EUROPE-ASIA STUDIES
Vol. 60, No. 10, December 2008, 1645–1658

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Remembering 1948 and 1968: Reflections on Two Pivotal Years in Czech and Slovak History

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IN THE HISTORY OF ANY COUNTRY PARTICULAR YEARS tend to stand out as major turning points or critical junctures. The chain of events that took place in a particular year is seen as having profound consequences for subsequent trends in the state's economic, social, political and cultural development. In the case of the former Czechoslovakia, 1948 and 1968 were two such years. Indeed, until the spell was broken by the momentous events of 1989, it seemed that, as Stefan Auer suggests in his contribution to this collection, there was something magical about the number 'eight' in the key dates of Czechoslovak history. As the following list of dates suggests, the number eight has featured in many milestone years of Czechoslovak, and particularly Czech, cultural and political history: 1348, Foundation of Charles University, Prague; 1618, Second Defenestration of Prague and the beginning of the Thirty Years War; 1848, Year of European Revolutions; 1918, Foundation of the independent state of Czechoslovakia; 1938, Munich Agreement cedes Sudeten territories to Nazi Germany and paves the way for German occupation of the state; 1948, communists gain full political control of Czechoslovakia; 1968, Prague Spring and Warsaw Pact invasion.

It is apparent from the many anniversary conferences and events that were held during 2008 that the events of two particular years, 1948 and 1968, still have strong resonance in the politics, the popular imagination and the academic history of the Czech Republic and Slovakia, as well as in East Central Europe more widely. These were two of the most significant dates in Czech and Slovak history: 1948, the year Stalinist communists took power in Czechoslovakia, and 1968 the year of the doomed attempt of Slovaks and Czechs to develop their own 'Socialism with a Human Face'.

1948 and 1968 in the context of Czechoslovak history

The twentieth-century history of the state of Czechoslovakia had its origins in the aftermath of World War I. Czechoslovakia was a multinational state with Czechs as the largest national group but not large enough to form an overall majority. Slovaks and Germans constituted the other main national groups (there were more Germans than Slovaks in the state), and there were also smaller Hungarian, Ruthenian (or

ISSN 0966-8136 print; ISSN 1465-3427 online/08/101645-14 © 2008 University of Glasgow
DOI: 10.1080/09668130802434281

Ukrainian), Polish, Jewish and Romani minorities. The state was made up of fragments of the Austro–Hungarian Empire and as a result there were significant regional differences between the highly industrialised Bohemian, Moravian and Silesian regions and the rural, less developed Slovak and Ruthenian regions. However, these challenges were not insurmountable and in the 1920s the Czechoslovak economy recovered to become as strong as that of many Western states.

The 1920s are often regarded as the golden era of Czechoslovak history. Tomáš G. Masaryk, the country's first president and 'father of the nation', was widely respected internationally and when compared with its neighbours Czechoslovakia was also regarded as a very successful liberal democracy. However, it might be fairer to refer to it as a golden era for Czechs, as other national minorities became increasingly dissatisfied with how they were being governed. The state was ruled by coalitions of democratically elected parties and unlike in many other countries in the region, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (*Komunistická strana Československa*, KSČ) was allowed to function as a normal political party. It had a core base of support among the working classes in the Czech industrial cities.

The first shock to the political system was the Great Depression of the 1930s; unemployment rose dramatically and the industrial bases were weakened. The German minority in the Sudetenland was most severely affected given the high levels of industrialisation in those areas. The rise of Nazi power in Germany also affected Czechoslovak politics. The antipathy ethnic Germans had felt for the Czechoslovak state since its foundation was intensified by the economic crisis and many voters moved away from the ethnic German political parties who cooperated with the Czechoslovak state to the more chauvinist nationalist Sudeten German Party. This was the backdrop to perhaps the greatest trauma of twentieth century Czechoslovak history—the Munich betrayal of 1938. With increasingly vociferous demands from the Sudeten German Party for national autonomy and threats from Hitler that any infringement of the rights of Sudeten Germans would have drastic consequences, the Czechoslovak state looked to the West for support. However, Czechoslovakia fell victim to the now infamous policy of appeasement. The Munich Agreement signed on 30 September 1938 by Germany, France, Italy and Great Britain, gave Germany permission to annex the Sudetenland. Czechoslovak representatives were not invited to the conference. We now know that the 'peace for our time' which Chamberlain had hoped this agreement would guarantee was not to be. The consequences of this agreement in 1938 were to have far reaching repercussions for Czechoslovak politics and society.

Following the war six political parties [four Czech parties—the Communists, the National Socialists (*Československá strana národně socialistická*), the People's Party (*Československá strana lidová*) and the Social Democrats (*Československá sociálni demokracie*)—and two Slovak parties—the Democratic Party (*Demokratická strana*) and the Communists (*Komunistická strana Slovenska*, KSS)] formed the 'National Front' (*Národní fronta*) to rule Czechoslovakia. Their policy programme was based on three shared principles: close alliance with the Soviet Union, nationalisation of industry and the expulsion of as much of the ethnic German minority as possible. In the 1946 national elections, the KSČ emerged as the largest party of the National Front and its leader, Klement Gottwald, was appointed prime minister under the

presidency of Edvard Beneš. As president, Beneš had to be independent of party politics but he had been a member of the National Socialist Party and this was where his sympathies remained. The KSČ enjoyed a number of advantages which explained its popularity among voters. While the Party had always enjoyed some support among core working-class voters, it benefited from the positive feelings towards the Soviet Union at the end of the war. Although the Western allies could have liberated Czechoslovakia a few days earlier, it was the Red Army which arrived as liberators at the end of World War II. This, combined with the perceived failures of capitalism during the Depression and the bitter feelings towards the West following the perceived abandonment of Czechoslovakia in 1938, only served to strengthen popular support for the Party. Thus, it is often argued that the events of 1938 paved the way for the imposition of communism in Czechoslovakia.

At the beginning of the year 1948 the democratically elected KSČ still shared power with other democratically elected parties in the National Front coalition. However, tensions within the coalition, which had been building since 1947, came to a head on 20 February 1948 when ministers from three coalition parties—the National Socialist Party, the People's Party and the Slovak Democratic Party—submitted their resignations to President Beneš. Following a tense few days culminating in general strikes and mass protests in support of the Communist Party, Beneš accepted the ministers' resignations and approved the new cabinet proposed by Prime Minister Klement Gottwald on 25 February. The new National Front coalition was made up of members of the KSČ, KSČ sympathisers from the other National Front parties and one independent, Jan Masaryk, Minister for Foreign Affairs and son of Tomáš G. Masaryk. The 'Victorious February' celebrated while the KSČ was in power has since become known as the 'February Coup'. However, recent historiography would also challenge that label, given the mass appeal of the KSČ and the fact that the KSČ leadership appeared to take tactical advantage of events rather than instigate them. As demonstrated in the essay by Martin Myant in this collection, there are still many open questions surrounding the events of 1948 which deserve scholarly attention.

Following the events of February, the KSČ rapidly consolidated its position and used all the state powers at its disposal to implement Soviet-style (Stalinist) socialism. The nationalisation of industry, already underway, was accelerated and agriculture was rapidly collectivised. Five-year plans were introduced to manage economic activity and all spheres of social and cultural life came under the control of the Party apparatus. The secret police (*Státní bezpečnost*, StB) watched and recorded everything. Initially the Party and the reforms enjoyed public support. Students, in particular, were enthusiastic about modernising the state and following the successful model of the Soviet Union. However, it did not take long for the dark side of Stalinism to appear. Political opponents and potential opponents were arrested and then, in the early 1950s, purges within the Party claimed even high ranking Party officials including Rudolf Slanský, the General Secretary of the Party and Vladimír Clementis, Minister for Foreign Affairs. The trials also had a significant anti-Semitic element: of the 14 people on trial with Slanský, 12 (including Slanský) were Jewish (Skilling 1976, p. 26).

Following Stalin's death in 1953, and Khrushchev's subsequent rise to power in the Soviet Union, other states in the region began to address the worst excesses of

Stalinism. However, while Khrushchev's 'secret speech' at the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) on 24 February 1956 led to public protests in Poland and revolution in Hungary, the Czechoslovak regime kept tight control and did not introduce any reforms. Gottwald died in 1953, but the man who replaced him as leader, Antonín Novotný, was also implicated in the show trials and purges and so denouncing Stalinism would have meant denouncing his own actions. There was also less public pressure for reform than in Hungary and Poland in the 1950s, as the economy was still performing relatively well.

Only in the early 1960s did problems with the centrally planned economic system become fully apparent in Czechoslovakia. This coincided with Khrushchev's second attack on Stalinism at the Twenty-Second Congress of the CPSU in October 1961. As Heimann discusses in her essay, it was under increasing pressure from both Moscow and from Party members at home that Novotný reluctantly allowed the reform process to begin. While it was apparent that economic reforms were urgently required—Czech export sales were falling as a direct result of their poor quality and at home there were shortages of consumer goods—it was less clear whether this would require political reform too. Ota Šik, the leader of the economic reform process, insisted that the economy could not function in an authoritarian system. As these debates continued within the Party, restrictions on social and cultural life were gradually eased. More citizens had opportunities to travel and study abroad and film-makers and writers enjoyed much more freedom: Miloš Forman could direct *The Fireman's Ball* and Milan Kundera could publish *The Joke*, mocking the Party and criticising Stalinism.

The Prague Spring is usually dated from January 1968, when Antonín Novotný was replaced by Alexander Dubček as First Secretary of the KSČ. This is generally presented as a triumph for the reformist wing of the Party. Dubček acknowledged the need to speed up the de-Stalinisation process begun under Novotný's leadership. The Party's *Action Programme*, which was launched in April, increased freedoms of speech and of the press and introduced economic reforms to improve the quality and availability of consumer goods. The programme was still based on the principles of socialism, with emphasis on the leading role of the KSČ, but the combination of economic and political reforms was supposed to lead to a new, more democratic kind of socialism—'Socialism with a Human Face'. The abolition of censorship allowed opposition voices to be heard and alternative political clubs to be formed, but their demands quickly became more radical, culminating in the 'Two Thousand Words' Manifesto published by Ludvík Vaculík on 27 June, which criticised the reluctance of conservative elements in the KSČ to support reform and speculated about the danger of a Soviet invasion.

Although the appearance of this manifesto could have been interpreted as a sign that the reforms were spinning out of control, something the leaders of other states in the Warsaw Pact greatly feared, Dubček was confident that the majority of society supported the Party and its leading role in the reform process. During bilateral talks between the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia in July at Čierna nad Tisou, near the Slovak–USSR border, Dubček defended the reforms while pledging continued commitment to both the Warsaw Pact and Comecon. However, these assurances were not enough for the other members of the Warsaw Pact. Just before midnight on 20 August 1968, on the grounds that they were defending a fraternal socialist state

from the threat of internal counter-revolution, the armies of five Warsaw Pact states—Bulgaria, East Germany, Hungary, Poland and the Soviet Union—invaded Czechoslovakia (Figures 1–3). As the rest of the world watched, Dubček called on the Czechoslovak population not to resist the soldiers. Although there was no armed resistance to the arrival of tanks and ground troops, Czechs and Slovaks challenged the occupying forces in other ways. Strikes were called, petitions were signed, posters and graffiti begged the occupiers to return home and mass protests on the streets obstructed the paths of tanks. Images from the time show how the invading soldiers looked even more confused about what was happening than the people of Czechoslovakia (Figures 4–6). Despite the lack of armed resistance, in the first week of the invasion more than 70 people were killed and hundreds more were injured.

On the morning of 21 August, Dubček and other members of the leadership were taken to Moscow for negotiations. By then it was clear that, given the levels of public support they enjoyed, the leadership could not simply be removed. Instead, the reformers were put under pressure to sign the Moscow Protocol, which they did on 26 August. The protocol effectively rolled back the freedoms introduced in the spring: alternative political groups were banned, censorship was reimposed and central economic planning was given priority once again. Some of the reformers, including Ota Šik and Jiří Hájek, lost their positions, but Dubček remained as General Secretary of the KSČ and Ludvík Svoboda remained president, at least for the time being. The

FIGURE 1. WENCESLAS SQUARE, PRAGUE. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY HISTORY, ACADEMY OF SCIENCES, CZECH REPUBLIC

FIGURE 2. SOLDIERS AT THE ASTRONOMICAL CLOCK IN PRAGUE. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF VILÉM PREČAN

Moscow Protocol marked the beginning of the end of the Prague Spring. What followed was the gradual erosion of freedoms so that by the following August 1969, Czechoslovak society was well on its way to being 'Normalised', or put another way, to being turned back into what the Soviet leadership regarded as a 'normal' socialist society. Dubček was replaced as First Secretary of the Party by Gustáv Husák, another Slovak, in 1969. Although Husák was part of the reform wing of the Party in the 1960s, and a close ally of Dubček, his name will forever be associated with the harsh Normalisation regime of the 1970s and 1980s.

The events of 1968 marked both the highs and lows of the Czechoslovak de-Stalinisation process but everything of importance did not happen in that fateful year.

FIGURE 3. SOLDIER AIMING AT CROWDS IN BRATISLAVA. PHOTOGRAPH BY LADISLAV BIELIK, COPYRIGHT PERMISSION PETER BIELIK

Mary Heimann shows in this collection how the de-Stalinisation process began, albeit slowly, under Novotný, and Vilém Prečan argues in his contribution that it was only finally crushed in August 1969. From the early 1960s, film makers and writers made the most of the easing of Party control over their work and Riikka Nisonen-Trnka's contribution demonstrates how scientists had begun to take advantage of better relations with the West long before the spring of 1968. Nonetheless, it was the complete abolition of censorship in April 1968 and Dubček's promise to introduce 'Socialism with a Human Face' that captured the world's attention. The brutal manner in which this 'Spring' was cut short, by the invasion of Warsaw Pact troops in August 1968 and the subsequent suppression of all political dissent in the Normalisation period, only added to the status of the Spring. However, as some of the contributors to this collection show, legends which have grown up around the events are mostly mythical. Mary Heimann challenges the iconic status of Alexander Dubček as a self-sacrificing champion of democracy, showing how his actions may have been motivated by a personal desire for power rather than anything more heroic. Equally, Maud Bracke highlights the discrepancies between how the French Left viewed events in Czechoslovakia during the reform process and after the August invasion. A process that had been dismissed as embarrassing or insignificant was subsequently appropriated as a model of democratic socialism for the Eurocommunist movement in the 1970s.

Perhaps the most significant consequence of the Prague Spring for Czechoslovak history was not the brief taste of freedom enjoyed by citizens but rather the federalisation of the state and the limited devolution of power to Slovakia. As argued by Scott Brown, the cracks in the foundations of this multinational state, which were partially papered over in 1968, foreshadowed the final separation of the state 25 years later. Ever since the foundation of the state of Czechoslovakia in 1918, Slovaks had

FIGURE 4. SIGNPOSTS BLACKED OUT IN BRNO. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE MORAVIAN MUSEUM

complained that they were treated at best as junior partners and at worst, that they were 'ruled' by the Czechs. In the communist period the clearest examples of the imbalance or asymmetry between the Czech- and Slovak-speaking parts of the country were the key institutions of power. Whereas Slovaks had their own institutions of self-rule and their own Communist Party, the *Komunistická strana Slovenska* (KSS), for Czechs the nationwide institutions of the Czechoslovak National Assembly and the Czechoslovak Communist Party doubled up as Czech institutions. As Brown demonstrates in his essay, Slovaks disliked this arrangement because it meant that Czech national organs were in fact legally superior to their Slovak counterparts. Slovak grievances were increased with the introduction of the 1960 Constitution, which revoked some of the powers previously enjoyed by Slovak national institutions but the simmering discontent could not be publicly voiced until the political climate relaxed in the late 1960s. The Slovak proposal to create Czech and Slovak national institutions which would be subordinate to Czechoslovak bodies was discussed but, perhaps logically, Czechs were less interested in the idea than Slovaks. While the proposals were debated over the summer of 1968, the Warsaw Pact invasion and subsequent clamp down on political freedoms did not end the federalisation process. The Constitutional Law of Federation was passed on 28 October 1968 and led to the

FIGURE 5. Liberec. Photograph Courtesy of the Institute of Contemporary History, Academy of Sciences, Czech Republic

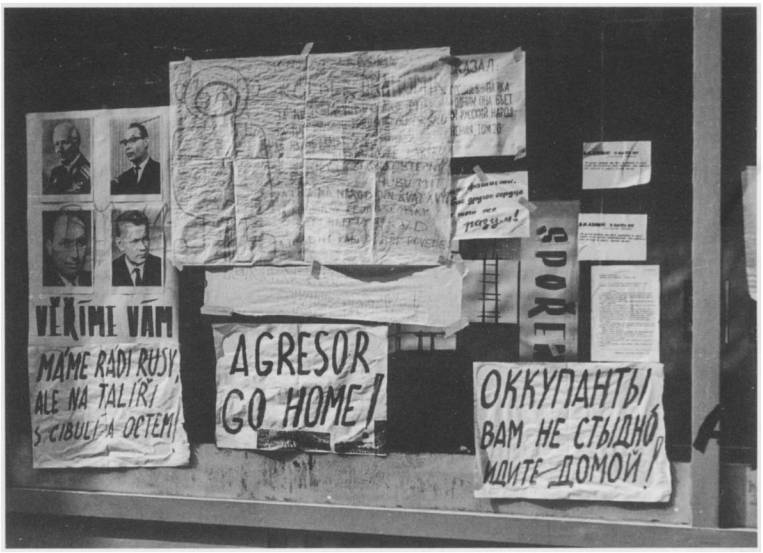

FIGURE 6. Criticism of Occupation in Three Languages. Photograph Courtesy of the Institute of Contemporary History, Academy of Sciences, Czech Republic

federalisation of Czechoslovakia. From 1 January 1969 the state was sub-divided into the Czech Socialist Republic and the Slovak Socialist Republic. The previous Czechoslovak parliament was renamed the Federal Assembly and new national parliaments were created (the Czech and Slovak National Councils). However, these changes were mostly cosmetic given the strong centralising tendencies of the KSČ.

The Warsaw Pact invasion led to a crisis in Czechoslovakia in many respects. Not only did it cause a domestic and international political crisis, but it also prompted much soul-searching among Czech writers and philosophers about whether the national reaction to events was that of pragmatic heroes or spineless cowards and whether given the small size of the state, the people of Czechoslovakia could ever determine their own destiny. These debates are discussed by Stefan Auer and Charles Sabatos in their contributions to this collection. Cowards or heroes they may have been; but, as discussed in the contributions of Libora Oates-Indruchová and Juraj Marušiak, for the Czechs and Slovaks who did not leave the country, the repressive Normalisation period following the Prague Spring posed its own challenges. In the context of Czechoslovakia, Normalisation has come to be understood as the process through which the KSČ came to reassert full control over society. In an essay written in 1979 Šimečka (1990) called it 'the restoration of order' (*obnovenie poriadku*); later, Williams (1997, p. 41) described it as the 'restoration of extreme predictability'.

Accounts in this collection assert that the secret to the success of Normalisation was that it was implemented by the very people who, only months previously, had been the champions of liberalisation. The enthusiasm displayed in the first week following the occupation clearly signals that the general population wished for more democratic freedoms and yet they accepted the return to the status quo with little protest. The main exceptions to this were the student protests of November 1968 and the threats of miners to go on strike in January 1969. The self-immolation of 21 year-old student Jan Palach on 19 January 1969 was a desperate plea for people not to resign themselves to the repression. However, according to Prečan in this collection, the citizens were so disappointed with the failure of leaders to resist the pressures coming from the Warsaw Pact members and especially from Moscow that they could see no point in fighting any longer. Oates-Indruchová and Marušiak detail how the Party authorities applied a range of measures from coercion to bribery to subdue the population. Marušiak's research also highlights how the implementation of Normalisation differed in Slovakia. Party members were all required to attend interviews to renew their membership. The outcome of this process had enormous consequences because of how membership was linked to career opportunities for both members and their children. However, in Slovakia, there were also rewards in terms of career advancement and general improvements in the standards of living which tempted many Slovaks to conform.

Many Czechs and Slovaks felt compelled to leave the country in the 1970s and they supported the dissidents who remained from abroad. The dissident movement in Czechoslovakia cannot be compared with that of Poland or even Hungary in terms of size. The most important opposition initiative was Charter 77 (*Charta 77*). This was originally a petition circulated in 1977 in response to the arrest of members of the psychedelic band Plastic People of the Universe, which challenged the authorities to respect human rights as guaranteed by the state constitution and the Helsinki Accords. Those who signed the petition were punished by the regime in various ways. Some lost their jobs or saw their children refused entry to higher education; others were imprisoned or forced into exile. The tough response to any opposition activity is one reason why the protest movements remained so small; another is the oft-cited pragmatism or cowardice of Czechs, discussed by Stefan Auer in his contribution to this collection. As a consequence, the final collapse of the regime in 1989 was probably

influenced more by external events—the domino effect of communist regimes collapsing all around them and Gorbachev's refusal to do anything meaningful to ensure the security of the KSČ—than by domestic pressure for reform, but nevertheless, the mass protests in the streets in November 1989 echoed the demonstrations 21 years previously. This time, however, reform of the system would not suffice; socialism with or without a human face was unanimously rejected in favour of Western style, liberal democracy.

The extent to which the events of 1948 and 1968 influenced Czechoslovak society in 1989 and their relevance today can be debated. After the war Czechs and Slovaks showed clear admiration for the Soviet Union and the communist political system and it is more difficult to argue that communism was imposed on the state than in the case of most neighbouring countries. However, the harsh Stalinism of the 1950s was not what had been anticipated and the reforms in the 1960s, which culminated in the Prague Spring, were an attempt to rectify that. Today anti-communists in the Czech Republic and Slovakia view the events of 1968 as irrelevant, simply tinkering with a system that could never have worked. This was already clear in 1989, when as Prečan argues, it was Havel the dissident that the crowds wanted to see, much more than Dubček the reformer. Nonetheless, the events of 1968, similar to the events of 1938, mark a watershed moment in Czech and Slovak history. The small Czech and Slovak nations were shown that their destiny was not entirely in their own hands and that a hard lesson has not been forgotten. In 1948 and 1968 Czech and Slovak citizens showed their willingness to take to the streets and support political causes they believed in. They may not have stormed any barricades, but their actions were hardly those of an apathetic citizenry. 'Remembering' 1948 and 1968 is not the same as celebrating the events. Rather it is an opportunity to reflect on what happened and why, what mistakes were made and what their consequences were. The contributions to this collection address some of these questions, and based partly on archives that are now open to researchers, they clarify what happened and why. However, it may be that we have to wait another 50 years or more and gain more distance from the communist period before we understand what the legacy of these events truly is.

Overview of the contributions to this collection

This edition opens with an essay which reflects on various aspects of the Prague Spring by Vilém Prečan, co-editor of *Seven Prague Days*, also known as the *Czech Black Book*, the famous eyewitness account of the 1968 invasion. Prečan situates the events of 1968 within the context of the communist period of Czechoslovak history, beginning in 1948 and ending in 1989, and shows how earlier events influenced those which came later. The second contribution, by Stefan Auer, takes an even longer view, detailing how Czech intellectuals have interpreted the non-violent resistance offered by Czechs, both to the Nazi invasion of their country and the Warsaw Pact occupation, and showing how the conventional image of the nation of velvet is open to challenge. Martin Myant's contribution, the only one to directly address the events of 1948, offers a critique of recent historiography of the events of 1948 and proposes a variety of new avenues for further research. These relate not only to the political manoeuvrings of the main protagonists in the February 'Coup' but also to the

treatment of ethnic Germans following World War II and the general appetite for socialism in Czechoslovakia after the war.

The next two essays deal with myths which have grown up around the events of 1968. Mary Heimann's research reveals a darker side to Dubček's motives than is generally presented. By piecing together the events which led to Novotný's downfall in January 1968, she shows that Dubček may not have had as strong a commitment to the reform process as he claimed. Similarly, Maud Bracke argues that the way the European Left now remembers the Prague Spring differs quite markedly from how communists in France, for example, perceived events as they were unfolding. She argues that in certain key respects the French left misunderstood the aims of the Prague Spring and it was only in the mid-1970s that the reform project was 'rediscovered' and invested with new symbolic meaning. This could of course be described as cynical, but it also hints at the problem of how events can become larger than the sum of their parts; 1968 certainly falls into that category.

Two essays in this collection are concerned with the academic establishment before and after the events of 1968. Riikka Nisonen-Trnka provides a detailed account of how, even before 1968, members of the Academy of Sciences enjoyed and exploited the academic freedoms they had won thanks to the commercial value of their research to the state. Despite the Cold War rhetoric of the time, collaboration on research projects between scientists in the East and West allowed important breakthroughs to be made. The case of Otto Wichterle's invention of the contact lens is a good example of this. The second essay dealing with academic freedoms, by Libora Oates-Indruchová, focuses on the more difficult times of the Normalisation era. Based on a detailed documentary analysis, she shows exactly how the Party reasserted its authority over academics who had grown used to some freedom. In particular, she focuses on the treatment of scholars in the humanities and social sciences, identified by Party officials as a particularly dangerous breed of academics.

That the events of 1968 have come to be known as the Prague Spring is in itself interesting. Why not the Bratislava Spring or the Czechoslovak Spring? After all, some of the key protagonists, including Dubček and his eventual replacement Husák, were Slovaks and as the pictures included in the collection show, people were mobilised all over the country and not only in the capital city. This collection includes two essays which focus specifically on Slovakia during and after the Prague Spring. Scott Brown discusses the roots of the Velvet Divorce and argues that federalisation, as proposed in 1968, did not sufficiently appease Slovak nationalists who wished for the unbalanced treatment of Czechs and Slovaks within the multinational state to be redressed. While Brown points to similarities in the debates of 1968 and the early 1990s regarding Slovak nationalism and the federalisation of the state, Juraj Marušiak identifies similar continuities between the Normalisation period in Slovakia and Slovak politics in the 1990s. Just as importantly, he also brings out the differences in the implementation of Normalisation between the Slovak-speaking and Czech-speaking halves of the nominally federalised state after 1968.

The collection concludes with an essay by Charles Sabatos which carefully details how Milan Kundera and Václav Havel, two of the best known Czech writers in the West, have interpreted the Prague Spring in their essays and literary works. Given their stature, both in the Czech Republic and abroad, the views of Kundera and Havel

inevitably colour how we all interpret recent Czechoslovak history. This discussion of their perspectives of Czechoslovak history is an apt way to close this collection, allowing the reader to come to their own conclusions about how best to remember the events of 1968.

Where possible the essays dealing with 1968 and its dramatic events have been supplemented by photographs.[1] It is said that every photograph tells a story, but the story of how it was taken and how it came to be published can be as interesting as that of the image it captures. Some of these photographs have become iconic images of the twentieth century. An excellent example is the image of *The Bare-chested Man in Front of the Occupier's Tank* (Figure 7). The photograph of Emil Gallo, a Slovak man defiantly facing down a tank, was taken by Ladislav Bielik on 21 August 1968, at the Šafárik Square in Bratislava. This photograph, which was included in the 1968 World Press Photo exhibition collection, was reproduced in newspapers, magazines and textbooks all over the world and is often cited as one of the 100 defining images of the twentieth century. However, the location of the photograph is often mistaken for Prague and in their lifetimes Bielik and Gallo received no credit for the picture. Gallo, who died in 1971, never told anyone what he had done and Bielik, a photographer for the daily *Smena,* lost his job once the Normalisation regime was established and could

FIGURE 7. THE BARE-CHESTED MAN IN FRONT OF THE OCCUPIER'S TANK, BRATISLAVA. PHOTOGRAPHED BY LADISLAV BIELIK, COPYRIGHT PERMISSION PETER BIELIK

[1]Every effort has been made to trace copyright holders and to obtain their permission for the use of copyright. The editor gratefully acknowledges those who granted us permission to reproduce images which capture the events of 1968 and apologises for any errors or omissions. She would be grateful for notification of any corrections.

never claim credit for the images. In the West the picture was widely circulated and accredited to *Deutsche Press-Agentur* or *United Press International*. It is only now thanks to the efforts of Bielik's son, Peter, that this evocative image, together with many other photographs taken by his father, are at last receiving due credit (Bielik 2008).

All but one of the essays in this collection (that of Riikka Nisonen-Trnka) are based on papers presented at a conference held at the University of Glasgow on 3–4 April 2008 to commemorate the sixtieth and fortieth anniversaries, respectively, of the events of 1948 and 1968. The conference was sponsored by the British Association for Slavonic and East European Studies (BASEES), the British Academy, the Centre for Russian, Central and East European Studies (CRCEES), the Czech Centre and the Embassy of the Slovak Republic and allowed academics at an early stage of their careers to present their work alongside some of the most distinguished scholars in the field. While not all contributions to the conference could be included in this collection, the authors are indebted to all those who participated for their comments and criticisms which helped to shape the present contributions.

The conference papers covered a broad range of themes ranging from high political intrigue to social history, and from film and literature to philosophy. Much discussion was devoted to challenging the myths that have grown up around those turbulent times. It was also clear that the conference, and indeed this collection, could have had a far wider remit given that 2008 is the anniversary of many more landmark events in Czech and Slovak history. However, for practical reasons, both the conference and this collection of essays focus on the 'eights' which marked the two key stages in the history of communism in Czechoslovakia. As the events under discussion were within living memory for many delegates, presentations based on archival research which brought new perspectives to historical events could be challenged by those who were 'there' and personally knew some of the key protagonists. This led to fascinating debates about how events are remembered and commemorated and how archives can reveal more than was known at the time. Not only are some archives more accessible than others, there is still a great deal of information which is not yet available to audiences who do not speak Czech or Slovak. The contributions in this collection will, therefore, be of interest to both specialists in the field and readers who are curious to learn more about these events.

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