realists rather than dreamers.

Jiřina Šiklová, known later for her work as a political dissident but then still a sociologist and practitioner of the new youth studies, argued in 1967 in an article in *Student* that “if the West German sociologist [Hans Heinrich] Muchow states that contemporary youth have no consistent life models, it seems that this is twice so in our case.”<sup>5</sup> Not only were Czech youth as bereft of heroes and mentors as their West German counterparts, but Czech students further felt attacked by the Communist Party for belonging to the “intelligentsia.” As another editorial in *Student* explained, the party deemed studying suspicious and, therefore, to be supplemented by university students' “heightened [official] political activity and, once they'd finished studying, by as low a salary as possible.” The party encouraged the impression that “work at school was not considered work.”<sup>6</sup> This, continued the editorial's author, was the reason for the low number of young people who had any interest in Communist Party membership. As the reform Communist and head of state television Jiří Pelikán admitted, the difference between his generation and this younger generation of intelligentsia was that

our generation had the advantage that the politics of the communist party represented the politics that a large portion of students and the intelligentsia understood as progressive politics. . . . Therefore [unlike today], it was precisely the active and elite part [of the student body] that had felt that the party and its politics belonged to them.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast, the student generation of the 1960s did not feel that the Communist Party belonged to them, and in fact neither they nor the party seemed sure of whether they wanted one another.

These uneasy relations were at the center of Czechoslovakia's best-known student protest, in 1967 at the Strahov dormitories located just behind the Prague castle. On the night of 31 October, the dormitory lights went out. The dormitory had been experiencing electrical outages for some time, an inconvenience that usually resulted in students cursing out loud in their dormitory rooms, floating burning slips of paper from their windows, and then con-

gregating in small groups in the courtyard from where they usually moved on to Prague's pubs and nightclubs. On 31 October the students gathered in the courtyard and shouts of "Let's all go out!" began to be heard. According to one of the students there, they all began to march down toward the castle and then on toward Nerudová street, shouting, "We want light!" Students were quickly surrounded by police cars, and when they turned to climb back up toward the castle, the police drove their vehicles up and down the street, squeezing the students onto the sidewalks. The main infraction took place when the police followed the students inside the courtyard of the dormitory, which students had assumed was a safe zone, and there attacked them with batons and tear gas.<sup>8</sup> This violent confrontation between students and police did not, however, immediately prompt comparison with Western European student demonstrations. What was central to the "Strahov" affair was the show of police brutality against the students, which further indicated the deteriorating relations between the regime and the intelligentsia, who were being "handled like an enemy class."<sup>9</sup>

Comparisons between Western European student protests and Strahov did not immediately come to mind at the time because both the domestic and international issues at stake East and West were markedly different. This was particularly clear in the case of student protests over the Vietnam War. In February 1968, university students from Brno embarked on a seven-day, 238-kilometer march to Prague in protest of the American war in Vietnam. But, unlike similar antiwar protests in the United States, this one was obviously in line with officially held views, and it thereby lacked a certain veracity. According to one participant, the weeklong march had ended with a friendly glass of Pepsi Cola at the American Embassy, "sincere moments" at the embassy of the Vietnamese Democratic Republic, and snacks with nonreformist former Communist Party first secretary Antonín Novotný, who, while dethroned in January and replaced with Alexander Dubček, was still stubbornly clinging to the role of Czechoslovak president.

Nevertheless, the Brno students must have sensed the awkwardness of their position, for they bristled on overhearing the conclusion of one party secretary regarding their antiwar protest march: "See, students don't just take part in unannounced demonstrations [i.e., Strahov], they're even capable of nice little political actions such as this." Despite their tea with Novotný, the Brno marchers insisted that their protest was "a part of the rising wave of student political activities."<sup>10</sup> Yet in February 1968, this was still more a case of wishful thinking than anything else. Most Czech students remained reluctant to veer from Communist Party programs and strike out as an independent political force.

The best-known exception to this was a group of university students who had first made a name for themselves when they infiltrated the official Youth Union back in 1965 and boldly declared that, if necessary, the union should

act as a potential opponent to party policy. While the "Prague radicals"—as this group of students consequently came to be known publicly—lost their group identity when the unpopular Youth Union was eventually dissolved, some of the group's original members became key student leaders during 1968 and continued to push (although never abandon) the party's boundaries.<sup>11</sup> Thus, while some of the Brno students might indeed have envisioned their antiwar march as part of a continuum of student protest in Europe, it was these several student Prague radicals, as they continued to be called, who actively envisioned a Czech student movement that would eventually have more in common with student protests in the West than with the reformist but still pointedly conservative Prague Spring government led by First Secretary Alexander Dubček under the banner of "socialism with a human face."

Indeed, the question of what leftist political protest meant in a state that, at least theoretically, professed to occupy just such a stand came to the fore during a mass student debate organized at the huge Prague Congress Palace. When prominent student leader and Prague radical Luboš Holeček took to the podium, he declared that the main obstacle to the formation of a Czech student movement was students' inexperience with politics. According to Holeček, Czech students first had "to learn to think politically, to learn how to put such a program together . . . [because for] twenty years we have not been given the opportunity."<sup>12</sup> Another well-known student leader and Prague radical, Jiří Müller, emphasized in an interview conducted around the time of the Congress Palace meeting that the reformist ethos expressed in the recent January 1968 Communist Party Plenum (which had ousted First Secretary Novotný and brought the more liberal Alexander Dubček into power) represented great hopes not only for him but also for "many people with leftist opinions from non-socialist countries." Such people, according to Müller, long had viewed socialist Czechoslovakia as the embodiment of their dreams and thus had refused to hear of its reality, "believing it [that reality] less, the more to the left they stood." "Today," however, Müller declared, "we have the chance to create a society that finally can be an attractive alternative in all respects."<sup>13</sup>

But what would this alternative be? As an editorial in *Student* confessed, "[t]he current situation desperately demands ideas, but they will not fall from the sky. . . . There is no one among us, friends, who is up to the task. Not even [student leaders] Holeček or Müller are the messiahs, nor do they want to be."<sup>14</sup> It seemed that the Czech student movement, which had begun its life in 1963 when the "Prague radicals" first infiltrated the official Youth Union, had since developed along the lines of what these students did not want. In 1968, faced with the possibility for change, students found it hard to envision what they did want, in large part because of their lack of practice in thinking about politics beyond the parameters of the Communist Party. At

the same time, having experienced the application of "communism" firsthand, they were unable to imagine an idealized rosy (or "red") future as persistently as could their Western European counterparts.

### "RED" RUDI DUTSCHKE IN PRAGUE

With Czech students anxious to define themselves as political beings, and with the Czech student movement still missing its crucial political platform, the Western European student movement was one of the few models available to them. Interestingly, *Student* carried little on the French demonstrations, and what it did bring to its readers about the events at Nanterre and on the streets of Paris was more informative than it was instructive or polemic. In contrast, the West German student movement, and particularly its charismatic leader Rudi Dutschke, made a more significant impact on Czech students, partly because of Germany's geographic proximity but also because of Dutschke's visit to Prague in April. Student Milan Hauner wrote about Rudi Dutschke for *Student*—first about Dutschke's visit to Prague, then about a visit by Czech students to see Dutschke in Berlin, and finally a multipart series about Dutschke's political philosophy.

In the first piece about "Red" Rudi's lecture trip to Prague, Hauner began by trying to describe the politics of the German student leader whose visit, he claimed, had been ignored by the Czechoslovak press "for unexplained reasons": "Is he a Maoist, Trotskyist, Marxist, even a Liebknechtist, or else simply an ordinary beatnik who provocatively enters into discussions . . . in the uniform of today's protesting youth: in jeans, a sweater, an overgrown shock of raven hair?" While Hauner was evidently curious as well as admiring of Dutschke, and particularly of Dutschke's command of a well-thought-out political language, Hauner also recognized that Dutschke's political interventions seemed out of context when spoken in communist Czechoslovakia: "[when he speaks,] German romanticism and revolutionary radicalism are wed. In our circumstances, he could perhaps gather only tired surprise [from his audience]." Nevertheless, it was Dutschke's charisma that had carried the day, according to Hauner, and in the end he had managed during the course of his lecture to overcome his listeners' initial apathy.<sup>15</sup>

Following Dutschke's formal presentation, the German student leader met with Czech students on a more informal basis, and it was here, as Hauner admitted, that a certain "embarrassing mutual schooling" took place. Dutschke was highly critical of current capitalism; on the other hand, he was excessively optimistic about its transformations under a "direct democracy." According to Hauner, "[a]mong our students, the situation was just about the opposite. And even Rudi's well-formulated phrases did not manage to convince our disillusioned ones that the future direct democracy

with 'new people' will not lead to the abuse of power." In Hauner's assessment, Dutschke seemed to want to have his cake and eat it, too: "In his utopian combination he is trying to fuse the productive capacities of America with the ascetic morality of the Chinese."<sup>16</sup> Many of the Czech students in attendance obviously considered Dutschke naive in contrast to their "hard-won realism."

Yet Hauner remained intrigued by Dutschke and his obvious mastery of a new Marxist-based political language that, although admittedly utopian, nevertheless underscored the political provincialism lurking inside the Czechoslovak 1968 reform movement. As Hauner noted, "Dutschke long ago integrated the realities of the third world into his theories," while most Czech students remained woefully ignorant about the activities of their fellow students abroad.<sup>17</sup> Although the more radical Czech students had recognized this and had sworn to confront this problem through a political platform of their own, no such thing had yet happened. A short while after Dutschke's visit, a new student organization was formed to replace the previous official Youth Union. Named the Association of University Students, its members did present a "program," but one that amounted to little more than a list of demands with which the Dubček-led government could have easily agreed.<sup>18</sup> A week later, Karel Kovanda, the most radical of the student "Prague radicals," wrote in *Student* that "[t]oday the question apparently is not against what we're fighting, but for what we're fighting." In his opinion, any student organization that was to be "vibrant, long-term, and capable of action" would "necessarily have to be created from the bottom up."<sup>19</sup> While Kovanda seemed to favor some sort of Maoist-inspired student revolt (which he never clearly defined), it was becoming evident that the most that Czech students could offer was a replica of the already-established reform communist program that Dubček's government was pursuing.

Toward the end of May, news on the recent protests at the Sorbonne in Paris appeared in an article in *Student*. The conclusions drawn about the Paris events again reflected concerns about the Czech student movement itself:

We must realize that only 8% of [French] students are from workers' families and the majority of students do not stand behind socialism or communism. . . . Here is the problem with the whole student movement. Many various groups, many various demands, many leaders, but behind it all there is little unity . . . without unity and without joining up with other layers of society, they will not win their most basic demands.<sup>20</sup>

Not only were Czech students keenly aware that they themselves lacked political coherence, but any earlier desire to replicate the Western European student movements was now quickly wearing off as they failed to locate a clear unity among French or German students as well.

Indeed, Milan Hauner was also sounding less positive about Rudi Dutschke after visiting him in Berlin in May with a Czech student delegation for a working seminar that had been arranged during Dutschke's earlier visit to Prague. Since then, Dutschke had been shot by an outraged German citizen and was now convalescing from the assassination attempt. At first unable to gain access to Dutschke, the Czech students were eventually contacted by his wife, who informed them that Dutschke was willing to meet; following a two-hour wait, they were brought in to see him: "He sat us around him and we immediately had to tell him how things were going. It was amazing to watch him. He was literally brimming with energy, burning with curiosity, and one could in no way tell that he was having difficulties with his memory or searching for words as the result of a dangerous injury to the brain." This almost Christ-like figure, holding court with the Czech students, proved to be increasingly fallible, however: As Hauner wrote, over the course of "two improvised discussion evenings, the deep disagreement between our group and the German interrogators visibly revealed itself."<sup>21</sup> Despite admiration for Dutschke, the different points of view of the Czech students versus the West German students inevitably clashed.

The crucial division between the two groups, as they saw it, centered on the German students' inability to distinguish utopia from reality, goals from the means to achieving those goals, and theory from practice: "We did not hide our deep skepticism toward any kind of perfect utopia," Hauner noted. The German students' main emphasis, he wrote, was "the creation of an ideal type socialist democracy whose main foundation had to be the control of production and decision-making by all workers based on a system of representative councils at all workplaces, for purposes of guaranteeing the growth of initiative from below." While they all agreed on this, since both sides were interested in discussing socialism, they ceased to agree the moment conversation turned to the practical application of these ideas. The Czech group insisted that the application of a theory "always rests on living people and historical conditions," making it messy and more complicated than initially anticipated. The German students, much to the annoyance of the Czech students, maintained their orthodox theories despite the Czechs offering them "an expansive palette of empirical examples based on our twenty year history." The Czech students increasingly began to feel that many among the German student group were being politically radical just for the sake of being so, and in fact willing to be so at any price.

### ITALIAN "TERRORISM"

Hauner's article describing the visit to Dutschke did end on a positive note: Hauner believed that more Czech students finally were beginning to rec-

ognize the international links between student movements in industrially developed countries, be they capitalist or socialist. In other words, despite disagreement about political programs, harmony could potentially be reached on the basis of a critique of industrialized culture and its damage to democratic practices East and West. Indeed, yet another month later, in July, *Student* published an article in which the authors argued that the Strahov student demonstration in Prague had been part of the chain that recently had proven established regimes vulnerable to citizen protest. They further insisted that this generation's critique of industrialized society—the very bond, they explained, that tied Strahov to Berlin to Nanterre to Turin—was applicable across the capitalist-socialist divide; that is, the key elements of a youth-driven cultural revolution were relevant to both Eastern and Western Europe.

Yet, following this enthusiastic declaration, the two authors turned to the topic of the student revolt in Italy specifically. Here they judged the cultural revolution to have overstepped its boundaries, in the process becoming—they argued—an all-too-familiar sight to anyone who had lived through the 1950s in Czechoslovakia. It was understandable and acceptable that student protestors had brought the Cannes film festival in France to a halt; but what was not acceptable was that "the ultra-left student movement" had then proceeded to do the same at the socialist-organized and, therefore, presumably student- and worker-friendly Pesaro film festival in Italy. In their eyes, this, unlike the Cannes affair, had amounted to an unjustified act of "terrorism." The authors described how, in the name of revolutionary struggle, workers had been brought into the salon at Pesaro, and then, "as you will recall from the nineteen-fifties," a debate proceeded in which the workers were not asked their opinion, and after a while the workers simply "announced that they must return to work" and that these sorts of films did not interest them anyway.<sup>22</sup>

The Czech student authors concluded that "a program of absolute negation is no program at all" and that the problem with all of the student movements in Western Europe is that "they're missing any kind of practical experience with socialism." The results of this lack of experience could be seen in the current trend for "revolutionary snobbism" reminiscent of the "salon Bolshevism" of the 1930s in Czechoslovakia. Another aspect of this "revolutionary snobbism" was, according to the two authors, the Western European students' rejection of "Europeanism," and therefore also of Europe's political and cultural centrality. Czech students, in their own brand of "snobbism," found the Western student movements' rejection of Europe particularly irksome for it flew in the face of their own goals. While Italian students had taken to chanting, "Asia, Africa, Latin America, YES! Europe and North America, NO!" Czech students were trying to break away from the tutelage of the Soviet Union and openly reappropriate the label of "European."<sup>23</sup>

By late June 1968, the Prague radicals were polemicizing with the student officials of the recently formed Association of University Students on the pages of *Student*. Unlike the "Prague radicals," the association believed that Czech students' concerns should remain largely within the domain of student-related issues such as housing, class size, university admissions procedures, and so forth. Arguments between the two groups were audibly conducted against the backdrop of the Western European student movements about which Czech students had by now had time to learn and form an opinion. Petr Rybář, chair of the Association of University Students, discussed his views in an interview in *Student* where he explained that, to his mind, a Czech student movement did not in fact exist and was only revealed sporadically during crises such as Strahov and the days that followed. In answer to the question of why a majority of students remained politically passive, Rybář replied that this was the way it should be: "A student is a student, and his task is first and foremost to study."<sup>24</sup> In mid-July, Karel Kovanda replied that, on the contrary, more Czech students "are beginning to realize the similarities between our university system and that in Western Europe," both of which are breeding grounds for antiquated teaching methods and uncritical thinking. Moreover, with a new, left-thinking opposition emerging in Czechoslovakia, and with students taking trips to Western Europe for the summer, where they planned to acquire "new experiences with the student struggle," Kovanda predicted student unrest, protest, and political action in Prague in the autumn of 1968.<sup>25</sup>

A week later, Rostislav Pšenko, a founding member of the Association of University Students, offered a rebuttal to Kovanda and his "fellow Prague radicals." In his piece, he sardonically congratulated all Czech students on finally having achieved "all we could possibly want: a [political] right, left, and center." The political "right" had been represented recently in an article in *Kulturní Tvorba* (Cultural Production) by the Prague caucus of student-communists, whereas Kovanda, in his last article in *Student*, had put out the call for a Maoist cultural revolution come autumn, thus assuming the position of the "left." The Association of University Students (seeing itself as representing the political center) was thus far resisting both ends of the spectrum: on the one hand, holding off joining the ruling National Front until it could be sure of its reformist integrity and, on the other hand, negating calls by the Prague radicals for an immediate revolution.

What troubled Pšenko the most was Kovanda's demand that the Association of University Students not only remain outside the National Front—as they were in fact currently doing—but also that it step outside "democratic society" and exist on its more provocative margins. For whereas Pšenko agreed with Kovanda that Czechoslovakia belonged to the industrialized nations and shared many of the same problems, his concern was that the discrepancies between an industrialized Western Europe and an

industrialized (but economically less successful) Eastern Europe be dealt with directly. Instead, Pšenko claimed, Kovanda was coating very real problems in Maoist or Guevara-infused language, leading Pšenko to recall the climate of 1930s Czechoslovakia when the Communist Party, instead of occupying itself with the genuine political problems facing the country, spent its time constructing Soviet-like statements. In other words, the Prague radicals were offering not solutions but mere phrases borrowed from elsewhere that were unsuitable to the experience of Czechoslovakia in 1968.

In fact, Pšenko continued, "I unfortunately believe, and many people with me, that these people [the Prague radicals] are more concerned that their colleagues in the West might laugh at them if they were to demand democratic institutions—this being such bourgeois rot."<sup>26</sup> In this vein, claimed Pšenko, the Prague radicals had been trying to shape the symbolism of Strahov in accordance with student protests in Western Europe when in fact Strahov had been a more politically ambiguous event. Pšenko argued that it was entirely "disorienting" for students to be told that "our 'little' Strahov demonstration" was on a par with recent Western European protests. For members of the new Association of University Students, the Western European and Czechoslovak political demonstrations had opposite purposes, appropriate to two significantly different contexts: Student protests in the West were a response to the reigning "extreme order" (represented by entrenched postwar governments) that the students wished to disturb and provoke and, thereby, ultimately challenge in the name of creating change; in Czechoslovakia, on the other hand, some sort of "order" based not on arbitrary Communist Party power but on popular demand was being created. Yet the most extreme of the Prague radicals, Karel Kovanda, in his overwhelming desire to copy his Western European student colleagues, was trying to take apart this new "order" before it had been even fully constructed.

In Pšenko's view, "[w]hat this society needs—having developed for twenty years in the opposite direction to the west—is genuine, democratic rights." To his mind, this was what he had been trying to do when he, along with the Prague radicals, first worked to shift student representation away from the monopoly of the party-led official Youth Union. But the Prague radicals then had gone further, continuing to work on the margins and resisting membership in any official organization, even if it were independent of the Communist Party, as was the newly created Association of University Students. The most powerful weapons against those who wished to halt the current democratizing process, Pšenko argued, "will be for quite some time, at least in this country, the classical weapons, such as institutions."<sup>27</sup> For this reason, institutions remained paramount to the political battle for "socialism with a human face."



## POLAND 1968

In contrast to the Western European protests, the 1968 Polish student protests and the accompanying government-endorsed anti-Semitic attacks seemed more relevant to the Czechoslovak experience, filled not only with familiar episodes but also with related warnings about the volatile mixture of politics, protest, communism, and the very real possibility of Soviet or else domestic repression. The geographic as well as political proximity of the Polish case was felt in the reportage on Poland. Articles in both *Student* and *Literární Listy*, the weekly for the more established generation of the intelligentsia, nervously documented the fear felt on the streets of Warsaw and in personal encounters with Poles. Many Polish students, too—unlike some Italian students who in 1968 chanted, “We are not with Dubček. We are with Mao.”<sup>28</sup>—felt linked to the Czechs and the Prague Spring, chanting in protest, “Bravo Czechs!” and “Poland is waiting for its Dubček!”<sup>29</sup>

The Polish and the Soviet Communist governments seemed also to believe that the Polish 1968 was related to the Czechoslovak Prague Spring, and vice versa. As articles in *Student* noted, journalists with the Czech press as well as Czech students had been turned away at the Polish border and not allowed to enter the country; both were viewed as agents of antistate dissent. It was reported in *Student* that in Warsaw the government had whipped up a public campaign that typecast both students and “Zionists” (read: Jews) as national traitors, claiming they were closely aligned with the antisocialist reformist forces in Czechoslovakia operating under the guidance of First Secretary Alexander Dubček.<sup>30</sup> In May, *Student* printed a translation of an interview in the Soviet press with Soviet minister of education V. N. Stoletov, who discussed the current “problems” in Poland: “When we’re talking about individual lost sheep, it is not so hard to help them. Worse is when whole groups of them pop up and when their actions have nothing in common with the real interests of the people and the country.” In the same breath, Stoletov then criticized the “Czechoslovak weekly *Student* [which], for example, recently started propagating the idea of creating a student organization that has nothing in common with the Communist Party and the ČSM [the official Youth Union].”<sup>31</sup>

When it came time to take steps against the Prague Spring, Poland’s Communist leader Władysław Gomułka, afraid of the ideological penetration of the Czechoslovak-Polish border, “was one of the most ardent spokesmen in the Warsaw Pact urging [Soviet leader] Brezhnev to unleash the military action in Czechoslovakia.”<sup>32</sup> It was perhaps the mutual recognition of both Polish and Czech students that they were not just playing with words—which, rightly or wrongly, they often assumed to be the case with student activists in the West—but in fact playing with fire, and a dangerous fire at that, which made their experiences seem more relevant to one another than did the cases of Berlin, Paris, or Turin.

## CONCLUSION

Ironically, it was the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia on 21 August 1968 that politicized Czechoslovak students as never before; 30 percent of students had been politically “engaged” before August, whereas that percentage doubled in the autumn.<sup>33</sup> Students managed to organize a strike and issue a Ten Points manifesto in November, but the content of that manifesto revealed, as the sociologist Jiřina Šiklová would write, that there was in fact no student movement to speak of. Any student movement, as such, remained split between different ideological orientations, organizations, and locations (e.g., with Prague more radicalized than Brno); and ultimately, despite student leader Holeček’s promise in March 1968 that youth would create their own alternate program, there was none, and students by and large promoted the same reformist program as Dubček’s Prague Spring government.<sup>34</sup>

Moreover, as a result of their strike, which the students quickly saw had had no effect on the fast-disappearing reforms in a now Soviet-occupied Czechoslovakia, students split into two distinct groups: The majority of students sank back into political passivity, whereas a minority became even more radicalized. The radicalized students, influenced by the “new left” in the West, formed the “Movement of Revolutionary Youth,” but its members were quickly brought to trial by the post-Prague Spring orthodox Communist government that took power in April 1969.<sup>35</sup> As for the passive majority, one Communist Party report from spring 1969 noted, “Among them are most of those who long for nothing other than for a satisfied, materially secured life, an idol to which they are willing to sacrifice everything, if not today then tomorrow.”<sup>36</sup> And so the platform for post-Prague Spring “normalization” was born, with citizens encouraged to pursue the dream of materialism rather than the dream of revolution.

The claim was—and still is—frequently made that in 1968 Czech students were shaping politics, whereas Western European students were only playing politics. But an exploration of the Czech student movement suggests that the situation was far more complicated, with Czech students in fact finding themselves disoriented in the newly politicized environment of 1968. With the end of censorship came information, and as Czech students learned of their Western European counterparts, the majority of them did not in fact immediately relate Czechoslovakia’s political needs to Western European students’ demands. In Czechoslovakia, where the push for reforming communism had been initiated by worries over the sharply falling socialist economy, applying the ideas of Herbert Marcuse and his critique of industrialized consumerism—as some among the Prague radicals wished to do—seemed strangely out of place. Moreover, the inspiration derived by many student activists in the West from Maoist and Guevara-inspired revolution did not resonate among the majority of Czech students and, if anything, reminded them all too eerily of snapshots from their

country's recent Stalinist past, a legacy with which Czechoslovakia was trying to come to terms rather than repeat.

In addition, whereas in Western Europe students attacked their governments and its affiliated institutions as purveyors of outdated hierarchies and oppressive systems, in Czechoslovakia many students argued that they needed to build up democratic institutions rather than tear them down. In this sense, they were never sure whether they were ahead of the students in the West by virtue of already having experienced the gritty realities of a revolutionary utopianism or else lagging behind their Western counterparts because they had yet to possess the sort of institutions that Western European students were already critiquing. Being "realistic" leftists, as they would argue, most Czech students tended to express opinions that converged with the Dubček-led government, rather than defied it, thereby further complicating the notion of student protest as "antigovernment" protest.

Juxtaposing the 1968 student movement in Western Europe with the Czechoslovak case offers up valuable insights. First, the "iron curtain" seems to have been less impenetrable than imagined, evidenced by the political dialogue between Eastern and Western Europeans prior to 1989. Second, the inherent difficulties of that dialogue, of finding a common political language with which to speak—a difficulty usually associated with the post-1989 period in Europe—was already present among students in 1968 when, as Milan Hauner noted, meetings between German and Czech students inevitably began with an "embarrassing mutual schooling," in which each side tried to explain their political "reality" to their impatient guests. Moreover, this "embarrassing mutual schooling" continued on into the 1980s in dialogues between Eastern European dissidents and Western European leftists: Eastern European dissidents were shocked by many of their Western colleagues' insistence on unilateral disarmament (which the Eastern European dissidents found to be entirely naive), whereas Western European leftists were horrified by the Eastern European dissidents' enthusiastic approval of Reaganite policies toward the Soviet bloc.

Third, and most interestingly, a transnational examination of the events of 1968 begins to undermine the distorted view of a Cold War discourse. Within this dominant discourse, communist Eastern Europe's economic lag is automatically extended to assume a concomitant political and cultural delay as well. But in 1968, while Czech students were certainly not politically well defined or organized, they were skilled social critics of the socialist system in which they lived. As such, they often found the hopes for a perfect socialist society—be it modeled on the ideas of Lenin, Stalin, Mao, Guevara, or Castro—unrealistic, outdated, and reminiscent of the misplaced faith of the older generation of Czech intelligentsia, students from the 1950s who, at most, had functioned as the party's "loyal opposition." From this perspective, one could say that it was the Western European students who were lagging behind.

But the 1968 Prague Spring did not only affect Czechs and Slovaks. The Warsaw Pact troops' physical intervention into Czechoslovakia, aimed solely to put an end to its political experiments, forced many Western leftists to rethink their relationship to communism. Interestingly, an Italian Communist named Avellino visited Prague in 1970 and reported that Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism had become the "dominant ideological influence" among Czech students, just as it had been among French students in the early post-war years. This was not, he argued, a "cultural lag" but represented "the same cultural and ideological resentment. Static opposition. Existentialism as a polemical reply to normalization in the Prague of 1970."<sup>37</sup> Having experienced the bankruptcy of utopianism, Czech students returned to its antithesis in quiet protest.

## NOTES

1. For more on the effects of Western cultural influences in communist Eastern Europe, see Paulina Bren, "Looking West: Popular Culture and the Generation Gap in Communist Czechoslovakia, 1969–1989," in *Representations and Cultural Exchanges across the Atlantic: Europe and the United States 1800–2000*, ed. Luisa Passerini (Brussels: PIE Lang, 2000).
2. Tad Szulc, *Czechoslovakia since World War II* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1972), 194.
3. Alan Levy, *So Many Heroes* (New York: Second Chance Press, 1980), 66.
4. State Central Archives (Prague), Archive of the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party; materials of the Ideological Commission (Fond 10/5); folder 6: *Problematika současné mladé generace*; materials for the seventeenth meeting of the Central Committee's Ideological Commission on 7 October 1965.
5. Jiřina Šiklová, "Ideály posluchačů Karlovy university," *Student* 49 (6 December 1967): 1.
6. Jiří Hanák, "O mostu inteligence," *Student* 13 (27 March 1968): 1.
7. "Beseda o únoru a dnešku s těmi co věděli, že svět patří jim," *Student* 8 (21 February 1968): 6.
8. "Podvědomy počet strachu hrůzy nelidkosti" [interview with Pavel Dvořák], *Student* 14 (3 April 1968): 3.
9. Document: "Záznam televizního rozhovoru šéfredaktora Televizních novin Československé televize Kamila Wintra s předsedou Svazu československých spisovatelů Eduardem Goldstückerem [4 February 1968, Prague]," in Jitka Vondrová, Jaromír Navrátil, and Jan Morvec, *Komunistická strana Československa: Pokus o reformu (říjen 1967—květen 1968)* (Brno: Doplněk, 1999), 66.
10. Ladislav Kadavý, "Válka je vůl: Pokus definici protestního pochodu," *Student* 9 (28 February 1968): 5.
11. Students associated most readily with the Prague radicals included Karel Kovanda, Jan Kavan, Jiří Müller, and Luboš Holeček. Yet the Prague radical position was never clearly defined in large part because it differed significantly from one member

to another. While Müller and Holeček had been pivotal in initiating organized student discontent, the government quickly managed to have them conscripted into the army, thereby limiting their political involvement and influence. Kavan and Kovanda thus became better known, with Kovanda emerging as the most radical of the "radicals." For more on this, see Milan Hauner, "Czechoslovakia," *Students, University and Society*, ed. Margaret Scotford Archer (London: Heinemann Education Books, 1972).

12. Open Society Archives (Budapest): Section: Czechoslovakia; subject file: Propaganda; folder: Rallies 1967–1971: Radio Transcript: "Pokračování diskuse ve Sjezdové paláci konaná 20.3.68," 170.

13. Jiří Müller, "Odmítali vnímat, co jsem jim říkal," *Student* 11 (13 March 1968): 5.

14. Ladislav Kadavý, "Co se děje mezi studenty," *Student* 16 (17 April 1968): 8.

15. Milan Hauner, "Rudý Rudi v Praze," *Student* 17 (24 April 1968): 1. At this formal gathering, Dutschke also offered his advice on the Czechoslovak Prague Spring. In his view, a "palace coup" by reactionary forces within the government existed as a real possibility. For this reason, the progressive students and others should not, Dutschke said, shy away from identifying "counter-revolutionaries" and moving against them.

16. Hauner, "Rudý Rudi v Praze," 4.

17. Hauner, "Rudý Rudi v Praze," 4.

18. These demands included the reduction of mandatory army service; the removal from government of persons responsible for past political injustices; participation in rethinking the organization and program of the ruling National Front; the cessation of phone tapping and mail intervention; the end of restrictions on travel within the country; and for those being charged with crimes, treatment according to "human principles." "Návrh programu Svazu vysokoškolských studentů," *Student* 18 (30 April 1968): 8.

19. Karel Kovanda, "Jakou chceme organizaci," *Student* 19 (7 May 1968): 7.

20. Milan Syruček, "Proč vlaje rudý a černý prapor nad Sorbonou," *Student* 22 (29 May 1968): 10.

21. Milan Hauner, "Rudi Dutschke v rekonvalescenci," *Student* 25 (19 June 1968): 4. All of the following quotations about the Czech students' visit to see Dutschke are from Hauner's article. Dutschke also informed them that the sociologist Herbert Marcuse—as Hauner explained to his readers, "considered the spiritual father of the contemporary student movement in the capitalist world"—wished to visit Czechoslovakia in the autumn to address student forums there.

22. Ivo Ponděliček and Jan Svoboda, "Dětské nemoci, Studentské moci," *Student* 29 (17 July 1968): 5.

23. Their *modus vivendi* was summed up by the philosopher Ivan Sviták and his "Ten Commandments for a Young Czechoslovak Intellectual." Commandment 6 read, "Don't think only as a Czech or a Slovak, think also like a European. . . . You live in Europe; you don't live in America nor in the Soviet Union." Ivan Sviták, "Desatero příkázání pro mladého intelektuála," *Student* 11 (13 March 1968): 1.

24. "Student má studovat" [interview with Petr Rybář by Ladislav Kadavý], *Student* 25 (19 June 1968): 5.

25. Karel Kovanda, "Bude v Praze studentská revolta?" *Student* 29 (17 July 1968): 1.

26. Rostislav Pšenko, "Jak 'revoltovat,'" *Student* 30 (24 July 1968): 4–7.

27. Pšenko, "Jak, revoltovat." Jiří Müller responded to Pšenko in the 14 August issue of *Student*, but his objections largely centered around Pšenko's presumption in lumping the Prague radicals together when, in fact, "they all have very different opinions."

28. Stuart J. Hilwig, "The Revolt against the Establishment: Students versus the Press in West Germany and Italy," in *1968: The World Transformed*, ed. Carole Fink, Philipp Gassert, and Detlef Junker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 338.

29. Milan Kroutva, "Polsko. Varšava," *Student* 14 (3 April 1968): 4.

30. V.S., "Varšavské ticho," *Student* 22 (29 May 1968): 1.

31. Student editorial staff, "'Student' ovečka zbloudilá," *Student* 21 (22 May 1968): 7.

32. Jerzy Eisler, "March 1968 in Poland," in *1968: The World Transformed*, 250.

33. Kieran Williams, *The Prague Spring and Its Aftermath: Czechoslovak Politics, 1968–1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 179.

34. Jiřina Šiklová, "Existuje u nás studentská 'new left'?" *Listy*, 21 November 1968.

35. For more on this see the article by one of its members: J. Suk, "Československá radikální levice," *Svědectví* 17, no. 67 (1982).

36. As quoted in Williams, *Prague Spring*, 251.

37. Open Society Archives (Budapest): Radio Free Europe Research Report, 11 November 1970; as quoted in Kevin Devlin, "Czech Youth Reject Normalization—Says Italian Communist."