Samizdat in Czechoslovakia: Communitas and Resistance

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> *"'Show Bech a book! Let's show our famous American author some* samizdat*!'* […] *Placed in Bech's hands, it felt lighter than, from the thickness of it, he had expected. Only the right-hand pages held words the left-hand held mirrored ghosts of words, the other side showing through. He had been returned to some archetypal sense of what a book was: it was an elemental sheaf, bound together by love and daring, to be passed with excitement from hand to hand. Bech had imagined the pathos, the implied pecking of furtive typewriters, but not the defiant beauty of the product."*
>
> *– from 'Bech in Czech' by John Updike (1987).*

One might say that 'the pen is mightier than the sword,' or, perhaps even, that 'the typewriter is mightier than the totalitarian state.' Throughout Central and Eastern Europe, in recent years, there has swept a transformative 'wind of change.' Together, we have witnessed a new era of revolutions redefine the global balance of power at the close of the twentieth century. Totalitarian regime after totalitarian regime finally fell, one after another, in dramatically quick succession, in a truly remarkable and unexpected response to the mounting pressure of a collective will of resistance from within; a will of resistance which had been sustained over many long and hard years of oppression by the peoples whom these regimes once ruled and kept apart from the rest of the world behind an uncompromising ideological 'Iron Curtain.'

With the end of the Second World War and the defeat of Nazi fascist occupation, Europe was divided with the widespread institution of Communist dominance across its Central and Eastern bloc. Countries, such as Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, and Czechoslovakia, aligned themselves into socialist economies alongside the Soviet Union under the military alliance of 'the Warsaw Pact.' The immediate post-war years saw the increasing implementation of a Stalinist model of political organisation, social transformation, and economic development within these new socialist states in

stark contrast to their Western counterparts. Thus, the era that became known as 'the Cold War' began.

And yet – as Creon, the ruler of ancient Thebes in Sophocles' tragedy, *Antigone*, found – the tyrannical imposition of a system of martial law upon an entire state will always spawn resistance. Moral resistance in the pursuit of personal freedom will, by its very nature, tend towards actions necessitating varying degrees of risk and self-sacrifice. The desire for both individual and collective liberty that became the zeitgeist of the early 1990s, which permeated across Europe at that time, was characterised as a yearning for freedom. In this essay I shall discuss the phenomenon of resistance in the form it took of the written word. In particular, I will look at the resistance literature of Czechoslovakia under the rule of its totalitarian regime and the significant part that literary activism played in the ordinary people's efforts which culminated in the 'Velvet Revolution' of 1989. Here we shall see how *'samizdat'* or resistance literature helped to organise and consolidate the 'anti-structure' or 'parallel polis' that arose to meet the various measures of civil oppression which were implemented by the country's totalitarian regime in its approximately forty-year period of Communist rule.

Totalitarian Oppression Inside Czechoslovakia

The main mark of a totalitarian society is the absence of democracy. If a totalitarian regime allowed the society it rules to manifest the processes that lead to the institution of democracy the regime would thereby allow the weakening of the absolute authority upon which it stands. The validity and viability of a totalitarian regime's claims to state leadership are maintained through its total political, economic and cultural dominance and control over its subjects – regardless of their own opinions or desires, either individual or collective, in all these respects. Totalitarianism is the complete and universal control of the entire spectrum of a society by the few members who constitute the ruling elite of such a regime.

In 1968, when Alexander Dubček became the head of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, the country began to enter into an unprecedented period of reform. This reform was in effect the beginning of a process of 'de-Stalinisation' within the country. Referred to as 'the Prague Spring,' it was described as an effort to create a 'Socialism with a Human Face' (see: Wolchik, 1991: 26). During the Prague Spring: 'Creative intellectuals were the first to challenge the regime and the prevailing intellectual orthodoxy. Writers and dramatists denounced party control of cultural life and,

at congresses of their unions and in the cultural periodicals, criticised the effects of Stalinism on culture. They also called for greater freedom of expression for themselves and other citizens' (Wolchik, 1991: 28). Yet this greater openness, and particularly the move it precipitated towards more political areas of reform which were being embraced and urged on by Czechoslovak society at large, was soon to prove dramatically counter-productive. Soviet and other Central and East European leaders were alarmed at what they perceived to be a serious challenge to the leading role of the Communist Party in Czechoslovakia. Their worries extended to the implication that such a spirit of political reform might spread to their own states. They warned Dubček of the need for he and his country to change its course. Yet, when this failed to occur, the Soviet leaders last resort was to mount an armed military invasion to bring the Czechoslovak peoples back into line (Wolchik, 1991: 34).

When Soviet tanks invaded Czechoslovakia on 21 August 1968 they met with little resistance and the country was swiftly returned into the strict, uncompromising realities of totalitarian rule and a process of 'normalisation' was begun (see: Wolchik, 1991: 35-47). 'Normalisation' was a particularly Orwellian or Kafkaesque term that referred to the reassertion of 'the Communist Party, the reinstitution of the media and other forms of information, massive personnel purges, and a change in the political formula' (Wolchik, 1991: 36). Yet, with Stalinist-style socialism once again clamping down upon Czech and Slovak society, the spirit of reform that the country had briefly experienced did not die out. Instead, this spirit metamorphosised into an active underground resistance.

In any society where there are certain individuals or groups who are oppressed there will be some among those who strive to resist. This phenomenon has occurred throughout history; for instance, think of the early Christians within the Roman Empire, the Jews in Nazi Germany, or the largely Buddhist indigenous population of Tibet during the uprising of 1959. The common feature of such active resistance is its express purpose to escape confinement or evade restrictions imposed through either intolerance or direct acts of tyranny. Expressions and acts of resistance generally vary according to the political causes and social limitations which have prompted them. In Central and Eastern European countries, such as Czechoslovakia, in the four decades of Communist rule which followed on from the end of the Second World War, the permanent tension between the state and civil society was expressed in various forms of independent social and cultural activity. This independent activity was often referred to as 'dissent' (see: Skilling & Wilson, 1991: 3-32).

In its scope this dissent was very limited and normally non-violent. Dissent was manifested in what was perceived as either one of two categories. In the first category there were various acts of

self-expression on the part of the individual; examples of these might include a person's particular religious faith and accordingly their acts of worship; or their participation in 'black market' economic activities; or telling political jokes and various other small-scale actions of non-conformity, many of which cannot be entirely suppressed even under the most extreme of 'totalist' societies. The second category encompasses more deliberate, structured or even institutionalised forms of dissent, 'such as human rights movements, ecological and peace associations, and *samizdat* publishing, which appeared in several countries with increasing frequency and persisted in spite of severe repression and temporary eclipse' (Skilling & Wilson, 1991: 3-4).

The phenomenon of *samizdat* literature has been described as a return to a 'pre-Gutenberg' culture (see: Skilling, 1989: 3-18). 'Samizdat' is a word – originally from the Russian – that has no strictly equivalent meaning in English. It can be translated very roughly as the literature of resistance or literature which was 'published' (i.e. self-published) and circulated in a clandestine manner owing to its unofficial, or unacceptable political/cultural evaluation, or its author's banned status in the eyes of the state and its judicial system. In Czechoslovakia, since all of the publishing and printing facilities in the country were under the absolute control of the ruling Communist Party, writers who wanted to publish their work without the hinderance of state censorship had to find an alternative way of doing so. The most immediate way that they found was evidently the most obvious – they circulated their works in manuscript form, either as typescripts bound with makeshift covers made from cardboard or cut from sheets of wallpaper, or sometimes they were even professionally bound in hard covers so that they bore the outward or superficial appearance of properly published books (see: Vaculík, 'A Padlock for Castle Schwarzenberg,' in: Goetz-Stankiewicz, 1992: 118-127). Such a 'simple act of defiance, combined with more risky human rights initiatives like Charter 77, created an island of liberty in a sea of tyranny, where people could write, dispute, reason, analyse, and invent as though they were free. In doing so, they became, as we can see clearly now, the nemesis of the old society and an embryo of the new' (Wilson, 'Living Intellects,' in: Goetz-Stankiewicz, 1992: 138-139).

Samizdat occurred in most of the Communist bloc countries where there was an organised dissent or human rights movement. In Czechoslovakia, a large number of people signed a document entitled 'Charter 77,' a human rights declaration that was issued in January 1977. The Charter developed into a movement of dissent 'which was at least partially institutionalised, could not be ignored in domestic politics and became a subject of international attention. By documenting countless human rights violations, it helped to illuminate the true meaning of 'real socialism' and to damage its image at home and abroad. All of these results provoked the regime to take harsher measures against Charter 77, thus further discrediting itself but failing to destroy the Chartist movement' (Skilling, 1981: 180). Despite persistent harassment of its signatories and those who

served as its spokespersons, the Charter as a movement was continuous in its activities. Encompassing a wide variety of social backgrounds, including ex-reform Communists from 1968, and dissidents from a variety of socio-cultural perspectives, the Charter came to serve as a focus for a vigorous independent or 'second culture,' and as an alternative source of information and views within the country (see: Skilling, 1989: 171).

Charter 77 and Samizdat – Communitas as Expression of Resistance

When analysing the position of a totalitarian regime in relation to social movements of organised dissent it is helpful to think about Victor Turner's concepts of 'structure' and 'anti-structure,' especially anti-structure's implied sense of 'communitas,' meaning a shared social identity and the ethos of 'hanging together' (see: Galt, 1994: 786). In relation to Czechoslovakia, during the period when the country was under totalitarian law, we can view the human rights movement of Charter 77, in a sense, as being an essentially egalitarian banner under which socially diverse members of the state could unite to express themselves and voice their shared beliefs. The instigation of the Charter within Czechoslovakia can be seen as a genuine manifestation of an 'independent' or 'second' society within the country, even though it was not regarded as a legitimate or authorised group in the eyes of the ruling regime. The dissident, Václav Benda, coined the phrase 'parallel polis' (*paralelni polis*) to refer to this 'second culture' (see: Skilling & Wilson, 1991: 35-41). 'The main purpose of the [Czechoslovak] second culture,' according to H. Gordon Skilling, 'was not to influence society or state, but to escape from its thrall and create a separate mode of life for its devotees. It was thus an essentially non-political stance although it had political implications' (Skilling & Wilson, 1991: 7). Given the surveilled and strictly controlled nature of the environment in which it grew, this 'parallel polis' or 'second culture' could not help but influence the wider realms of both the society and the state in which it lived.

Charter 77, the human rights declaration, issued in January 1977 by this 'parallel polis' of Czech and Slovak society, stimulated a veritable explosion of typewritten materials. The great upsurge of *samizdat* literature is thought to have far surpassed in quantity and quality the individual items of protest material which had circulated rather haphazardly prior to the Charter's existence (see: Wolchik, 1991: 288). This action prompted the beginnings of a true 'typewriter culture,' as one Charter 77 spokesperson described it (see: Skilling, 1989: 26). An editor of one of several *samizdat* 'publishing houses,' Jan Vladislav, observed that this 'Parallel culture, [provided] the most eloquent

evidence of the nation's desire for freedom of expression and offered one way of preventing the Czech nation from being robbed of its identity and having an alien identity substituted instead' (quoted in: Skilling, 1989: 26).

According to the non-violent principles of Charter 77 and Czechoslovak dissent, *samizdat* literature sought to be a lawful form of resistance. Czechoslovak *samizdat* was almost always issued in typescript form, produced by means of manual or electric typewriters; very rarely was a work issued in handwritten form or reproduced using a photocopier or Xerox-type machine. Such writings were always reproduced in a number of carbon copies and were circulated amongst friends, family, like-minded associates and acquaintances, who then reproduced and disseminated them further according to their own personal evaluation of the piece's worth and their willingness to undertake such an act of cultural resistance with a disregard towards the inherent risk this involved. Authors in the vast majority of cases identified themselves in their works. Writing about the series of *samizdat* 'feuilleton' books which he had self-produced, in a work titled 'A Padlock for Castle Schwarzenberg,' Ludvík Vaculík said: 'I thought up a name for them [his series of books]: it was an acronym for the instruction 'Vyslovny zakaz dalsiho Opisovani rukopisu' (Further copying of this manuscript expressly forbidden) making the Czech word VZDOR (defiance). But I didn't tell anyone, in case they laughed at me …' (Vaculík, 'A Padlock for Castle Schwarzenberg,' in: Goetz-Stankiewicz, 1992: 118-127). The irony of the author's double meaning and his subversive intention are very clearly and wittily expressed through his mockingly innocent aping of the controlling *'diktats'* of the authorities.

Many of the authors who worked in *samizdat*, several of whom had been banned by the state, suffered harsh treatment from the police, and some, most notably Václav Havel, were imprisoned for long periods of time. But the main point of *samizdat* was that literary reproduction via this means was regarded as entirely legal. Other methods of reproduction were purposefully avoided by Charter 77 signatories or 'Chartists' in order to attempt avoiding prosecution. 'The legality of typewritten materials,' Skilling writes, 'seemed to be confirmed by the failure of the authorities during the first year to prosecute persons for such action, although the drafters and signers of typewritten matter often suffered discrimination and persecution of other kinds' (Skilling, 1981: 98).

Samizdat proliferated and proved to be an extremely effective and ubiquitous phenomenon in Czechoslovakia. As a means of resistance to the totalitarian state, there was little the authorities could do to put a stop to it. It managed to filter through society, transcending every social level, uniting diverse individuals through the dissemination of information which the country's leaders wanted to supress. It permeated into and dispersed itself throughout society almost invisibly. By the

nature of its spontaneity, it proved to be highly elusive. The police had great difficulty in either limiting or controlling it. Even today it would be impossible to estimate even only roughly how many articles were reproduced in this manner. At the time the authorities could only seek to identify various typewriters used, and, in some cases, confiscate them along with the seizing of typewritten materials in house searches. Nor had they any control over what happened to or how *samizdat* was used when it managed to leak outside of Czechoslovakia. Occasionally they would fabricate or circulate various efforts by anti-Charter elements in an attempt to confuse or mislead readers, but the spirit or sense of 'communitas' that both *samizdat* and Charter 77 managed to create eventually proved impossible to break.

Dissent becomes Anti-structure

Václav Havel, the Czech playwright and a founding spokesperson of Charter 77, who was also the author of many influential essays upon the nature of totalitarianism and dissent, wrote in his essay 'The Power of the Powerless' (Havel, 1991: 125-214) that dissent differed from traditional forms of opposition. He likened overt dissent to the tip of an iceberg, in that the most visible part was not necessarily the most important manifestation of the vast underlying body of discontent from which it drew its strength. Dissent essentially differed from the parliamentary sort of opposition which offered alternate programmes of government through a legally instituted competition for power within its state structure. It also differed, he believed, from the forms of opposition that arose within classical dictatorships, which may also offer an alternative programme and function legally (or perhaps on the margins of legality), or those which resorted to violent methods of opposition. On the contrary, dissent within Czechoslovakia was an idealistic form of opposition founded upon a greater social and moral understanding. Hence the express declaration of Charter 77 when it was first founded that it was not a political movement, nor did it aspire to be one.

Originally the Charter set out to lay great stress upon the moral responsibility of the individual, and of conforming to the legal basis upon which all should ground their activities, along with the abstinence from violence of any kind in the expressions of their own personal and collective desires and their calls for respect, human rights and freedom. Yet, as H. Gordon Skilling outlined in his 1981 review of the Charter, all efforts by 'Charter 77 to be *non-political,* to avoid open opposition and to achieve a dialogue with the authorities, were […] unsuccessful. There was an inherent absurdity in the idea of a dialogue between a regime which was the epitome of illegitimacy and a

movement which that regime treated as counter-revolutionary' (Skilling, 1981: 181, emphasis in original).

The act of dissent carried out through the means of *samizdat* literature and embodied in the values and existence of Charter 77 can now be seen as operating, albeit at varying levels of conscious intention, in an area of sub-politics. The true significance of the manifestation of such a form of hidden or suppressed politics was vastly underestimated by the state powers in the late 1980s when the Czechoslovak peoples began to openly express their dissatisfaction with the ruling regime, who were seen as merely paying lip service to the Soviets and their encouragement towards adopting new reforms which allowed for greater liberalisation under President Gorbachev's initiatives of *'glasnost'* and *'perestroika'* (see: Skilling & Wilson, 1991: 11-29; Wolchik, 1991: 39-45). Consequently, ordinary people began to mobilise and express their collective will through mass demonstrations upon the streets and squares throughout Czechoslovakia. The combined result of *samizdat* and Charter 77 can now be seen as the tools which united 'civil society' – that is the overriding massed will of the people, which was in itself the accumulated result of such a long period of totalitarian oppression, and of having experienced a brief period of open reform previously in 1968, into something which Victor Turner might describe as an 'anti-structure' (see: Galt, 1994). Through the unification of civil society and the 'parallel polis' or 'second society' the people effected the legitimisation of a true, socially activist 'anti-structure' to influence and oppose the hegemony of the totalitarian Communist state in Czechoslovakia.

Anti-structure Results in the Hegemony to Take Over

Hegemony, according to its dictionary definition, means political domination. Yet for the Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci, hegemony had a slightly different meaning. According to Gramsci and his use of the term in his famous 'Prison Notebooks' (see: Simon, 1991: 21-28), hegemony is the term for political domination through a combination of ideology and political leadership.

Here we have a paradox – because in the case of a totalitarian form of state leadership, it not only denies that society democracy, it also denies itself this socially legitimised notion of hegemony, according to Gramsci's use of the term. This is due to its representation of a single group or body, which is namely itself – that is, the ruling regime. According to Gramsci, hegemony has a 'national-popular' dimension. 'It requires the unification of a variety of different social forces into a broad democratic alliance expressing a national-popular collective will, such that each of these forces

preserves its own autonomy' (Simon, 1991: 24), and makes its own contribution in the advance towards social change. For Gramsci, the goal that he saw beyond this advance towards social change was the implementation of socialism. In the context of an overthrown totalitarian regime, even one which purported itself to be socialist in principle, we can still demonstrate the validity of Gramsci's concepts.

In Gramsci's dual perspective of just exactly who holds the power of authority and who holds the power of hegemony within the old Communist state of Czechoslovakia, we can see that the totalitarian regime clearly held the power of authority, which it maintained by its rule of force – but this was *not* in itself hegemonic, according to Antonio Gramsci. The real (potential) power of hegemony in Czechoslovakia, throughout the late 1980s, lay increasingly within the growing alliance between the wider 'civil society' and the organisation of Charter 77.

Charter 77 became increasingly more favourably disposed towards forming such an alliance, modifying its stance from its original founding principles. It gradually moved away from its non-political stance and became significantly more inclined towards engaging with and pursuing more political issues and activities, not simply because of a shift in attitude on the part of its signatories, but also because of the actions of a wider group made up of ordinary and diverse citizens throughout Czechoslovakia. And it was from this changing disposition towards the actual formation of an ideological and political alliance that enabled a social leadership to coalesce. The proliferation of mass demonstrations calling for freedom across the country both forced and enabled the creation of a strong formal opposition group which was called 'Civic Forum,' and quickly resulted in the events which precipitated the sudden demise of Czechoslovakia's ruling regime, who significantly no longer had the backing and military support of Soviet Russia, in what is now referred to as the 'Velvet Revolution' of November 1989.

Real hegemony, in the Gramscian sense, was forced by the events of the Velvet Revolution, impelled by the moral change and human rights movements of Czechoslovakia coalescing into a mass 'civil society' through these organisations' long-standing defiance of the oppressive state regime. Thus, Charter 77 represented the ideology behind the people's desire for social, cultural and political freedom and democracy; when the two finally were able to come together they resulted in a true hegemonic force. Therefore, the Charter helped to quickly set up and facilitate a series of umbrella groups that would then embody this new hegemony of social power, enabling it to take over and replace the old totalitarian social and political structure – this was the achievement and triumph of Civic Forum in forming a united 'anti-structure' to state-orchestrated repression (see: Wolchik, 1991: 49).

Freedom, Possibility and the Future

'The aim of revolutionary strategy is the capture of power,' writes Roger Simon (1991: 27) in his book upon *Gramsci's Political Thought,* yet although Gramsci dealt mainly with the concepts and strategies of Marxist and Leninist forms of revolution, I hope I have demonstrated in this essay how these principles can also be used in realising and achieving other forms of social change besides those first proposed or sought by either Marx or Lenin.

Classical Marxism and also Leninism both hold the intrinsic view that power is concentrated in the state. In the past, the state was almost always in the control of the capitalist class, particularly in Europe; yet with the example of the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia, and to certain extents the other revolutions in the former East European Communist bloc during the late 1980s and early 1990s, we can see how the processes that deposed these countries' original capitalist forms of state power could be reversed to depose the so-called 'socialist' totalitarian forms which had been established during the Russian Revolution and the period immediately after the end of the Second World War. Yet, having made such an assertion, does this mean that we should view the Velvet Revolution, and the other recent revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe, which usurped political power from the rigid and seemingly intractable systems of hardline Communist regimes as 'counter-revolutionary'?

In his *samizdat* essay, 'Article 202,' Václav Havel compared the similarities between the totalitarian rulers of his Czechoslovak home state and the old 'Czarist' centralist authorities of Russia (Havel, 1991: 115). This kind of analogy was the sort of civic engagement and social self-reflection which the Czechoslovak regime sought to suppress. Hence, we can see how the crucial role that *samizdat* literature played, alongside the types of civic actions that Charter 77 fostered, helped to encourage a sense of 'communitas,' united within the spirit of resistance among the Czech and Slovak peoples, that manifested itself in the solidarity of ordinary people and was expressed through their collective action, motivating a wider 'civil society' to mobilise and call for social change. Thereby effectively instituting an 'anti-structure' in opposition to the entrenched structure of the state and its totalitarian regime. In this way, given its egalitarian nature, I think it would be incorrect to describe Czechoslovakia's 'gentle' or non-violent revolution of 1989 as a successful act of counter-revolution against the principles of socialism. Instead, I think we should view the November 1989 Velvet Revolution as an act of *further* social revolution, a revolution of national self-liberation. A revolution,

perhaps, which might propel the Czech and Slovak Republics towards the construction of a more genuinely socialist society, even if it ends up being one situated within and freely interacting with a wider capitalist world structure.

Indeed, in his first major public address in January 1990 (his 'New Year's Address') as the newly elected President of Czechoslovakia, the Czech playwright and former Charter 77 dissident, Václav Havel, said that he hoped his country would succeed in re-establishing itself as a republic which was 'socially just, […] a humane republic which serves the individual and which therefore holds the hope that the individual will serve it in turn' (Havel, 1991: 396). He finished his speech with the significant declaration: 'People, your government has returned to you!' (Havel, 1991: 396). Thus, a peaceful social coalition can achieve hegemony and result in the emergence of political, social and cultural freedom, seized through the act of organised civil resistance.

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Postscript: *Please note that this essay was originally researched and written in May 1996, mostly (and most enjoyably) in the Round Reading Room of the (old) British Library in London. It has been revised here (in Tokyo in September 2024) with edits only to correct syntax and grammar. The original content of the essay itself in terms of its ideas and argument have not been altered. It is far from a perfect essay, and while there is quite a lot expressed here which I would wish to cut out, re-write, or elaborate upon, it remains what it is – an enthusiastic undergraduate's essay.*

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