

# **Across the Atlantic**

**Cultural Exchanges between  
Europe and the United States**



**P.I.E.-Peter Lang**

**Bruxelles • Bern • Berlin • Frankfurt/M • New York • Oxford • Wien**

## Table of Contents

Die Deutsche Bibliothek – CIP-Einheitsaufnahme

Across the Atlantic : Cultural exchanges between Europe and the United States / Luisa Passerini (ed.) – Bruxelles ; Bern ; Berlin ; Frankfurt/M. ; Oxford ; New York ; Wien : PIE Lang, 2000  
(Series Multiple Europes ; No. 13)  
ISBN 90-5201-926-6

*CIP available from the British Library, GB  
and the Library of Congress, USA.  
ISBN 0-8204-4665-3*

Cover photo : Battista Agnese, *Atlas*, Mid-XVI Century,  
British Library, Add. 18154, f. 12 v. - 13 r.

Cover : Safran, Brussels.

© P.I.E.-Peter Lang s.a.  
PRESSES INTERUNIVERSITAIRES EUROPÉENNES  
Brussels, 2000  
E-mail : info@peterlang.com

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form, by print, photocopy, micro-film or any other means, without prior written permission from the publisher. All rights reserved.

ISSN 1376-0904  
ISBN 90-5201-926-6  
D/2000/5678/17

|  |    |
|--|----|
| <b>Preface</b> .....   | 11 |
| An Experiment in Teaching and Learning<br><i>Ioanna Laliotou and Luisa Passerini</i> |    |

### PART I. CULTURAL IDENTITIES

|  |    |
|--|----|
| <b>Introduction</b> .....  | 19 |
| <i>Jerrold Seigel</i>  |    |
| <b>From Walden to Wilderness: The Making of<br/>Anglo-Saxon Identity in Nineteenth-Century America</b> .....                                 | 25 |
| <i>Pierangelo Castagneto</i>   |    |
| <b>The Changing Features of the Americans<br/>in the Eighteenth-Century <i>Britannica</i></b> .....  | 39 |
| <i>Silvia Sebastiani</i>   |    |
| <b>Prince Camaralzaman and Princess Badoura Come<br/>to Tea: Cosmopolitanism and the European Identity<br/>in <i>The Europeans</i></b> ..... | 59 |
| <i>Maurizio Ascari</i>   |    |
| <b>The Taste of Business Defining the American<br/>Art Collector 1900-1914</b> .....   | 73 |
| <i>Flaminia Gennari Santori</i>  |    |

# Looking West: Popular Culture and the Generation Gap in Communist Czechoslovakia, 1969-1989

Paulina BREN

## Introduction

This paper examines the cultural history of *Západ* in Czechoslovakia during the 1970s and 1980s. *Západ*, the Czech word for “the West”, was used throughout Czechoslovakia’s half century of communism from 1948 to 1989 to denote the “capitalist” ring of nations stretching from Germany to the United States. In the end, though, *Západ* was largely understood to be synonymous with the United States and with all things judged to be “American”. The aim of this paper is to use representations and appropriations of *Západ* to trace a history of late communism which, first, shows social and political change during the twenty years between the 1968 Prague Spring and the 1989 “velvet revolution” and, second, which gives equal weight to all facets of political culture, from Communist Party rhetoric to dissident manifestos. Part One looks at what *Západ*, particularly in its cultural manifestations, came to mean to the Communist Party throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Part Two examines the ways in which Czechoslovakia’s youth was in fact influenced by popular culture from the West, and how this influence initially affected the shape of generational conflict, and later forged political opposition.

It is important to note that for the most part studies of late communism in Czechoslovakia are in fact studies of a dissident minority. This minority was largely centered around the *Charter 77* organization; from 1977 to 1989 little more than one thousand people altogether signed the *Charter*’s founding manifesto. The low numbers reflected the sacrifices one made by officially signing on as a dissident openly opposed to the state; sacrifices that included the loss of one’s career, the demotion to menial labor, the end to one’s children’s higher education. Conceptually, the most popular term used to understand communist Eastern Europe in the 1970s and 1980s has been “civil society”. Civil society is understood as a loose association of persons and groups that function outside of government control, recreating in their midst the mechanisms for and rituals of a resurgent democracy. Part of the

attraction of the argument for the existence and growth of civil society during late communism has been that it allows one to take the paradigm of dissent and enlarge it beyond its actual scope. Moreover, the notion of an ever-expanding civil society helps to explain the end of Party rule in 1989 by producing a sense of development, of change having taken place under the veneer of a static twenty years of Party rhetoric.

The civil society analysis, however, is wrong in assuming that anything could actually take place outside of government influence. As Michael Walzer has written, “the paradox of the civil society argument” is that the state “both frames civil society and occupies space within it. It fixes the boundary conditions and the basic rules of all associational activity (including political activity).”<sup>1</sup> This is particularly true of communist Eastern Europe where, to cite but one example, art produced in the cultural underground was often judged less for its “aesthetic value” and more for its “oppositional value”. In other words, dissent and its more expansive sibling, civil society, were shaped throughout by the Communist Party’s criteria, policies and actions. It would be more accurate, therefore, to recognize the interwoven nature of life during late communism in Czechoslovakia; it is something that this paper aims to do by focusing on the theme of *Západ* as a means to explore the frequently ignored political aspects of culture in late communism. As political life fossilized after the 1968 Soviet-led invasion, culture increasingly became the key contested area in which to exercise the power of critique for the majority of the population.

## Part One

### *Communism’s Second-Generation: The Political Reformers (The Prague Spring and the Warsaw Pact Invasion)*

That the Communist Party took over in Czechoslovakia in 1948 was not entirely due to Moscow’s post-World War II desire to buffet itself by a protective ring of mini-Soviet Unions. Czechoslovakia had had a history of sympathy for socialist ideals and, therefore, also a tolerance for the Communist Party as part of the official political landscape. This history, coupled with the betrayal felt after the Munich crisis when Western Europe chose to give up Czechoslovak territory rather than face Hitler, further bolstered a turn toward Moscow, particularly among young intellectuals. It was this generation – those who

<sup>1</sup> WALZER, M., “The Civil Society Argument”, in G. SHAFIR (ed.), *The Citizenship Debates*, Minneapolis, 1998.

attained adulthood first under the cloud of betrayal by the West and, then, during the war – that became communism’s *first-generation*. For many members of this generation East and West were envisioned in the same black and white iconography characteristic of the Stalinist 1950s (“with us or against us”) – itself a continuation of the deterministic symbolism of the war era.

During the period of the 1950s show trials, for example, the anxiety and paranoia plaguing the Communist leadership in Czechoslovakia was reified as a beetle plague let loose on the country by the West. Potato beetles had been swept in, according to the newspaper announcements of the time, with the “help of the clouds and winds of the Western imperialists, as well as with the help of their terrorist agents sent over”.<sup>2</sup> The Western threat was encapsulated in the convenient shape of a potato beetle with stripes on its back suggestive of the American flag, and with a harvest-demolishing gluttony said to be reminiscent “of imperialism”.<sup>3</sup>

Notions of America as an all-powerful imperialist threat, though, were, much like the potato beetles, products of the 1950s cold war political climate. By the 1960s, with the end of Stalinism a new generation had stepped forward in Czechoslovakia. No longer content to join the postwar “builders of socialism” (as the postwar, first-generation communists were called), this new *second generation* wished instead to ventilate the communism of earlier years which lived under the outdated fears of an imperialist *Západ*. The 1968 Prague Spring was as much a delayed de-Stalinization, and premature *glasnost*, as it was a generational turn-over similar to that in the West. The Prague Spring, with its motto of “socialism with a human face”, not only took place within the *echelons* of the Party but also in the jazz clubs of Prague. In contrast to the 1950s which were symptomatic of a deep geographic and cultural isolation, the 1960s opened Czechoslovakia up to a newly prosperous postwar America and Western Europe.

Yet the doors which had swung open in the mid-1960s were shut tight once again after the August 1968 Soviet-led Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia which brought a definitive end to the Prague Spring. For the first year following the invasion, however, Czechoslovakia’s borders were left permeable to allow for a self-selective national purge to take place against the back-drop of the state-directed

<sup>2</sup> As quoted in “Mandelinka Bramborova”, in MACURA, V., *Stastny Vek: Symboly, emblem a myty 1948-1989*, Prague, 1992, p. 29

<sup>3</sup> As quoted in *ibid.*, p. 31.

one; both emigration and the comprehensive Party purge insured that supporters of the Prague Spring would be made invisible and irrelevant. Yet *another* purge was needed, however: a purge of the newly emerged familiarity and, indeed, frequent admiration for *Západ* which the majority of Czechs and Slovaks now seemed to have. With the completion of both purges, the project of “normalization” (as the post-1968 period of late communism in Czechoslovakia would officially be called) could go on.

### *The Re-Emigrants*

In the effort to “normalize”, to bring things back to the way they had been before the Prague Spring and thus to make them once again “normal” in the eyes of the newly retrenched conservative Communist Party, a new contaminant coming in across the border from the West was detected. Western tourists, bringing dollars with them, were guilty of spreading “petit-bourgeois habits”.<sup>4</sup> To many people, that the West, and America in particular, provided for the conditions in which “petit-bourgeois habits” could be practiced was a good thing. Aware of this, the Party expanded efforts to counter this new admiration. In doing so, it cleverly incorporated another wave of border-crossers into the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic – *the re-emigrants*.

Of the 60,000 or so Czechs and Slovaks who had left the country following the August 1968 invasion, some were returning after only a few months abroad. The first amnesty for these re-emigrants (accompanied by a promise of no retaliation and, in some cases, generous treatment) was declared in May 1969, and a second in February 1973. These re-emigrants’ woeful accounts of life in *Západ*, particularly in America, were now put to use, broadcast on radio and television and detailed in print.

The first re-emigrants’ accounts, publicized in 1969 and 1970, focused on the genuine realities of emigration: the sense of homesickness, social isolation, the frequent loss of one’s job qualifications, as well as the miserable conditions in Western Europe’s political asylum holding camps. In 1971, though, a marked shift in representation took place; media priority was placed on negating the prevalent images of the affluent “American way of life”. As one young male returnee instructively told *Radio Hvezda* in Prague, “Well, these were [our] illusions about the West. It was being said in our country that in the

<sup>4</sup> “Tesce vydelane dolary”, in *Tvorba*, no. 32, 11 August, 1971 (quoted in the RFE Czechoslovak Situation Report, 25 August, 1971) [Open Society Archives, Budapest – from hereon OSA].

West there are better working conditions, that the living standard is higher than ours; so we thought that we would go and seek that better prosperity.”<sup>5</sup> To his surprise, his experiences did not correspond to his expectations.

As in this young man’s account, re-emigrants frequently pointed to the pace of work in the West (especially in American Taylorist-style factories) to which a socialist citizen was not accustomed and with which he could not, therefore, keep up. Equally so, re-emigrants complained that even with a job they could not afford to go out and enjoy their leisure time in the same way as they could back in Czechoslovakia. One woman, interviewed on the tarmac as she boarded her return flight from the United States, admitted that during her time in America she had never visited a cinema because over there “a person must give up all sorts of amusements and everything else that costs money.”<sup>6</sup> She further expounded on yet another recurring theme – that of deceptively cheap goods. While clothes might be cheap, they were also shoddy: “My husband and I always said, ‘At home things are relatively expensive, but of genuinely good quality...’”<sup>7</sup> Another couple, Brestislav and Ludmila Janousek, and their two children, went so far as to return to Czechoslovakia without being doubly sure of the government’s position toward re-emigrants. Thus, they calculated into their plans for re-emigration the possibility that they might actually have to serve the prison term to which all political emigrants had been sentenced *in absentia*. The gamble seemed worth it to them all the same. Mr. Janousek explained that “we were telling ourselves that even if worst comes to worst, if we had to serve the sentence, it still cannot be equal to staying for one’s whole life in such conditions and society as we learned to know [in the US].”<sup>8</sup> The conditions of life in America – rather than the now tightly sealed borders characteristic of post-1968 Czechoslovakia – were presented as the prison from which one longed to escape.

The re-emigrants’ accounts were narrated in such a way as to play up what socialist Czechoslovakia had to offer and capitalist America did not: a less demanding work environment, cheap entertainment and leisure, state-funded health care and, despite the Warsaw Pact invasion and the full-scale purge which followed, a “more spiritually mature

<sup>5</sup> *Radio Hvezda*, 17 September, 1970, 21:03 [OSA: translation by Radio Free Europe staff – from here on RFE].

<sup>6</sup> *Radio Hvezda*, 24 November, 1971, 17:30 [OSA].

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Czechoslovak Television*, 24 July, 1972, 19:30-20:00 [OSA: translation by RFE].

nation than that in America".<sup>9</sup> Moreover, by providing an economic reason for the re-emigrants' return, their reasons for leaving were made out to be economic as well. The greater implications of the Prague Spring, the invasion, the flight of a significant part of the population, and the permanent installation of Soviet troops in Czechoslovakia were de-politicized.

This de-politicization also signaled the future direction for normalization in socialist Czechoslovakia. Through the re-emigrants' accounts (as elsewhere in the first few years following the invasion), the Party made it clear that it was not against the sort of consumerist lifestyle associated with America and with *Západ* in general. In fact, its goal was to help its citizens pursue a similar life-style but within a de-politicized (and thus less volatile) context. The trade-off of Communist Party commitment with Party conformity and ritualization was acceptable, in some ways even preferable. In return, *Západ* in the guise of satisfactory consumerism would come East, further enhanced by the benefits of cheap leisure, health care, and socialist interpersonal relations. The Slovak writer and dissident Milan Simecka described the new policy of normalization as the moment in which, "Czechoslovak propaganda quite literally unfurled a banner with the proverbial side of pork as its standard."<sup>10</sup> These promised benefits of consumption, however, (abundant pork etc.) would only take place if the population cooperated in ensuring social and political order.

### ***Third-Generation: The Politically Passive (1970s Hippies and Consumerists)***

Allen Ginsberg

This desired order was almost immediately threatened by the appearance of hippies shaped by their exposure to Allen Ginsberg during the liberal Prague Spring period. In 1965 the American beat poet Ginsberg had visited Czechoslovakia, staying for three months before being expelled for undesirable behavior. Ginsberg, who had been permitted to enter the country in the hey-day of political liberalization, was now blamed for the social disorder among Czechoslovakia's post-Prague Spring youth. The Slovak daily *Smena* explained:

A few years ago Prague was personally visited by Ginsberg, the great hippie and American homosexual poet. At diverse clubs he enthused spoiled

<sup>9</sup> Interview with father and son Bartak for *Radio Hvezda*, 26 December, 1971, 19:30 [OSA].

<sup>10</sup> SIMECKA, M., *The Restoration of Order: The Normalization of Czechoslovakia*. London, 1984, p. 138.

Prague maidens and long-haired boys not only through his special philosophy of existentialism, but also by the fact that he did not hesitate to appear at "social functions" in dirty torn sneakers, dirty blue jeans, and a sweaty T-shirt. His visit and peculiar appearance at that time were the subject of eulogies in several Prague periodicals of that day [...].<sup>11</sup>

Ginsberg was, in a sense, a metonymic representation of *Západ*. Even more so, however, he represented not only the misguided values of America, but the widespread *influence* of those same values in socialist Czechoslovakia. Ginsberg encapsulated many of the characteristics that the Party would feel compelled to combat among youth in the remaining twenty years of communist dominance: effeminacy (translated into what was perceived by the authorities as political passivity); non-conformity in appearance (translated into a distaste for regimented socialist organizations and values); and alternate philosophies (translated, among other things, into a resurgent rock music scene).

Although hippies (known in Czech as *manicky*, or "long-hairs") were presented as a marginal portion of Czech and Slovak youth, their significance was considered to be much greater. The reason for this was rooted in the events of the 1968 Prague Spring – a political movement which, although wide-spread at the time, now needed to be re-written as nothing more than a small bump in communism's forward trajectory. In the public memory, the Prague Spring had to become no more than a minority movement led by disorganized, narcissistic rabble-rousers out to harm socialism and its inherent political harmony.<sup>12</sup> Thus, a relationship was quickly drawn neatly between the troublemakers behind "the disorder of 1968" (as the Prague Spring was now referred to) and the disorder supposedly propagated by hippies and their like under "normalization". The link was cemented by the media's reporting on hippies: "Through their 'image', and unruly behavior, the long-haired gradually came into conflict with society and started becoming a problem in our country. Even before 1968 we had to take very severe steps against them, and 1968 made our work much

<sup>11</sup> *Smena*, 28 January, 1972 [OSA: translation by RFE].

<sup>12</sup> This is the exact scenario presented in the 1970s popular television drama, *Major Zeman*, in which Czechoslovakia's postwar communist history is retold through the personal story of state security officer Zeman. The episode on the Prague Spring is presented as an insular event which takes place among bored young mod types (led by an exceedingly narcissistic and drunk Vaclav Havel-type playwright) in a Prague music club. The participants are further criminalized since the narrative hinges on a murder which takes place at the club, and of which the Havel character is accused.

more difficult.”<sup>13</sup> By making them out to be “American” hippies, the political troublemakers were shown to be “foreign”, “alien”; in other words, those discontent with the political order (both then and now) were not identifiable as “natives”. The Czechoslovak Socialist Republic’s problems were problems brought into the country and not problems intrinsic to it.

The link between the Prague Spring’s instigators and normalization’s hippies was, like so much of what the Party said, an important half-truth. The Party’s fear of Czechoslovakia’s youth during the period of normalization was directly related to the fact that it was the youth (and not workers) who had played an important role in the “populist turn” of the Prague Spring, when the drive for reform moved from the controlled Party meetings to the uncontrolled streets in the spring of 1968. While earlier in postwar Czechoslovakia *youth* had represented the future builders of socialism and its accompanying idealism, *youth* was now seen as the site of an untamable political culture. Young people who did not fulfill the Party’s image of “good socialist youths” were to be viewed as a continuing challenge to communism’s hegemony.

A good socialist youth was judged to be reliable, predictable; young men and women who could be counted on to uphold their traditional roles within society. The Slovak daily *Smena* recounted the widespread loss of this reliability: “But in the past few years our teenagers, at least part of them, have lost their manly bearing, they have become spoiled, oversensitive, melancholy ‘pansies’. This is demonstrated not only by their wearing of long hair, girls’ flowered blouses [...] but also by their psychological and physical stamina [...]. The drafting commissions are horrified when confronted with such a feminized ‘soldier’ in the nude [...]”<sup>14</sup> In turn, young women were blamed for their overt sexual behavior, and accused of acting like men. Disoriented about their gender and its responsibilities, these young men and women were said to lack what it took to fight not only a real war (on the battle-front and the home-front) but the ideological war as well. *Radio Prague* brought up the issue of young people in Czechoslovakia who were lacking the “fighting spirit” because, unlike the postwar first-generation communists, who “learned to know the bourgeois [type] democracy, humanism and freedom through [their] own experience [during the interwar years]” and therefore did not suffer from illusions about the West, the country’s youth was under many illusions about

capitalism and *Západ*.<sup>15</sup> In another radio broadcast, it was noted that “pacifist views and moods among youths who have not experienced either capitalism or war are especially dangerous”. Pacifist moods were also seen as indicative of young persons’ negative attitudes towards the “socialist way of life”.<sup>16</sup>

All of these fears, ignited by the events of the 1960s and now transposed onto American-type hippies were still further legitimated; the disorderly behavior of hippies was linked to a rise in criminality among the youth, adding to the alarmist features of reporting on the hippies. Newspapers, radio and television filled with accounts of growing youth criminality and hooliganism behind which the “long-hairs” were said to be instrumental. In an unusual public disclosure, in February 1972 the Czechoslovak Government held a press conference to discuss its concerns over rising juvenile delinquency, robberies, alcoholism and prostitution, claiming that 30% of all crimes and 50% of all robberies were the work of youth under the age of 18.<sup>17</sup> “Criminal values” were re-interpreted as criminal activity. For instance, the hippie definition of “peace” was a precariously undifferentiated, all inclusive notion of world peace – which was entirely unsuitable for socialist activism which demanded that one “take sides”. Exaggerated issues of drug-use (in one poll of 100 hippies aged eighteen years and younger, over 70% were found to be “drug addicts”<sup>18</sup>) were used, for example, to suggest that the hippies’ philosophizing about peace and harmony was no more than a veiled attempt to liberalize drug legislation.<sup>19</sup>

While it is impossible to know the real statistics, the way in which the problems of youth criminality from 1969 to 1972 were formulated from *within* the debate about American-imported hippies suggests that the statistics were inflated in order to criminalize certain aspects of unacceptable political culture seen as lingering within “the body of youth”. Moreover, young people still in school and too young to have

<sup>13</sup> *Smena*, 24 March, 1972 [OSA, translation by RFE].

<sup>14</sup> *Smena*, 28 January, 1972 [OSA: translation by RFE].

<sup>15</sup> *Radio Prague*, 21 February, 1972, 17:10 [OSA: translation by RFE].

<sup>16</sup> *Radio Hvezda*, 13 July, 1974, quoted in the RFE Czechoslovak Situation Report, 24 July, 1974 [OSA: translation by RFE].

<sup>17</sup> *The Economist*, March 17, 1972 [OSA: RFE Special].

<sup>18</sup> *Vecernik*, January 5, 1972 as quoted in the Czechoslovak Situation Report, 17 February, 1972. Most likely drug use was in fact quite minimal, certainly in comparison to the mid-1980s when the problem of drug use once again showed up in the media, but this time accompanied by real-life stories, photo-essays, and detailed accounts. In 1983, *Charter 77* even wrote an open letter to the Federal Assembly warning them of the severe drug problem among youth, which continued to be ignored by the authorities.

<sup>19</sup> *Tribuna*, no. 26, 23 June, 1976, p. 9 [OSA].

participated fully in the Prague Spring were impossible to purge in the same way that the Party could purge an adult only a few years older, but already reliant on his/her job and Party membership in general. This added to the impression that young people were somehow more difficult to monitor and control.

### Angela Davis

To balance the influence of Ginsbergian hippie tendencies, the government dipped into its own bag of American icons. In 1972, the black activist and American communist Angela Davis visited a number of countries in Eastern Europe, including Czechoslovakia. Her struggle, which well illustrated the very worst of American racial policies, was applauded throughout the Czechoslovak media. Her decision to come to Czechoslovakia on an official visit so soon after the invasion, however, did little for her popularity among the general population. A common feeling was expressed by one student at the Department for Humanities of Charles University, Prague: "That Angela Davis is a total idiot [...] she's starting to imitate those [communists] in Moscow." The newspaper which ran this "overheard" remark was not trying to promote such opinions but to counter them. According to the article, published in the ideological-cultural weekly, *Tribuna*, Angela Davis' political steadfastness was, rather disturbingly, incomprehensible to students of the university's Humanities Department. These politically misguided students, the article warned, would soon be in schools teaching the next generation. Worse still, the students expressing such remarks about Angela Davis were not students who had experienced "the crisis years of 1968-1969" at the university (in other words, already politically damaged), but students who had been accepted to university in 1970 during the first year of "normalization".<sup>20</sup>

The reason the government wished to promote the sort of activism represented by Angela Davis (that is, both fully committed and anti-American) was that studies were increasingly finding Czechoslovakia's youth to be pursuing entirely non-political life goals. These new, non-political values were no longer the exclusive domain of peace-loving hippies. Polls had found that young people generally now exhibited such tendencies as a "lukewarm" attitude to work, a desire to achieve success and happiness in an easy way, a lack of interest in politics, a lack of ideological firmness and a tendency to undervalue the "values of socialism", gravitation toward "religious

<sup>20</sup> *Tribuna*, no. 43/72, 25 October, 1972, p. 7 [OSA].

remnants", and the "phenomena of admiration of the capitalist way of life and its morals".<sup>21</sup> It was this last tendency which would come to encapsulate all of the others as well.

To have even superficially explored this turn toward the apolitical and the materialist would have meant opening up political and social questions posed during the Prague Spring. But public discussion about the Prague Spring ("the disorder of 1968") was kept to a minimum and its narrative carefully controlled. So instead the shift in attitude away from a deep interest in politics during the 1960s to the current fetishism of the non-political was explained away as nothing less than the result of Western propaganda which specifically aimed at making Eastern Europe's communist citizens politically comatose. In late 1972 the General Prosecutor's Office of the Czech Socialist Republic remarked that one of the causes of criminality among Czechoslovak youth were foreign radio broadcasts (such as BBC, Radio Free Europe, and Voice of America) which provided for bad examples from abroad.<sup>22</sup> The experience of 1968 had demonstrated that "a certain part of [...] youth was not immune against these influences."<sup>23</sup>

The bad examples from the West broadcast into the country by propaganda organizations were being processed as a new, non-socialist ranking of priorities which, based on a poll of 1,000 youths, suggested that money took first place in importance, followed by a "positive and undisturbed" family life, and, thirdly, a "world without wars".<sup>24</sup> Consumer mentalities had come to dominate, revealing a desire for "weekend homes, cars, showcase apartments, showing off to one's neighbor what I have, to make sure he does not have it, or else to make sure that what he has, I have too...."<sup>25</sup> A sixteen year-old girl from Prague told *Radio Prague* that "the living credo of most young people today has become to live well and do nothing".<sup>26</sup>

In the first ten years of normalization, what these different categories of youth were all being accused of was ostentatious displays of political disengagement. Political disengagement was taken to be a political stand as well. Thus, whether they believed in peace and love like Allen Ginsberg or whether they turned their backs on the political struggle for which Angela Davis was officially applauded, "youth"

<sup>21</sup> Originally an article in the Czech daily *Rude Pravo*, it was then broadcast on *Radio Prague*, March 7, 1973, 09:00 [OSA: translation by RFE].

<sup>22</sup> *Radio Prague*, September 12, 1972, 17:30 [OSA: translation by RFE].

<sup>23</sup> *Radio Prague*, May 10, 1976, 11:00 [OSA: translation by RFE].

<sup>24</sup> *Radio Prague*, August 1, 1974, 18:04 [OSA: translation by RFE].

<sup>25</sup> *Radio Prague*, May 31, 1973, 08:00 [OSA].

<sup>26</sup> *Radio Prague*, June 24, 1977, 17:15 [OSA: translation by RFE].



continued to be perceived as harbingers of an ambiguous and non-socialist political culture. The same was to be said of the growing number of young consumerists.

### John Travolta

By the mid-1970s the Party was less concerned with hippies than it was with Western-style consumerists. Although young hippies and young consumerists probably did not have much in common, the Party read them as being the same. First, both hippies and consumerists were disruptive to the social order – and social disruption was little less than political disruption. Second, both looked to *Západ* for inspiration. Third, both groups were understood to be politically passive, politically disengaged (that is, *vis-à-vis* communism – which was the only valid criteria). Consumerism among youth (like the young hippies' effeminacy) was, in the eyes of the Party, first and foremost a practice revealing political passivity – the feminization of the political. The full-blown consumerism rampant among the Party's top elite was read entirely differently, justified as a necessary tool to give them the time and the means to be ever more political. Moreover, as a Central Committee internal report admitted, the most consumerist social group in "normalized" Czechoslovakia was the working class.<sup>27</sup> For a Communist Party already uncomfortable with its legitimacy, however, (having been brought into power by the August 1968 Soviet-led invasion and kept there by the permanent installation of Soviet troops in Czechoslovakia) a contented working class remained sacrosanct regardless of its attitudes and activities. Besides, neither workers nor members of the post-1968 (purged) Communist Party were likely candidates for subverting the state.

The campaign against Western-type consumerism also found its American iconic representation – John Travolta. In the late 1970s, the film *Saturday Night Fever* was shown in Czechoslovakia's cinemas. One angry reviewer wrote in an article entitled "Who is served by Travolta's World?": "By way of the disco world and its dramas the film ingeniously propagates a 'sensible compromise' between youth and the consumer's way of life [...] 'Saturday Night Fever' artfully and cunningly disorients youth in the West; in the socialist world, in turn, the film is an instrument for the petty bourgeois ideology to be infiltrated and is designed to create aspirations for the consumer-type

<sup>27</sup> "Stav a tendence rozvoje socialistickeho spolecenskeho vedomi", Meeting of the Ideological Commission, 25 October 1985: IK-63/24: UV KSC Fond: State Central Archives, Prague.

Western way of life."<sup>28</sup> Ten years following the re-emigrants' accounts of economic hardship in the West, the Czechoslovak media was once again having to counter the myth of "consumer paradise", as one article referred to young people's myths about *Západ*.<sup>29</sup> What compounded the problem this time was a palpable generational difference which fused favorable images of the West (characteristic not just of this post-Prague Spring third-generation) with a marked change in outlook (which was particular to the third-generation). This *generational gap* would come to bear on both official and unofficial life in Czechoslovakia during the 1980s.

### From American Dress to the American "Way of Life"

By the mid-1970s, it was no longer possible to speak of a small segment of Czechoslovakia's youth as singularly lured by the symbols of America. The media reported that in fact an "invasion of American flags and small flags sewn onto pockets, jackets and [sweaters] and wherever it is possible" was taking place all over the country.<sup>30</sup> To the fact that "stars and stripes could even be seen on home-knitted pullovers", a journalist replied: "If you ask them what the neutron bomb is, then they answer that they are immune against its consequences since they are veiled in American colors."<sup>31</sup> The link between philo-Americanism and political passivity obviously remained intact. The commentator of one radio segment entitled *Against Illusions and Myths* described the scene:

When you stroll along Wenceslas Square [in Prague], you will certainly come across some young people who are dressed in fashionable shirts and sweaters with emblems of the United States of America and with symbols of the American flag. For this segment of our youth the West [*Západ*] is still the model. And not only for them but for their mothers and fathers who, with open mouths, flip through all sorts of Western magazines and are entranced by colored postcards of Monte Carlo, lit up with brightly colored melons and polished cars of the most luxurious brands. For the Czech petit-bourgeois the West is the symbol of the best that ever existed or exists on our planet.<sup>32</sup>

As the aesthetic fascination with things American took hold of the entire spectrum of Czechoslovakia's youth, it became increasingly difficult to *differentiate* – a process which was the very backbone of the

<sup>28</sup> *Pravda*, 9 January, 1980 [OSA: translation by RFE].

<sup>29</sup> *Tribuna*, 24 June, 1981, p. 9 [OSA].

<sup>30</sup> *Radio Prague*, September 6, 1975, 16:05 [OSA: translation by RFE].

<sup>31</sup> *Radio Prague*, August 1, 1977, 15:15 [OSA: translation by RFE].

<sup>32</sup> *Radio Prague*, August 1, 1973, 17:00 [OSA].

Communist Party system. Entry into personally beneficial official structures (from preschool to university to old-age homes) depended on whether or not one was judged as politically reliable. The problem was that even young persons dressing in American flags and T-shirts with foreign language slogans were in fact members and functionaries of the Socialist Youth Union.

As it became more difficult to differentiate between the “well-meaning” and the “subversive” youth, the same article suggested that there were, on the one hand, benign “unconscious” propagators of the Western lifestyle and, on the other hand, more insidious “conscious” exponents of the Western way of life among Czechoslovakia’s youth:

[...] special attention must be paid to those young people who are consciously becoming instruments of ideological subversion. They regard as exemplary anything coming from the capitalist West, especially the United States. Not just decorated jackets, hats and bags but also the consumer-type attitude to society. Not just the eye-catching and ostentatiously displayed specimen of bad taste and lack of aesthetic feeling, but also the Western way of life, for which they show uncritical admiration.<sup>33</sup>

In other words, earlier, Western-influenced youth whose aim was social disorder had been readily identifiable by their accompanying aesthetic disorder (young men wearing girls’ blouses or young women wearing American flags). Increasingly, some of those young men sporting long-hair and girls’ blouses might well be upstanding members of the Socialist Youth Union. Deciding just what was to be labeled as subversive (since the entire youth population could not be labeled as such) now entailed a more complicated and less instantly recognizable notion of influences infiltrating from the West – namely, an affinity for the “American way of life” rather than a mere fascination with American fashion. This new identifying characteristic required greater vigilance in order to be detected successfully.

The growing impossibility of differentiating between the “conscious” and the “unconscious” propagators of symbols and values perceived to be American, or from the West generally, suggests the increasing complexity of the Party’s ideological policing. No longer practicing the level of state violence reminiscent of the 1950s, the normalization government over-reacted to what, left alone, might have been no more than apolitical entertainment. By increasing ideological repressiveness in the very cultural arenas important to youth, the government helped to politicize them. The state’s fear over Americanism (which reflected fears over communism’s failures) ended up spurning

<sup>33</sup> *Tribuna*, 16 February, 1983, p. 5 [OSA: translation by RFE].

first a 1970s cultural underground scene and second, and I would argue more importantly, a 1980s semi-official opposition scene. Both scenes were centered around American-influenced music, which the authorities deemed subversive, another facet of the disturbingly ambiguous “American way of life”.

## Part Two

### *The Plastic People of the Universe*

Alongside the flourishing political liberalization of the late 1960s, Prague had further experienced a growing rock music scene. The burgeoning underground music culture was at this time understood as non-establishment rather than dissident; it was propelled by the appearance of the Czech band *The Primitives* whose repertoire included Jimi Hendrix, *The Grateful Dead*, *The Doors*, *The Mothers of Invention* and other American bands. *The Primitives* were also the ones who introduced Frank Zappa’s music to Czechoslovakia, an influence which, as Paul Berman has written, continued well into the late 1980s and included such devotees as playwright dissident Vaclav Havel.<sup>34</sup> When *The Primitives*, famous for introducing the “psychedelic sound”, split up in 1969, the five-month-old band, *The Plastic People of the Universe*, took over as the pre-eminent anti-establishment band. Continuing with *The Primitives*’ repertoire, they also added works by *The Velvet Underground*.

The beginning of normalization in the early 1970s, and its accompanying purge of American influences, decimated this same music scene. The anti – *Západ* campaign meant that bands were banned from performing songs in English and groups with English names were forced to change them. *The Plastic People* refused to do so, thereby losing their official license, and were allowed to perform only for private parties. Choosing not to dissolve but to continue to perform, they moved (this time literally) “underground”.<sup>35</sup> They performed for privately organized gatherings, and their repertoire remained largely English for quite some time.

In a story that is now familiar, the police finally clamped down on *The Plastic People* a month after the band’s performance in 1976 in a village where Ivan Jirous, their manager as well as Czech art historian and avant-garde aficionado, was celebrating his wedding. Jirous and

<sup>34</sup> BERMAN, P., *A Tale of Two Utopias: The Political Journey of the Generation of 1968*, New York, 1996.

<sup>35</sup> JIROUS, I., “Underground Culture”, in *Index on Censorship* 1/83, pp. 32-34.

nineteen other musicians were arrested. Vaclav Havel, who was well acquainted with members of the music underground, was appalled by the arrests and imminent trial, and rallied other intellectuals both in Czechoslovakia and abroad (most notably the German writer Heinrich Böll) to their defense. During the 1976 Prague trial against *The Plastic People* Havel took notes and reported on the events in a typescript circulated among friends. He wrote that the trial was a moment which, "originally nothing out of the ordinary, [...] suddenly illuminates with an unexpected light the time and the world in which we live."<sup>36</sup> *Charter 77*, born of this illumination, went on to become one of the most famous and well publicized dissident organizations in communist Eastern Europe; at its core stood the playwright Vaclav Havel and the philosopher Jan Patocka who would later die from a stroke following a police interrogation.

### *Charter 77 versus the Underground*

Since *Charter 77* was born out of the defense of the "cultural underground", *Charter 77* and the cultural underground (or "second culture" as it was famously coined by the same Ivan Jirous) were frequently mistaken to be one and the same, but they were not. As the dissident and political philosopher Martin Palous has written, *Charter 77* never entirely saw eye-to-eye with the underground movement. The underground movement was anti-establishment whereas *Charter 77* had been founded on the idea of a *dialogue* with the government.<sup>37</sup> *Dialogue* was antithetical to the underground's aim, which had been outlined by Ivan Jirous a year prior to *Charter 77*'s founding: "[The underground] is a declaration of a struggle against the establishment, the regime...[It] is created by people who have understood that within the bounds of legality nothing can be changed, and who no longer even attempt to function within those bounds..."<sup>38</sup> In a sense, it was the underground that better fulfilled Vaclav Havel's dictum that a person must, under communist normalization in Czechoslovakia, defy politics

by "living in truth;" by living "as if" there were no Party and no Party henchmen.

In November 1979, for example, Ivan Jirous wrote a review of a new band called *DOM*. With great admiration he described the lead singer's performance at a recent punk rock presentation in Nova Viska in June 1979: "[He] strolls along the stage with the microphone in his hand like a slow-motion take of a 1950s rock star. He does not look at his audience, he is removed from them and his band behind him... [He and his band play] as if for themselves, but not for themselves; as if for someone in the background, who is not there."<sup>39</sup> In Jirous' view, the lead-singer, who was also *DOM*'s founder, had jettisoned the fear with which the rest of the population continued to live: "That fear, which they have cultivated in us for thirty years, which stops us from publicly and matter-of-factly saying whatever comes to mind..."<sup>40</sup> *DOM* had conquered those fears and played "as if" the Party did not exist: to them dialogue with the Party would have been inconceivable.

A second difference between *Charter 77* and the cultural underground was their divergent views on *Západ*, particularly on America. The cultural underground welcomed the enlargement of its artistic influences, restricting them neither to Eastern Europe nor Europe and frequently reaching into American popular cultural trends for inspiration. The more intellectually based *Charter 77*, in contrast, very much maintained a left-wing European intellectual's disdain for all things perceived as mainstream American. Reviewing Arthur Hailey's popular novels in one of the *samizdat* (underground) journals, the literary critic Jan Trefulka concluded that, "It is, by the way, unbelievable to what extent this American consumerist realism is similar to so-called quality, or at least decently written works of socialist realism."<sup>41</sup> The sense that Czechoslovakia represented a "more spiritually mature nation than that in America",<sup>42</sup> as the communist press had itself explained in 1971 in the wake of some re-emigrants' return trips to Czechoslovakia, was shared by many dissident-intellectuals.

For many dissident-intellectuals, inspiration came from Europe, from what was perceived as an integral and "natural" part of Czechoslovakia unfairly amputated by the communists' 1948 *coup*. Vaclav Havel, writing the sleeve-notes for *The Plastic People*'s album

<sup>36</sup> SKILLING, H.G., *Charter 77 and Human Rights in Czechoslovakia*, London, 1981, p. 13.

<sup>37</sup> There was within *Charter 77* much debate over the formulation of its goals. In 1978 Vaclav Benda's *Parallel Polis* questioned the *Charter*'s emphasis on dialogue with the government.

<sup>38</sup> Ivan Jirous's "Report from the Musical Underground" first appeared in Czech, under the pseudonym of Jan Kabala, in the French-based émigré magazine *Svedectvi* no. XII/51, Paris, 1976 (as quoted in "Strangers in a Strange Land: Music from the Czechoslovak Underground", RFE Background Report/7 (Czechoslovakia) 12 January 1979).

<sup>39</sup> "Jsou to divny kluci", [written in November 1979 as *samizdat*] in I.M. JIROUS, *Magoruv zapisnik*, Prague, 1997, p. 214.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 215.

<sup>41</sup> JKA [Jan Trefulka], "Americky konzumni realismus", *Obsah* [Prague-samizdat], issue 11, 1988 [Libri Prohibiti Archive, Prague].

<sup>42</sup> *Radio Hvezda*, 26 December, 1971, 19:30 [OSA].

*Hovezi Porazka*, explained the uniqueness of the band's music as the product of "a certain experience of life, which for decades if not centuries, history had helped mold in these places; it is about the spiritual and emotional atmosphere belonging to this place and pertaining to it – more than we, who daily breath it in, are able to realize. *The Plastics* live in Prague. In Czechoslovakia. In Central Europe."<sup>43</sup> In his most famous essay, *The Power of the Powerless*, Havel also drew parallels between "so-called liberal parliamentary democracies" and what he termed Czechoslovakia's normalization era "post-totalitarian" communist state; in doing so, he fixed Czechoslovakia firmly within the scope of Europe, European-ness, and what he understood as Europe's twentieth-century spiritual crisis, which was being experienced by both communist Eastern Europe and democratic Western Europe.<sup>44</sup>

Like the Communist Party, the dissident-intellectuals also frequently reached for the language of gender in order to relate their distaste for American values. For both the dissidents and the Party, America and American-ness were perceived as feminine. One such example is a story entitled *My Merry Mornings* by the well-known Czech fiction writer and dissident, Ivan Klima. In the story Klima related the tale of Lida, an ex-lover who emigrates to America and then returns twenty years later for a visit to Prague.<sup>45</sup> In the story, the once victimized, mysterious and sensuous Lida who was representative of the historic Prague in which she lived, becomes a frivolous, superficially sincere, irritatingly gregarious, wealthy woman after living in America for twenty years. She understands nothing, least of all Klima's intense dissident world of secret police, telephone surveillance and round-the-clock shadows, all of which run counter to her superficial world of consumerism. Although it was Lida (and not Klima) who had originally been the political victim of the 1948 communist coup (she had been barred from university and was working in a bookstore while Klima attended university and continued his youthful love affair with communism), things had since turned topsy-turvy.

Indeed, the lack of "weightiness", to recall Milan Kundera's phrase, was viewed by many *Charter 77* signatories as symptomatic both of

<sup>43</sup> HAVEL, V., "Hovezi Porazka", in *Obsah* [Prague-samizdat], issue 2, 1984 [Libri Prohibiti Archive, Prague].

<sup>44</sup> HAVEL, V., "The Power of the Powerless", in J. KEANE (ed.), *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens Against the State in Central-Eastern Europe*, London, 1985, New York, 1990.

<sup>45</sup> KLIMA, I., "Tuesday Morning: A Sentimental Story", in *My Merry Mornings*, London, 1983, 1985.

America and of communist Czechoslovakia: in contrast, historical and authentic (that is, non-communist) Czechoslovakia was seen as an integral part of "weighty" Europe, which again lay in direct opposition to "light" America. In many a dissident-intellectual's view, by officially sanctioning a form of communist consumerism (even while at the same time damning the "American way of life"), the Czechoslovak normalization government was forcing Czechoslovakia to become as "light" as the America whose values it pretended to deplore. Consequently, in the pages of underground dissident literature it was not so unusual to find a sentiment of grudging respect for the 1950s communist "project" in Czechoslovakia which, while sending many more people to their deaths than did the normalization regime, had been born from shared European values and hopes for socialism.<sup>46</sup>

### "New Wave Music"

In the 1970s, other banned bands joined *The Plastic People* to round out the underground music scene. When the *Plastic People* went on trial in 1976, the government increased its efforts to bring popular music under the influence of official structures and to recharge the official music scene's political commitment and enthusiasm, which had given way to saccharin pop music – in much the same way they hoped to recharge the effeminate, passive and apolitical American flag-wearing Czech and Slovak youth who had lost their political commitment. Even the fifth festival of political popular songs, though, *Sokolov 77*, whose intentions were precisely these, was judged poorly by a Department of Culture official who remarked that "a greater feeling for the commitment of the songs"<sup>47</sup> was still missing.

While the underground music movement which had originated in the 1960s remained under police surveillance, and while the official rock scene degenerated into a pastiche of meaningless pop songs, a new generation of rock bands emerged in Czechoslovakia. They differed in two ways. First, they played what was called "new wave" music, heavily influenced by the punk rock movement in the West. Second, they chose to assume the status of "amateur bands" which meant that they occupied a niche which was neither official nor dissident. These bands situated on the margin – bands like *Psi Vojaci* [Dog's Soldiers] and *Zlutý Pes* [Yellow Dog] – quickly gained a large following, especially among the youth and the working class. In late

<sup>46</sup> See for example PECKA, K., "Rovnost je sen hrbatych", in *Obsah* [Prague-samizdat], issue 9, 1986, p. 2 [Libri Prohibiti Archive, Prague].

<sup>47</sup> *Radio Hvezda*, 26 February, 1977: as quoted in the RFE Czechoslovak Situation Report/19, 25 May 1977 [OSA: translation by RFE].

1981 the authorities announced a ban on nearly forty such popular amateur rock groups.<sup>48</sup>

This first ban and others that followed did little to destroy the new wave movement; there were too many such rock groups for authorities to keep track of and the bands, once banned, frequently regrouped under different names. This ability to elude the authorities – to make themselves undefinable, to seem compliant on the surface while in practice oppositional – made the case of the group *Patent* in many ways typical. *Patent* was formed in 1980 by six members, all college students, who won official prizes, including an honorary mention at the 1983 political song festival, *Sokolov 1983*. In that same year, though, they were suddenly added to the ever changing list of banned rock bands. The reason for this was that, as the authorities charged, *Patent* had shown itself to be “two-faced”.<sup>49</sup> Despite seeming to be the embodiment of approved socialist youth culture, as it turned out the face worn by the band at official competitions was quite different from the one worn at “private performances” sponsored by local youth organizations and trade unions. At a concert sponsored by the Ceske Budejovice [a town in Western Bohemia] Road Works State Enterprise, they had dressed in torn clothing, acted rudely with officials, departed from approved lyrics and sung punk rock numbers instead, in short inciting “antisocial behavior”. Despite the unbearable noise levels, officials had been able to discern the “sound of songs sung in English coming from the stage”.<sup>50</sup> The band even admitted to its Western influences explaining: “We listen to a lot of American groups and we translate the texts for our own use.”<sup>51</sup> But the Party’s ban on these new wave amateur groups was more than a continuation of the normalization policy that barred songs sung in the English language.

Around the same time that the Party added *Patent* to the list of banned bands, it also outlined its position on new wave music in a lengthy article published in the widely influential cultural-ideological weekly *Tribuna*. According to the article, the government’s position was not anti-American since it applauded certain American musicians:

Pete Seeger, because his songs were socially charged [...] Bob Dylan [because of] songs such as Oxford Town, about a black student, Meredith, who could only register at school with the assistance of the federal police

<sup>48</sup> RUPNIK, J., “Rock Bands Banned in Czechoslovakia”, *BBC Current Affairs Research & Information Section*, Report no. 53/81, 2 December 1981 [OSA].

<sup>49</sup> “Dvoji tvar Patentu”, *Rude pravo*, 24 June 1983, p. 3 [OSA].

<sup>50</sup> As quoted in the RFE Czechoslovak Situation Report 12, 12 July 1983 [OSA].

<sup>51</sup> “Dvoji tvar Patentu”, *Rude pravo*, 24 June 1983, p. 3 [OSA].

[...] James Brown, who in Madison Square Garden in New York during a concert [announced] “I am black and I’m proud of the color of my skin, I’m proud that I was born black.”<sup>52</sup>

When faced with differentiating between positive and negative American icons (as in the past with Ginsberg, Davis, and Travolta), the Party inevitably used the powerful argument of race relations in America (although the track record on Roma [gypsy] issues reveals a deeply racist Communist Party).

Many socialist organizations, however, were apparently having a more difficult time with the important task of differentiating. In the face of the on-going ban, these amateur new wave bands were surviving in one of two ways. One option was passage from semi-official status to being banned, and then joining the already established cultural underground. Another option was to dissolve, re-group, and find sponsorship with Socialist Youth Organizations, economic enterprises, local trade union branches – all of which were allowing the amateur new wave bands to perform and exist within official structures, performing for their “private” functions. As before, the authorities – unable to acknowledge either the cultural underground or the fact that some official Party organizations were in fact participating in protecting these amateur rock groups – insisted that this music trend was the result of Western propaganda. In a now familiar formulation, it was claimed that Western propaganda organizations had recognized the value of new wave type music for numbing the political minds of the world’s youth. Consequently they were beaming in the subversive sounds through radio broadcasts and contraband records and cassette tapes. “New wave”, however, was considered to be the worst of the influences that had crossed the border from West to East, the reason being that the punk rock ethos cut into the Party’s last strong-hold – into the promises of communism’s rosy future.

### *Third-Generation Dissent*

Despite the ever-increasing disappointment with communism, for many people promises of future abundance in Czechoslovakia continued to be a relevant precept – a blank screen for the projection of day-dreams. The Party capitalized on this, claiming that the coming “scientific-technical revolution” (which was never very clearly defined) would catapult the communist countries forward, propelling them into a well-engineered social and economic utopia that the West could only dream of. In direct contrast to this official message, the new

<sup>52</sup> “‘Nova’ vlna se starym obsahem”, in *Tribuna*, no. 12, 23 March, 1983, p. 5 [OSA].

wave punk message screamed out that there was *no future*. For the Party, the message that there was “no future” was a far greater danger than any missive *Charter 77* could realistically put out. According to the 1983 critique of new wave music in *Tribuna*, the West (through the radio waves and contraband records) was trying to encourage the formation of punk groups in Eastern Europe, introducing “to our young people the life philosophy of ‘No Future’ and other such positions [...] which are foreign to socialism.” The theme of “no future” was again trumpeted to be the product of foreign, Western propaganda. Adherence to that message by new wave fans was interpreted as yet another form of political passivity exhibited by a specific segment of Czechoslovakia’s youth.

The nihilistic new wave message was effective, however, precisely because it corresponded to the very sentiments of this *third-generation* – the last generation to be brought up under communism, and the only generation whose experiences defined neither by the trauma of World War II nor of the Prague Spring, but rather by the grayness of normalization’s failures. Ironically, while the Party had long been criticizing youth-centered popular cultural trends from the West for their promotion of political passivity, it was the Party’s condemnation of new wave that in fact unmasked a surprising politicization among this third-generation.

As mentioned earlier, in March 1983 the Central Committee’s cultural weekly, *Tribuna*, had outlined the Party’s condemnation of new wave, justifying the ban on many groups, most recently *Patent*. When the editors published the article they probably imagined that the question was closed. Instead, there was an outpouring of protest letters sent to the newspaper by teenagers who were angry over the article’s denunciation of their music. This letter-writing campaign came *before* Gorbachev’s arrival on the Moscow stage. It came at a time when, as the cultural underground leader Ivan Jirous had written in 1979, the population was saddled with a “fear, which they [the Party] have cultivated in us for thirty years, which stops us from publicly and matter-of-factly saying whatever comes to mind [...]”<sup>53</sup> Moreover, the letters sent in by teenagers from all around the country were not anonymous, but signed with addresses attached.

The authorities were clearly caught off guard, but they chose to respond. The number of letters coming in to the *Tribuna* offices forced the paper to include excerpts of the letters as a way of outlining the

<sup>53</sup> “Jsou to divny kluci”, [written November 1979], in JIROUS, I.M., *Magoruv zapisnik*, Prague, 1997, p. 214.

teenagers’ misguidedness. Zdenek Martinek from Pilsen wrote in and cleverly re-appropriated the very propaganda he had grown up with; in his letter he explained that by forbidding new wave “you will only turn the attention of young people to Western new wave music (and for you this is apparently an incomprehensible fact – that we young people listen to ‘new wave’ music produced in the West with great enthusiasm – even though a definite majority of us don’t understand the texts [...]) – which is a tactically poor move [on your part].” Miroslav Cernosek from Prague, along with two friends, wrote that *Tribuna*’s claim by which “new wave music is a marginal affair is highly erroneous. This music is widespread among the young generation and enjoys great popularity. The interest in new wave is steadily growing.” The newspaper’s counter-response to these letters fell back on familiar explanations: these young people were “a product of uncritical admiration for Western music and music by our lyricists who try to imitate it; a product of admiration not only for the West but also for the lyrics” and the music was affecting young people’s “mode of thinking and their views precisely in accordance with the wishes of the enemies of socialism.”<sup>54</sup> The insistence on the “foreign-ness” of such behavior was similarly reiterated; it was remarked that one could not help but feel that young people in socialist Czechoslovakia were in fact forcing themselves into imitating the nihilism learned from the West.

But despite the initial follow-up articles which attempted to put an end to the issue, the debate about new wave music continued in the pages of *Tribuna* (spilling over into *Rude pravo* as well) through all of 1983 and most of 1984. Hardly a week passed without mention of the letters that continued to arrive. Young people who had missed the beginning of the debate in March were writing in asking for copies of the original article. The insistence that this was the work of Western propaganda increased proportionally. An interview with one upstanding socialist young man led to his admission that a friend regularly wrote to the London headquarters of the BBC and they in turn would send him punk and new wave records otherwise unobtainable in Czechoslovakia.<sup>55</sup> One article alluded to the covert existence of “organizations” in Prague which were being allowed to dictate cultural

<sup>54</sup> “‘Nova’ vlna se starym obsahem: Ohlas na clanek”, *Tribuna*, no. 32, 16 August 1983, p. 7 [OSA]. In the same month as the first response to these letters was published in *Tribuna*, *Charter 77* put out a twenty-one page review of the different music forms in Czechoslovakia and their recently increased repression by the regime (*Charter 77 Document no. 31*, 31 August 1983).

<sup>55</sup> “Co vse se nemuselo stat”, *Tribuna*, no. 36, 7 September 1983, p. 4 [OSA].

tastes.<sup>56</sup> Another referred directly to dissent and the cultural underground, stating: “There is much talk of some sort of second culture among some musicians (and particularly rock musicians) and among a certain group of young people.”<sup>57</sup> While the authorities did not say that it was a case of outright sabotage, they did insist that the growing new wave and punk following was nothing more than a fascination for copying “all sorts of nonsense from the West [*Západ*]”.<sup>58</sup>

The Party was missing the point entirely: the angry response among young people to the government’s criticism of new wave music was more about their rejection of Party values than about an admiration of *Západ*. One reader clearly explained to the *Tribuna* editors: “you don’t understand today’s generation in the least. Everyone who plays this music and all those who listen to it have only one thought in mind, which to you will always be alien: they reject the ideal of the successful person as someone who follows the straight line marked out in advance to a position of rank.”<sup>59</sup> The young protesters were rejecting the normalization values which had deteriorated to the point where success was measured in terms of a scramble for security within the structures of Communist Party conformity.

The Party was aware of this aspect of new wave but failed to understand its implications. In an October 1985 meeting of the Central Committee’s Ideological Commission, the topic under discussion was an internal report about the current state of society’s attitudes toward socialism. The report’s evaluation of the country’s youth was quite correct:

It was found that young people for the most part rank socialism’s priorities highly [...]. This positive evaluation relates most of all to socialism as a program for changing the world – in their relationship with its reality, on the other hand, they tend to focus on the failures. Criticism and a lack of interest in taking an active part in solving social issues is growing.<sup>60</sup>

In other words, members of this third-generation were not becoming advocates of capitalism so much as they were rejecting the practice of communism in “normalized” Czechoslovakia. That rejection was

<sup>56</sup> “Bud’me dusledni a zasadovi”, *Tribuna*, no. 40, 5 October 1983, p. 7 [OSA].

<sup>57</sup> “Poznamky ke ‘Slovu kritiky’”, *Tribuna*, no. 46, 16 November, 1983, p. 5 [OSA].

<sup>58</sup> “‘Nova’ vlna se starym obsahem: Deformace hodnot”, *Tribuna*, no. 52, 28 December 1983, p. 6 [OSA].

<sup>59</sup> “‘Nova’ vlna se starym obsahem: Ohlas na clanek”, *Tribuna*, no. 32, 16 August 1983, p. 7 [OSA].

<sup>60</sup> “Stav a tendence rozvoje socialistickeho spolecenskeho vedomi”, Meeting of the Ideological Commission, 25 October 1985: IK-63/24: UV KSC Fond: State Central Archives, Prague.

demonstrated, on the one hand, as an overall apoliticism and, on the other, as the tendency for this generation to seek and exercise its critical voice in a splintering of groups, gatherings, and organizations specific to each person’s interests (one of the larger ones being new wave music). They turned their backs on forging collective identities and actions; this was a marked divergence from the first-generation post-war builders of communism (who came of age during the war) and the second-generation reformers of the Prague Spring (who came of age during the 1960s).

For the authorities to have acknowledged the implications of this stance would have also meant acknowledging that (as the new wave music predicted in its lyrics) there was “no future” – at least no communist future if communism’s future was to be built by the same generation that was finding “its message” in the new wave music. The Party’s eventual solution was entirely cosmetic. In 1986 the director of the Institute for Cultural and Educational Activities gave an interview in which he criticized the handling of new wave music, calling it “an administrative path solving nothing”.<sup>61</sup> In June 1986, the government sponsored *Rockfest ’86*, a two day festival with eighty rock bands including groups that had been banned from performing in public.

Repression of the new wave movement, however, did have the effect of politicizing a generation growing up in the 1980s, many of whom were to be in the front lines during the 1989 “velvet revolution”. A recent oral history project carried out in Prague examined the backgrounds of the students who were pivotal in the events that helped bring down the communist government. One student explained the influence of new wave music during the period when he was growing up:

Music influenced me very much, because at the beginning of the 1980s the so-called new wave came along [...]. There were bands such as Yellow Dog [*Zlutý pes*] and Music Prague [*Hudba Praha*] and other such bands who, because of one line in the text, started to undergo a certain martyrdom. People also started to talk about the fact that *The Plastics* had existed once [...]. When they [the newspapers] started writing about it, suddenly it didn’t make sense to me, because I didn’t see in it what suddenly someone was telling me was there. And so I started cutting out and collecting lots of different newspaper articles, but still I couldn’t make sense of it. [...] and

<sup>61</sup> *Mlada fronta*, 22 July 1986, as quoted in the RFE Czechoslovak Situation Report/12, 5 September 1986 [OSA: translation by RFE].

it sort of shocked me that these bands were banned [...] and I still didn't know why if there wasn't a political reason for it [...].<sup>62</sup>

Another student revolutionary recalled:

I was interested in nothing other than rock music. Only. Instead of the clarinet I started to learn to play the guitar and that's how the [gramophone] records came into it. Politics didn't interest me, only rock music. But in fact the two had much in common, because I couldn't get access to the music. And, rather classically, it started to bother me that I couldn't go and buy records; it started to bother me that when I was in Ostrava [a large city in northern Moravia] at the exchange [informal record exchanges popular with young people] and bought a record, that the police confiscated it, which happened to me... That happened at the exchange, they'd occupy it and basically go after the hippies, they just took their records and that was that. Otherwise no other persecution. I also remember how when I was at the technical college in 1980 – 1984, we used to travel to those [music] festivals, once we got all the way to Zabcice in Moravia and there the police sent us right back to the train station [...].<sup>63</sup>

Yet another future revolutionary was thrown out of the Socialist Youth Organization, where he even held a function, for having organized a punk festival in August 1984. He was also brought in for questioning because the timing of the festival coincided with the last public performance of one of the most popular new wave bands, Prague's Selection [*Pražský vyber*].<sup>64</sup> Another student remembered how in high school someone had spray-painted "Prague's Selection" in the school: "It shaped many of us – to take a position against the authorities of the time who banned absolutely everything. We carried it inside us to the very end."<sup>65</sup>

The marked difference in the perspective of this last, third-generation was similarly evident by the mid-1980s within *Charter 77* as well. The Czech political philosopher and former dissident Martin Palous has written on what he perceived to be a growing generation gap between what he calls the "first wave" of *Charter 77* signatories and the "second wave". The "second wave" Charterists, unlike the "first wave" Charterists, were heavily influenced in their outlook and oppositional tactics by the cultural underground. From 1985 on, when Gorbachev's rise brought hope that communist hegemony might after all one day collapse, *Charter 77*'s emphasis on dialogue with the gov-

ernment finally gave way to the cultural underground's long-time aim of dialogue with the majority of the population instead. One result was the "A Word to Our Fellow Citizens" manifesto, which was the first *Charter* document to address the public directly rather than the Party leadership. During the tenth year anniversary celebrations of *Charter 77* in 1987, a debate also took place within the organization about the past and future role of the *Charter*. The debate "deepened the polemical tone of the generational discussion and imbued it with an ideological content".<sup>66</sup>

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have traced the representations of the West [*Západ*] and the uses of those representations in communist Czechoslovakia during the period of normalization from the early 1970s to the late 1980s. A picture emerges which incorporates not just one single feature or actor during this time of late communism but rather which shows how the actions and reactions of the state, its citizens, and the dissidents were interrelated. For the Communist Party, *Západ* was a tableau upon which to project anxieties about its political and social failures; the rhetoric around *Západ* suggested an act of wishful thinking that the ever increasing elements of discontent and political passivity had been planted in the country by America (hippies, consumers, punks) and represented, like the 1950s potato beetles, something endemic and yet "foreign", "alien". For the dissident-intellectuals, mainstream America and its values served as a counterpoint through which to define their identity as Europeans; they insisted that, despite the intellectual embargo imposed on communist Czechoslovakia, they remained squarely within the intellectual tradition represented by Europe rather than the materialistic tradition of the United States. For the post-Prague Spring youth, the fascination with America and its symbols and messages (hippie blouses, American flag patches, punk nihilism) was a lightning rod through which to express the generational and ultimately political change in their own values and goals.

Just as importantly, by tracing the appropriations of *Západ* in late communist Czechoslovakia, we see what did *not* happen. *First*, the Communist Party's rhetoric (for example its critiques of new wave) did not always fall on deaf ears, dissipating into nothing more than communist "white noise", as is commonly thought. Party rhetoric was an

<sup>62</sup> OTAHAL, M. and VANEK, M., *Sto Studentských revolucí: Studenti v období padu komunismu - životopisná vyprávění*, Praha, 1999 [interviewee #90], p. 101.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* [interviewee #96], p. 101.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.* [interviewee #59], p. 102.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.* [interviewee #58], p. 102.

<sup>66</sup> PALOUS, M., "Poznamky ke generacním sporům v Chartě 77 v druhé polovině osmdesátých let", in M. OTAHAL (ed.), *Dvě desetiletí před Listopadem 89*, Prague, 1993, p. 43.



integral part of what we might call political culture during communism, and for that reason should be taken seriously. The Party, through its media, for better or worse spoke to its citizens who sometimes – as in the case of the new wave debate – spoke back. *Second*, the dissidents and the “cultural underground” were not one and the same. Moreover, the generational differences which the state was facing by the late 1980s *vis-à-vis* the third-generation could also be found within the ranks of *Charter 77* between first-wave and second-wave dissidents (which, in age, corresponded to communism’s second and third generation). Nor, as was demonstrated, can dissent be understood exclusively in terms of official inclusion in one of the dissident organizations; the new wave amateur bands existed in the no-man’s land between official and unofficial, pretending to comply with official regulations while also doing what they wished – a stance characteristic of a large part of the general population.

Most importantly, the history of *Západ* in Czechoslovakia is a history of generations. The third and final generation brought up under communism (and coming of age in the 1980s) differed importantly from the generations of their grandparents and parents who had been defined by their experiences during World War II and the Prague Spring respectively. The third generations’ fascination with America was not an undifferentiated call for American-style consumerism or capitalism; not only had they come to expect the social benefits associated with socialism but, furthermore, many youth rejected consumerist values because of the way in which the Communist Party’s elite held those values themselves, adding to their inherent hypocrisy. Instead, *Západ* supplied the symbols and messages with which this final generation of communist citizens could express their critique, particularly since this generation seemed disinclined to formulating and pursuing the sort of collective goals and actions associated with their grandparents’ and parents’ political participation. The post-World War II hopes for a better, more just world (a sentiment deeply felt in Czechoslovakia) had fired the idealism of the first-generation, and hopes for a more humane, responsive communism had motivated the second-generation during the Prague Spring. The project of communism – rising from a European-wide questioning during the interwar years and the trauma of World War II – had by the 1980s lost the power to stir the imagination of Czechoslovakia’s third-generation.

## About the Contributors

**Maurizio Ascari** is a Researcher in English Language and Literature at the University of Bologna. He is the author of *In the Palatial Chamber of the Mind. Comparative Studies on Henry James* (1997) and *La leggibilità del male. Genealogia del romanzo poliziesco e del romanzo anarchico inglese* (1998). He has also edited and translated Henry James’s *Breve viaggio in Francia* (1991), *Racconti italiani* (1991), *La Musa Tragica* (1996) and *La crespa Cornelia* (1998).

**Gerben Bakker** holds a degree in Journalism and Economic History from Groningen University in the Netherlands. He is currently a Researcher at the European University Institute in Florence, Italy, where he is finishing his doctoral thesis entitled “Entertainment Industrialised. Emergence of the International Film Industry, 1890-1940”, focusing on the declining role of European companies on the international film markets. His next project, for which he is currently searching a university, will examine the economic development of the European entertainment industries after the Second World War.

**Bent Boel** is Assistant Professor in the Department of Languages and Intercultural Studies at the University of Aalborg. His *The European Productivity Agency and Transatlantic Relations, 1953-61*, based on his dissertation, will soon be published by Museum Tusulanum Press, Copenhagen.

**Paulina Bren** is currently finishing her Ph.D. in Modern European History at New York University. Her dissertation investigates the post-1968 ‘normalization’ period in Czechoslovakia. Based on archival research, her study argues against the notion of an apolitical private sphere during late communism and shows instead how the Communist Party actively promoted a form of private citizenship. Her academic research interests cover 20th century Eastern and Central Europe, with a focus on the politics of culture and gender.