

# **A Study of Intellectualism in Czechoslovakia and its Role in the Velvet Revolution**

Written by Heidi Gordon

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

## **A Study of Intellectualism in Czechoslovakia and its Role in the Velvet Revolution**

<https://www.e-ir.info/2013/05/20/intellectual-idolatry-and-the-quiet-revolution/>

HEIDI GORDON, MAY 20 2013

### **Intellectual Idolatry and the Quiet Revolution: A Study of Intellectualism in Czechoslovakia and its Role in the Non- Violent Nature of the Velvet Revolution**

*"Even a purely moral act that has no hope of any immediate and visible political effect can gradually and indirectly, over time, gain in political significance."* Vaclav Havel[1]

And so it was in Czechoslovakia in 1989.

History teaches us that radical political change and revolution are a fundamentally violent affair; however the events that took place across the Eastern Bloc in 1989 shattered this illusion and stunned the world. One by one, countries that had endured long hard years under an oppressive Communist regime finally declared their desire for freedom and autonomy, wielding only intellectual power and peaceful intention. With the power of words and the clatter of keys, those countries of Eastern Europe brought the suffocating, totalitarian reign of Communism to a final and long overdue end.

The findings of this paper address the question of whether it was Czechoslovakia's culture of intellectualism, and indeed its intellectuals, that were responsible for the non-violent nature of the Velvet Revolution. Through empirical analysis this paper examines the 1989 revolutions from the perspective of both Czechoslovakia and Romania (whose revolution was, in contrast, bloody and violent) and, in the case of Czechoslovakia, examines intellectualism in further detail. The conclusions expand on the theory that a culture based on the importance of education, reverence of the written word and value of intellectual virtue, as opposed to religious or dogmatic ideology, was responsible for the success of the revolution's non-violent approach. Consideration is also given to the distinctive culture of intellectualism in Czechoslovakia and the role of intellectuals in politics. Through analysis of available literary sources, discourse and historical information depicting these real world events, this paper investigates the cultural, political and historical causes that led to the unique nature of the Czechoslovakian and Romanian revolutions, thereby establishing the reasons for their subsequent differences.

During the course of this research, additional questions are raised that query the validity of the proposed theory and benefit from further analysis. These include the possibility that the violence in Romania was due to factors outside the sphere of intellectualism and merely a response to the violence inflicted by its ruling regime; the questions of whether Czechoslovakia would have responded using violent means had its government been comparable to that of Romania and whether Communism would have acquiesced to peaceful protest had the regime not been as vulnerable as it was at the time.

Though history cannot be re-written, in examining these and other questions raised, the paper aims to determine that the characteristic culture and idolatry of intellectualism in Czechoslovakia and the benign power of its intellectuals had not only a significant impact on the non-violent nature of the Velvet Revolution but were the reason for it.

### **Education and Culture in Czechoslovakia**

# **A Study of Intellectualism in Czechoslovakia and its Role in the Velvet Revolution**

Written by Heidi Gordon

*"There is a very widespread, genuine desire to learn, a zeal, even a pathetic earnestness of the masses to profit by what is offered to them, a sincere admiration and respect for real knowledge and art, however indiscriminating in practice."*[2]

Czechoslovakia's intellectual reputation goes back many decades; its importance intrinsically linked to its culture. Justifiable evidence of this could be taken from the Czechoslovakian people's choice to elect philosopher and humanist T. G. Masaryk (unarguably Czechoslovakia's most prolific sociologist), as President of Czechoslovakia in 1918; and again through their choice of dissident playwright Vaclav Havel as leader of the people in 1989. But from where do the roots of this intellectual idolatry stem?

Even during the time of Austrian rule, education was a fundamental right and free to all, meaning virtually no one in Moravia or Bohemia was classed as illiterate. Education only grew in strength following the country's liberation from the Austrian Empire, with schooling becoming ever more of a priority. The effect of this educational expansion was not only edification of the people, but a lessening of the influence of Catholic doctrine in education.

Czechoslovakia is now widely acknowledged to be one of the most atheist countries in Eastern Europe, with an open indifference to religion. This is no small detail when its proximity to many religious Orthodox countries is considered.

Democracy was taught in schools as a matter of course, with an educational syllabus that would surpass any school in Western Europe today. In his book *The Czech Question*, Jaroslav Střítecký refers to the importance of democracy to the Czech people "...democracy [was] considered to be a necessary condition for the existence of the Czech nation..."[3] This ideology never diminished.

There was also little to no class distinction or discrimination when it came to education in Czechoslovakia. Consequently, the privileged studied alongside the underprivileged. This went some way to creating an inclusive intelligentsia, not one merely reserved for the wealthy proletariat; and intellectualism became the new religion of a nation.

Ladislav Holý confirms this cultural shift in his book *'The Little Czech and the Great Czech Nation'*

"The image of the Czech nation which is most frequently invoked when Czechs talk about their assumed national traditions is the image of a democratic, well-educated and highly cultured nation, and this image is in numerous contexts a distinct source of national pride. In much scholarly writing it is accepted as an objective fact." [4]

Holý quotes Petr Pithard, prime minister of the first post-November Czech government and a political scientist and historian who reiterated the popular image of Czech culture, by saying "...our ancestors had an exceptional respect for the written word, for a book. Illiteracy was eradicated relatively early and the Czechs have become a nation of readers." [5]

However, although these circumstances created a highly educated population, it was the high unemployment of the 1930's that led to the radicalisation of political philosophies[6] that was so distinctive of Czechoslovakia and its intellectuals. When democracy dissipated and finally vanished in the uniformity and homogeneity of the Eastern Bloc, it was these intellectuals and their revolutionary ideas that would eventually rally a nation to its freedom.

## **The Czech Intellectual**

*"Nowhere else in modern times has there developed such a deep belief in the well-nigh magical power of the word and of cultural symbols in general. Crucially, often these are not simply highly educated professionals, but, more specifically, individuals with humanities and arts backgrounds that are among the most luminous public figures in the region"* [7]

The intellectual can be defined as an individual associating with reason and thinking, yet possessing mental skills that are not simply intelligent, but focused on the 'art' of thinking; particularly on the abstract, philosophical and

# **A Study of Intellectualism in Czechoslovakia and its Role in the Velvet Revolution**

Written by Heidi Gordon

esoteric aspects of human inquisition and the value of their thinking.

Bauman's quote depicts the high esteem in which intellectuals have always been held in Czechoslovakia, but how and why did they come to be regarded with such admiration?

František Palacký, a Czech historian and politician of the eighteenth century was undoubtedly the most influential person of the Czech National Revival. Known as "Father of the Nation" he was the first to come into contact with the resurgence of national feeling that had begun to influence Czechoslovakian intellectuals. An authority on aesthetics, his influence on Czech political thought and historiography was immeasurable and he is said to have been responsible for 'creating the Czech nation'. Through access to education and the influential and enlightened writings of intellectuals that followed, Czech people moved away from religion and a new mind-set emerged.

From 1526 to 1918, Czechoslovakia fought for national and political recognition against what appeared to be the 'entirety of Europe'. Through the seventeenth century 'Period of Darkness' the nation struggled to retain a hold on the peaceful, democratic and magnificently medieval culture it had constructed. Czechoslovakia succeeded and in an act of exaltation and defiance elected humanist and philosopher T.G. Masaryk as President. This gesture authenticated the nation's admiration of the intellectual and clearly revealed their most respected values. Later, sacrificed by the rest of Europe to Hitler's forces and subsequently falling victim to the oppression of the Communist regime, it was perhaps no surprise that to the Czech people holding on to their glorious culture, language and identity became of the utmost importance.

Although intellectualism and the power of the word was already firmly established in Czech culture well before his time, dissident playwright-turned-President Vaclav Havel was vastly responsible for exalting the intellectual status of Czechoslovakia. As a *Washington Post* editorial reported, on a speech made by Havel to Congress, it "provided stunning evidence that his country, far from being only an inheritor – let alone borrower – of the European intellectual tradition, it is a prime source of it." [8]

As Milada Polišenská also observed, "the Czechs never identified with the communist version of national identity and preserved the old, patriotic, romantic and beautiful picture of Czech national identity that was a source of both hopes and despair." [9]

Czechoslovakia took intellectuals to its heart as the only hope to save a nation from the oppression of the Soviet Union. If nothing else, intellectuals were a source of individualism, hope, beauty and creativity in the bland and homogenous mire of Communism that had taken hold across the Eastern Bloc. The intellectuals responded to the call and took it upon themselves to be the speakers of truth.

As Holý states, "[the] role of culture is also expressed in the Czech metaphor of the writer as the conscience of the nation" [10] Alvin Gouldner also observed this phenomenon

"it is not only that intellectuals can take the standpoint of the social "whole", by reason of their structural position or special culture, intellectuals often occupy social roles and have had educations that induce them to define themselves as "representatives" of the larger society or nation, or of the historical or native tradition of the group.[11]

The motto of the 1989 revolution was undoubtedly 'Truth Shall Prevail' and it was thanks to the intellectuals that this was indeed the case.

## **The Revolution: The year 1989 left reality far behind**

Timothy Garton Ash observed:

"...there was something new; there was a big new idea, and that was the revolution itself – the idea of the non-revolutionary revolution, the evolutionary revolution. The motto of 1989 could come from Lenin's great critic Eduard Bernstein; 'the goal is nothing, the movement is everything'"[12]

# **A Study of Intellectualism in Czechoslovakia and its Role in the Velvet Revolution**

Written by Heidi Gordon

Many have written about the historic events that took place in Eastern Europe during 1989 and the purpose of this paper is not to re-tell these events in their entirety, but to search for the reasons behind their unusual and dramatic nature. In order to do so, it is perhaps pertinent to offer a summary here of the events that led to the Velvet Revolution and its particular characteristics.

Following independence from the Austro-Hungarian Empire and dissection and incorporation into the Nazi German machine, Czechoslovakia became part of the Eastern Bloc and fell under the influence of Soviet rule. The nation, led by Dubcek at the time, used mass non-violent civil resistance to fight the Soviet leviathan during the Prague Spring of 1968 during which time free press and radical reforms had proved too much for the Soviet Union to tolerate. It is said that between 1945 and 1989, 250,000 Czech citizens were political prisoners. Of these, 243 were executed, 3,000 died in prison, 400 were killed crossing the border and 22,000 were sent to labour camps.

Resistance and a strong underground intellectual life had remained present in Czechoslovakia during the entirety of Communist rule but it was in the year 1989, and the period after the fall of the Berlin Wall that real change began. In 1977 a group of intellectuals, headed by dissident playwright Vaclav Havel had begun a small civil rights organisation known as Charter 77. Grounded in the philosophical writings of Jan Patočka, it would be the 'solidarity of the shattered' that would lead this revolution and fight for the human rights of the Czechoslovak people. The movement, inspired by critical theatre and music, cultivated the spirit of dissent among the country's intellectuals. The Soviet government responded by launching a campaign against the alliance, forcing citizens to sign declarations of condemnation and shunning those who belonged to it; though "many an opponent of Charter 77 did so in betrayal of his conscience"[13]

It was unsurprising that a pervading fear; a fear of being 'found out', coupled with a lack of belief that anything could change, made people deny their conscience – for no one could have foreseen the collapse of the regime during those oppressive times. But on November 17, 1989 the people would come to realise the power they possessed.

November 17 is an important date in Czech history. It was the day when, at the beginning of the Nazi occupation 50 years earlier, a student named Jan Opletal was killed by police, along with nine others in what was a peaceful demonstration. His funeral; a show of defiance, and his name, have never been forgotten. In 1989 students chose to commemorate this anniversary with a peaceful march through the city of Prague. However, the protest was infiltrated by police and soon security forces were violently beating innocent students. This event sparked not only visible outrage throughout the population, but a series of demonstrations that lasted from November 19 to late December. The number of peaceful protesters in Prague during those weeks reached an estimated one million people. After a two-hour general strike involving all citizens of Czechoslovakia, it was on November 27 as people stood peacefully in Wenceslas Square, jangling their keys in a show of collective defiance, that the Communist regime finally succumbed. Recognising its failure in other states it finally relinquished power to the people. Barbed wire was removed, the Communist government dissolved and on December 29, 1989, dissident playwright Vaclav Havel became the new president of a free Czechoslovakia.

## **Intellectuals in Politics**

*"It is a desperate situation that now the artists and intellectuals have taken politics in their hands and use politicians only as advisors. They do it for the salvation of the world."*[14]

As a highly cultured state, when Czechoslovakia lost its leading nobility and wealthy, educated citizens in the early seventeenth century, their national revival depended on the intellectuals of the day to lead the nation. In an interview for Czech cultural weekly *Tvorba*, Eduard Goldstucker noted that 'the case of intellectuals becoming the leaders of a nation does not exist anywhere else.' He also argued that

"It is impossible to separate [politics or the aim of awakening democratic and humanistic values among the people] because in Bohemia culture has traditionally been put in a position where it has to be a representative of national interests, in other words, to take the place of the politicians"[15]

# **A Study of Intellectualism in Czechoslovakia and its Role in the Velvet Revolution**

Written by Heidi Gordon

Katherine Verdery echoes these sentiments by stating "Culture and politics were so closely intertwined [in Czechoslovakia] and elites moved back and forth between intellectual and political work with such frequency, that the roles of politician and intellectual were indistinguishable." [16]

Verdery further defined intellectuals as 'producers of culture' claiming that culture and politics were very closely linked in Eastern Europe. Abrams also agrees with this viewpoint writing "In the life of the Czech nation, as in others of the region, the borders between political and cultural activity have often been so blurred as to make distinguishing them artificial and even arbitrary." [17]

The question though of how intellectuals came to be respected enough to enable them to participate freely within the political sphere in Czechoslovakia still remains. It may seem strange to those of us in the western world that electing an 'intellectual' to lead a nation could ever be possible, yet, as has already been established, for Czech people the intellectual held high status.

When Vaclav Havel used literary, artistic and theatrical symbolism in his politics or decided on film costume designers to create the uniforms for his royal guard, no one thought it unusual. In Czechoslovakia intellectualism and high culture pervaded every sphere of life. Though to us entrusting our country's governance to anyone other than a politician is unimaginable, to the Czech people anything else would have been unthinkable.

Across Eastern Europe it was often seen as the responsibility of intellectuals to speak the truth and expose lies. It was the responsibility of Czechs to educate themselves; to know as much as they could about the world through philosophy, art, politics, music and literature. This is perhaps why intellectualism was prized so highly and why intellectuals were held in higher regard than politicians. Put simply, it was intellectuals (not politicians) who commanded the trust and respect of the people, because they spoke for the people.

Differences between the intellectual and the politician certainly existed. It was the intellectual's humanist background and implicit belief in the basic principles of human rights that made them ideally placed to advise on governance and democracy, without losing sight of the class of high culture that has come to define the Czech people. Unlike politicians, intellectuals possessed no ulterior motive of gaining personal power, which was perhaps their greatest attribute. This notion was supported by Charter 77 in their opening statement "The intellectual dissent of Czechoslovakia remained, from start till the end, purely intellectual. It didn't turn into a 'political opposition', whose priority it is to take over power; it didn't cross the border of critical discourse, of the "dialogue with power." [18]

It was for these reasons, coupled with their knowledge and love of the arts, culture and philosophy, that intellectuals in Czechoslovakia became the critical voice of the people on public as well as political affairs. When intellectuals became dissidents during Communist rule, the political role they occupied drastically altered. Their position as the voices of reason and truth was reinforced; indeed it seemed theirs was the only voice that could be heard through the deceptive and suffocating façade of Communist idealism.

In his extraordinary seminal essay, 'Power of the Powerless', dissident playwright Vaclav Havel noted

"With the post-totalitarian system mounting a total assault on humans, they stood against it alone, abandoned and isolated. It was therefore entirely natural that the "dissident" movements were explicitly defensive and that they existed to defend human beings and the genuine aims of life against the aims of the system." [19]

Havel had long written about what he termed 'anti-politics'. That is "politics as practical morality, as service to the truth, as essentially human care for our fellow humans." [20]

That is, the realisation that the seemingly powerless can challenge oppressive regimes and automatism by speaking truth and morality. Totalitarianism negates politics. From 'post-totalitarian' regimes comes greater political understanding; the understanding that politics is beyond political parties and governments. It was 'living within the truth', within the realm of 'the existential and the pre-political'. 'Living within the truth confronts living within a lie' and so exposes the system at its core.' [21]

# A Study of Intellectualism in Czechoslovakia and its Role in the Velvet Revolution

Written by Heidi Gordon

Here comparison can be drawn with Romania whose intellectuals were largely disassociated from public life and inactive in the political sphere, as Richard Andrew Hall observed

“The [Romanian] regime’s totalitarian policies not only atomised but deepened longstanding cleavages in Romanian society, especially that between intellectuals and professionals and the rest of society. Thus the courageous expressions of dissent in the late 1980s by intellectuals and professionals had little broader impact on the rest of society.”[22]

He observed it was therefore no surprise that a peaceful, negotiated transition did not occur in Romania; as the power of intellectuals was insufficient to instigate the necessary change, but rather that the catalysts of the revolution would be the oppressed individuals and groups living under the regime. As a result, revolution under these circumstances would always be ‘chaotic and violent’.

This indicates that Czechoslovakian culture and faith in the intellectual as a proponent of non-violent change preordained the peaceful nature of the revolution and that Romania’s lack of this faith inevitably doomed any chance that an intellectual revolution might have been possible.

## Intellectualism vs. Communism

*“The dissident intellectuals, powerless as they seemed to be, delivered the decisive blow when they denounced the regime’s underlying ideology as ritualized lies, out of touch with reality.”[23]*

There is no denying that the abandonment of Communist ideology by the intellectual population of Eastern Europe came as the decisive blow to the ruling party. After all, it was intellectuals who had created it. It was an intellectual, Karl Marx, who constructed the Communist ideology and the basis of the Communist movement. It was an intellectual, Vladimir Lenin, who first put the ideology into practice. There is no denying that without intellectuals the Communist ideal would never have existed. As Jerome Karabel observed; “Nowhere has the issue of the relationship between the intellectuals and the powers been raised with greater sharpness than in Russia and Eastern Europe. In part, this is because the “intelligentsia” as a distinct social group was born in this region.”[24]

Perhaps it is only fitting then that the combatants of an intellectually manifested regime were also intellectuals. One might argue that no others could have undertaken such a task.

Miroslav Kusy highlighted the fact that; “In practical politics, the communists of the Soviet Bloc considered the intelligentsia and especially its elite, the intellectuals, to be of great social importance. The Communists knew very well that words were the weapon of the intelligentsia. He who can speak convincingly, rules society.”[25]

In Czechoslovakia, as more and more intellectuals were stifled and censored by the very system they believed would bring greater intellectual freedom, they dissented and abandoned loyalty to the Communist ideal. In doing so, ironically the power of the intellectual increased, albeit initially through subversive means. It almost seemed as if intellectualism fed on suppression and subjugation and once liberated, began to diminish.

Richard Andrew Hall commented; “Totalitarian regimes are vulnerable to spontaneous action because of their overtly ideological emphasis which deeply politicises even routine, non-political societal behaviour and their extreme centralisation of power within the state and in the capital.”[26]

In hindsight it appears that without the support of intellectuals the Communist ideal had very little chance of survival. The intellectuals abandonment of these ideas signified the end of one intellectual ideology; Communism, and the beginning of another; democracy.

In Czechoslovakia the time was ripe for intellectual movements to take hold. Under a totalitarian regime; where opportunities for organisations and groups to form were limited, was created the very need for their existence.

# A Study of Intellectualism in Czechoslovakia and its Role in the Velvet Revolution

Written by Heidi Gordon

## Intellectuals and Violence

*"War is not an instinct but an invention"[27]*

Schell wrote that the 1989 collapse of communism in Central Europe "present[ed] the most sweeping demonstration so far of the power of 'politics' without violence." [28]

Lacking a revolutionary past, Czechoslovakian people had long been thought passively to adapt to new regimes, seemingly unwilling to resist them, however unpopular. The embodiment of this philosophy is captured in the famous satirical novel *The Good Soldier Svejk* by Jaroslav Hašek.

An alternative way to explain this behaviour is that Czechoslovak people simply preferred to adopt a non-violent position, choosing democracy and intellect over force, and that this has merely been misconstrued as conservatism or apathy. Czech people have consistently maintained their non-aggressive stance throughout history, confident in their views on how life should be conducted morally, socially, politically and culturally. Whether in WWII, the Prague Spring, the Velvet Revolution or their separation from Slovakia, the Czech people always chose to throw flowers at the advancing tanks rather than reward their force with violence. Words were the intellectual's weapons of choice and this ethos has stood them in good stead to this day.

A revolution led by intellectuals has a higher probability of being non-violent. This statement, though general, is sustained when considering that the nature of the intellectual is to oppose violence. Violence would prevent discourse and dialogue, which are the foundations of every intellectual's intention. The more violent a revolution, the less of a role there is for the intellectual within it.

Alvin Gouldner, on the subject of intellectuals and killing, said;

"Intellectuals have been slow to kill; they have commonly felt a certain incompatibility between killing and talking, seeing each as an alternative to one another. Killing ends the dialogue, and the threat of violence makes it valueless. For who believes the consensus that comes out of the barrel of a gun?" [29]

As Stefan Auer noted;

"Ever since the French Revolution of 1789, violence has been at the centre of revolutionary politics. Just as repressive regimes relied on violence, their opponents felt pressured to resort to violence too...Unlike their more radical predecessors, revolutionaries [like Vaclav Havel] were not wedded to teleological views. They did not aim at yet another utopian end-goal, but rather sought to create the possibility for a new beginning without a radical break with the past. To the extent that the 1989 revolutions in Central Europe were successful in creating conditions for liberty, they undermined the pre-existing notions of revolution." [30]

1989 also challenged pre-existing notions of revolutions as predominantly violent, with intellectuals like Vaclav Havel rejecting the Marxist-Leninist justification of violence and adopting a more peaceful approach instead. When fighting for human rights, as Havel principally was, it would have seemed ludicrous to employ violent means to achieve such an aim. Indeed it would have gone against all his principles to do so.

## The Case of Romania

*"The when and how of the transition matter because they have real consequences in the lives of those who experience such events: in Romania more than 1100 people lost their lives as a result of the timing and manner in which the Ceausescu regime collapsed." [31]*

The case of Romania's revolution is well documented, as the violence that defined it was in stark contrast to the peaceful revolution that prevailed across the rest of the Eastern Bloc. The reasons for this disparity and its relationship to Romania's culture, faith and absence of intellectuals within the social strata, warrant further

# A Study of Intellectualism in Czechoslovakia and its Role in the Velvet Revolution

Written by Heidi Gordon

discussion.

Although their culture was steeped in folklore, myth and legend, as in Czechoslovakia, Romania's population was far more diverse; consisting of many Jewish, German, Hungarian and Roma minorities. It is possible that this caused a lack of social and cultural cohesion within the country, making it more difficult to unite and fight for a common cause.

Education in Romania also lagged far behind the rest of Eastern Europe, while the Romanian Orthodox Church had the allegiance of approximately seventy per cent of the population; the rest of whom were minority groups supporting their own individual faiths.

Quoting Minister Earl Pope,

"The churches [of Romania] became guardians of evangelical, historical, traditional, and human values. Struggling with internal and external circumstances and drawing strength from their faith, the churches kept alive in the people the hope of liberation, becoming in this way the repository of a better and more just future." [32]

Romanian people clung to religion as the Czechoslovakian people clung to their intellectuals. These two very different entities of worship undoubtedly produced varying viewpoints on matters of culture, politics and revolution. While the former offered solace yet ultimately inaction, the latter offered an alternative way of thinking and momentum. However, given the appalling deeds Romania's population had been subjected to by its own government, their feelings of helplessness, defeat and unwavering faith in religion was hardly surprising.

Of religion, Karl Marx wrote; "Religion is the sigh of the creature overwhelmed by misfortune, the sentiment of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people." [33]

In 'The Opium of the Intellectuals', Raymond Aron quotes French philosopher and social activist, Simone Weil, who scathingly said of Marx's quote "Marxism is undoubtedly a religion in the lowest sense of the word. Like every inferior form of the religious life, it has been continually used, to borrow the apt phrase of Marx himself, as an opiate for the people" [34]

While Marx's quote poetically explains the significance of religion in the lives of the oppressed and powerless, Weil shrewdly illustrates how Marxism is akin to a religion in its ability to indoctrinate the masses. It was perhaps in this way, but this way only, that the struggle in Romania and Czechoslovakia were alike.

## Romania's Revolution

*"The lack of alternatives in political thought, the lack of an ample dissent movement, but above all the lack of initiatives and of Romanian intellectual solidarity (elements that set apart Romania from the neighbouring states) made the overthrowing of the dictatorial communist regime a bloody episode" [35]*

As mentioned, in stark contrast to the peaceful revolutions of Soviet Europe in 1989, Romania's revolution was one shaped by violence and loss of life. Though similar in political and geographical attributes to that of her Warsaw Pact neighbours, the circumstances of Romania's revolution were poles apart.

In his quote above, Hall makes it clear that intellectuals held little sway on the revolution or indeed the minds of the Romanian people. The scars left on Romania from years of intimidation and torment by Ceausescu are evident and described here by Pope;

"Unquestionably there is a serious moral void within Romanian society at large. This is the tragic legacy of the Ceausescu era which needs to be addressed. More than forty years of oppression, corruption, paranoia, and social atomization have taken their tragic toll...inherent destruction and mistrust pervaded the nation...the fundamental problem was not political but moral." [36]



# **A Study of Intellectualism in Czechoslovakia and its Role in the Velvet Revolution**

Written by Heidi Gordon

This quote gives some insight as to why it may not have been possible for Romania's people to instigate a peaceful revolution, even if it had been underpinned by an intellectual community – which, as has already been discussed, was lacking. For one, the conduct of the other side (i.e. Ceausescu and his army) would have been out with their control and would certainly have entailed (as it did) the use of weapons; and secondly, the people were not fighting an intellectual enemy.

The revolution began on December 15, 1989 in the comparatively cosmopolitan climate of Timisoara. This hints that the beginnings of revolution were instigated by the more 'intellectually progressive' of the population – in Romania predominantly the religious clergy. It was within the safety of religion that the demonstrations began.

Confrontation occurred between local authorities, supported by secret police, and religious believers surrounding a Hungarian Reformed Church in Timisoara. One of Romania's few dissidents László Tőkés, a pastor at the church, was condemning the regime's campaign to destroy thousands of local villages and as a result was to be evicted from his church. Hungarian parishioners and ethnic Romanians (of traditionally Orthodox faith) surrounded the church in protest. This unexpected uprising carried on into the following day, when all of Timișoara went on strike even though faced with tanks and armoured vehicles.

Over the next 3 days over sixty people were killed and 700 arrested by Ceausescu's forces. Rumours of many more dead swept across the country and the revolution began.

Ceausescu blamed foreign agents for the provocation and in response decided to call a national rally on December 21 to try and regain control of the population. What happened next was unprecedented. Broadcast on live national television, Ceausescu addressed the people, when disorder and heckling erupted in the crowd calling for free elections and chants of 'down with Ceausescu'. The distress on the faces of Ceausescu and his wife Elena, broadcast to a nation, instantly confirmed the fragility of the dictatorial regime that had dominated for so many years and demonstrations broke out across the country in response. Ceausescu and his wife fled in panic, only to be executed a few days later on Christmas Day.

Romania's revolution began with the threat of banishment of one of its most prominent religious leaders, in effect an attack on Romanian's moral and cultural way of life. The threat to religious ideology to Romania was what intellectual suppression was to Czechoslovakia. From that point on, Romania's revolution gathered momentum and took on an anti-regime stance. However, it is possible to assume that without the trigger of religious subjugation, their revolution may never have occurred.

## **The Violence in Romania**

*"There was no bond between the ruler and the ruled, merely despair and a deep-seated hatred ready to flare at the earliest opportunity. Ironically, the Romanian population was ultimately united when this despair and hatred could be focused upon a common enemy." [37]*

In Romania, it wasn't communism that was the enemy so much as Ceausescu's dictatorship. Oppression had caused homogenisation of the population. They lacked any original political thought and revolutionary tradition or ability to conceive of overthrowing Communism.

While all other nations of the Warsaw Pact were fighting for a return to their independent states, Romania had no such past to recall. A country with a history of enslavement must not have known what its future would hold after bringing down the regime that had brutalised it.

Largely impervious to Soviet political influence, it was Ceausescu who imposed prison sentences on citizens found buying too much food; who kept his people in a state of fear and poverty and chronic food and energy shortage; who denied fundamental rights to women and possessed a sickening disregard for human rights. To call him an international pariah was an understatement.

# A Study of Intellectualism in Czechoslovakia and its Role in the Velvet Revolution

Written by Heidi Gordon

So arrogant was Ceausescu that even after East Germany and Czechoslovakia, he still believed there would be no repercussions in Romania. But, as Hall wrote

“If Ceausescu’s decision to convene this mass rally and to believe that he could play the nationalist card as he had done 21 years earlier was misguided, his order that the event be televised live and nationwide proved to be positively suicidal...It took television almost three minutes to cut the live feed, and by that time the damage had been done: an entire national audience had seen that the emperor had no clothes.”[38]

The fact remains, in Romania there was no time to ‘plan’ a revolution; there was no intelligentsia leading the fight. Everything that occurred in Romania occurred spontaneously and quickly. Action required reaction.

“There was no pre-existing oppositional network in Romania, like Solidarity [in Poland] or Charter 77 [in Czechoslovakia], that could place itself at the head of the popular unrest. Ironically...the most ‘revolutionary’ events of 1989 thrust into power the least revolutionary and most compromised leadership.”[39]

There may be many who doubt that Romania’s was even a ‘revolution’, but to the people of Romania it was the moment of realisation that people really could provoke change.

## Conclusions

*“The idea of human rights and freedoms must be an integral part of any meaningful world order.”[40]*

In researching this paper, there was no question that intellectuals were the main protagonists of the Velvet Revolution. While not exclusively responsible for its peaceful nature, they deserve immeasurable recognition for the part they played in it.

The revolution in Czechoslovakia was inspirational and humane. It centred on a fight for democracy, tradition and culture, led by the country’s most luminous intellectuals.

Who could doubt the principles and ability to instigate democratic change of someone who believed that “The salvation of this human world lies nowhere else than in the human heart, in the human power to reflect, in human meekness and human responsibility.”[41]

Without this unique group of intellectuals fundamentally opposed to violence as a means of attaining political reform – who possessed the ability to see beyond simple power gains and politics – the events of the Velvet Revolution would have been vastly different. Of Vaclav Havel, Barak Obama said “His peaceful resistance shook the foundations of an empire, exposed the emptiness of a repressive ideology, and proved that moral leadership is more powerful than any weapon.”[42]

When contrasting events with Romania it is clear that Romania was not afforded the same luxuries as Czechoslovakia. Although their faith in religion rather than intellectualism meant they had no one at the helm of their fight, urging them to choose the path of peaceful revolution, they also had to contend with the use of violence towards them by their own government. This was not the case in Czechoslovakia in 1989.

It would be crass to suggest that Romania might have had peaceful revolution had they prioritised intellectualism over religion. If the government in Czechoslovakia had used violence to subjugate its population, the peaceful nature of their revolution might have been lost. Romania may not have had an intelligentsia standing between them and their dictator but that was not the reason for the bloodshed. Romania did not respond *with* violence, they simply responded *to* violence.

The success of the intellectuals in Czechoslovakia was aided by the weakness of the Communist regime at the time (in part due to the withdrawal of intellectual support). In Romania Communism was not the only enemy.

# A Study of Intellectualism in Czechoslovakia and its Role in the Velvet Revolution

Written by Heidi Gordon

There is, then, no definitive answer to the question of whether the cultural background of these two countries was responsible for making their revolutions so different. Had Romania favoured existential thinking, philosophy and education over religion, it is possible they would have had an intelligentsia to fight on their behalf. This does not imply that the use of intellect would have defeated their particular enemy. No amount of words would have shielded people from bullets.

Out of all the turmoil and oppression of the Soviet years, Czechoslovakia elected a President who was the essence of human goodness: a politician who truly had the rights and welfare of his people at heart. Though many of us are fortunate to have avoided decades of tyranny and domination imposed by an unwanted and unelected regime, modern society has now come to accept an equivalent – homogenous and indifferent standards of leadership. There are few who would doubt that our politicians today are less enlightened, free thinking or morally 'good' as those that arose from the revolutions of 1989.

As Vaclav Havel said, "Citizens no longer perceive their politician as a living human being, for they never have and will never see him that way." [43] In other words they are apart from the people; they choose politics to further their own gains and care very little for the people they are elected to serve.

In conclusion, political circumstances play a pivotal role in all revolutions. While intellectuals unquestionably shaped the nature of the Velvet Revolution, it is not an absolute that a revolution led by intellectuals would be non-violent. Romania's absence of an intellectual stratum was not accountable for the violence perpetrated by one despotic leader. Intellectuals championed Czechoslovakia's peaceful cause, but they only succeeded because they were fighting an intellectual revolution.

Finally, the following is a transcription of an interview by Arnost Lustig with Alexander Dubcek and Vaclav Havel on New Year's Eve 1989 and their personal thoughts on the 1989 revolutions;

AL: "What is your reaction to the events sweeping around us?"

AD: "I am happy I lived to see this...It was a difficult delivery, but the most beautiful one."

AL: "What does the uniqueness of the Czechoslovak revolution consist of?"

VH: "That it was so swift, full of love, pure and shy. I hope that the road on which we are going will be such as this revolution has been – that it continues without violence, cruelty, and revenge. Only when we see and follow the terrible bloodshed in Romania, we realize what we have been spared. After all, in our country something like that could have happened as well." [44]

## Bibliography

Abrams, B *The Struggle for the Soul of the Nation. Czech Culture and the Rise of Communism* Harvard Cold War Studies Book Series Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield 2004 p.39

Aron, R *The Opium of the Intellectuals* Intro. Harvey C. Mansfield New Brunswick N.J 2001 p.vii

Auer, S *Violence and the End of Revolution After 1989* Thesis Eleven 97: 6 Stefan Auer Published by: <http://www.sagepublications.com> 2009 p.7

Baumann, Z *Intellectuals in East-Central Europe: Continuity and Change* Eastern European Politics and Societies 1987 p.162

Garton Ash, T 'Conclusions' in Sorin Antohi and Vladimir Tismaneanu eds, *Between Past and Future: The*

# **A Study of Intellectualism in Czechoslovakia and its Role in the Velvet Revolution**

Written by Heidi Gordon

- Revolutions of 1989 and their Aftermath* New York and Budapest: Central European University Press 2000 p.398
- Gilberg, T *Nationalism und Communism in Romania: The Rise und Fall of Crausescu's Personal Dictatorship* Boulder Co. Westview Press 1990 p. 270
- Goodwin, J *Old Regimes and Revolutions in the Second and Third Worlds* Social Science History Volume 18 Number 4 Winter 1994
- Gouldner, A W *Prologue to a Theory of Revolutionary Intellectuals* From Telos 26 Winter 1975-76 pps.12, 34
- Hall, R A *Theories of Collective Action and Revolution: Evidence from the Romanian Transition of December 1989* Taylor and Francis Europe-Asia Studies Vol. 52 No. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/153590> 6 Sep. 2000 pps.1069, 1072, 1074, 1080
- Havel, V *Disturbing the Peace: A conversation with Karel Hvižd'ala*, Vintage Books 1990 p.115
- Havel, V *International Herald Tribune* 21 February 1990
- Havel, V *Or Living in Truth* Faber, 1987 pps.55-62
- Havel, V *Politics and Conscience* First published in Prague in a samizdat collection *The Natural World as Political Problem: Essays on Modern Man* Edice Expedice Vol. 188 1984 Translation by Erazim Kohák/ Roger Scruton Salisbury Review [http://www.vaclavhavel.cz/showtrans.php?cat=clanky&val=73\\_aj\\_clanky.html&typ=HTML](http://www.vaclavhavel.cz/showtrans.php?cat=clanky&val=73_aj_clanky.html&typ=HTML) 2 January 1985
- Havel, V *Power to the Powerless* [http://vaclavhavel.cz/showtrans.php?cat=eseje&val=2\\_aj\\_eseje.html&typ=HTML](http://vaclavhavel.cz/showtrans.php?cat=eseje&val=2_aj_eseje.html&typ=HTML) October 1978
- Havel, V *The Need for Transcendence in the Post Modern World* Independence Hall Philadelphia <http://www.worldtrans.org/whole/havelspeech.html> July 4 1994
- Havel, V *The Onassis Prize For Man and Mankind* Athens 24 May [http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Vaclav\\_Havel](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Vaclav_Havel) 1993
- Holý, L *The Little Czech and the Great Czech Nation: National Identity and the Post-Communist Transformation of Society* New York: Cambridge University Press 1996 pps.77, 83
- Joppke, C *Intellectuals, Nationalism, and the Exit from Communism: The Case of East Germany* Comparative Studies in Society and History 37 1995 pps. 213-241
- Karabel, J *Towards a Theory of Intellectuals and Politics* Theory and Society Vol. 25 No. 2 Springer April 1996 p. 214-215
- Kuran, T *Now Out of Never: The Element of Surprise in the East European Revolution of 1989* Reviewed work(s) World Politics, Vol. 44 No. 1 Cambridge University Press <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2010422> Oct.1991 p. 28
- Kusy, M *Role and Responsibility of Intellectuals* Comenius University Bratislava Slovakia <http://www.unc.edu/depts/europe/conferences/ACLS98/kusy.html>
- Lustig, A and Lustig, J *Return to Czechoslovakia: Snapshots of a Revolution: The Kenyon Review New Series* Vol. 12 No. 4 Kenyon College <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4336322> Autumn1990 pps. 7, 8
- Neumann, V *Civic Culture in Banat and Transylvania: The Role of Timișoara in the 1989 Transformation of the Romanian Political Order in Idem Between Words and Reality. Studies on Politics of Recognition and the Changes*

# **A Study of Intellectualism in Czechoslovakia and its Role in the Velvet Revolution**

Written by Heidi Gordon

*of Regime in Contemporary Romania* Translated by Simona The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy The Catholic University of America Washington D.C. pp.41-63

Obama, B in an official statement of President Obama on the death of Vaclav Havel  
[http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Vaclav\\_Havel](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Vaclav_Havel) 18 December 2011

Ortega y Gasset, J *The Revolt of the Masses*, New York W. W. Norton & company 1930

Polišenská, M *Czech National Identity and the European Constitution: a Chance and/or a Challenge (a Historical Perspective)* Anglo-Americká Vysoká Škola The New Anglo-American College in Prague p.14

Pope, E *The Role of Religion in the Romanian Revolution in Religion in Eastern Europe* Evangel Press Indiana  
[http://www.georgefox.edu/academics/undergrad/departments/soc-swk/ree/Pope\\_The%20Role.html](http://www.georgefox.edu/academics/undergrad/departments/soc-swk/ree/Pope_The%20Role.html) 2003

Rosenthal, A M *International Herald Tribune* 11 May 1990

Schell, J *The Unconquerable World: Power, Nonviolence, and the Will of the People* New York: Metropolitan Books: 186 2003 p.16

Střítecký, J *The Czech Question A Century Later* Reviewed work(s) Czech Sociological Review Vol. 3 No. 1 "A Hundred Years of "The Czech Question" p.80

Tvorba 1990 No. 7 p.7

Verdery, K *What Was Socialism and What Comes Next?* Princeton Studies in Culture/Power/History Series Princeton Paperbacks Princeton University Press 1996 p.106

Wellek, R *The Cultural Situation in Czechoslovakia* The Slavonic and East European Review Vol. 14 No. 42 Modern Humanities Research Association and University College London, School of Slavonic and East European Studies  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4203157> April 1936 p.624

[1] Vaclav Havel *Disturbing the Peace: A conversation with Karel Hvížd'ala*, Vintage Books 1990 p.115

[2] René Wellek *The Cultural Situation in Czechoslovakia* The Slavonic and East European Review Vol. 14 No. 42 Modern Humanities Research Association and University College London, School of Slavonic and East European Studies <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4203157> April 1936 p.629

[3] Jaroslav Střítecký *The Czech Question A Century Later* Reviewed work(s) Czech Sociological Review Vol. 3 No. 1 A Hundred Years of "The Czech Question" p.80

[4] Ladislav Holý *The Little Czech and the Great Czech Nation: National Identity and the Post-Communist Transformation of Society* New York: Cambridge University Press 1996 p.77

[5] Ibid. p.83

[6] R Wellek *The Cultural Situation in Czechoslovakia* The Slavonic and East European Review

# **A Study of Intellectualism in Czechoslovakia and its Role in the Velvet Revolution**

Written by Heidi Gordon

p.624

[7] Zygmunt Baumann *Intellectuals in East-Central Europe: Continuity and Change* Eastern European Politics and Societies 1987 p.162

[8] AM Rosenthal *International Herald Tribune* 11 May 1990

[9] Milada Polišenská *Czech National Identity and the European Constitution: a Chance and/or a Challenge (a Historical Perspective)* Anglo-Americká Vysoká Škola The New Anglo-American College in Prague p.14

[10] Ladislav Holý *The Little Czech and the Great Czech Nation* 1996 p.83

[11] Alvin W Gouldner *Prologue to a Theory of Revolutionary Intellectuals* From Telos 26 Winter 1975-76 p.12

[12] Timothy Garton Ash 'Conclusions' in Sorin Antohi and Vladimir Tismaneanu eds, *Between Past and Future: The Revolutions of 1989 and their Aftermath* New York and Budapest: Central European University Press 2000 p.398

[13] Timur Kuran *Now Out of Never: The Element of Surprise in the East European Revolution of 1989* Reviewed work(s) World Politics Vol. 44 No. 1 Cambridge University Press <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2010422> Oct.1991 p. 28

[14] Arnost Lustig and Josef Lustig *Return to Czechoslovakia: Snapshots of a Revolution: The Kenyon Review New Series* Vol. 12 No. 4 Autumn Kenyon College <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4336322> 1990 p.8

[15] Tvorba 1990 No. 7 p.7

[16] Katherine Verdery *What Was Socialism and What Comes Next?* Princeton Studies in Culture/Power/History Series Princeton Paperbacks, Princeton University Press 1996 p.106

[17] B. Abrams *The Struggle for the Soul of the Nation. Czech Culture and the Rise of Communism* Harvard Cold War Studies Book Series Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield 2004 p.39

[18] Miroslav Kusy *Role and Responsibility of Intellectuals* Comenius University Bratislava Slovakia <http://www.unc.edu/depts/europe/conferences/ACLS98/kusy.html>

[19] Vaclav Havel *Power to the Powerless* [http://vaclavhavel.cz/showtrans.php?cat=eseje&val=2\\_aj\\_eseje.html&typ=HTML](http://vaclavhavel.cz/showtrans.php?cat=eseje&val=2_aj_eseje.html&typ=HTML) October 1978

[20] Vaclav Havel *Politics and Conscience* First published in Prague in a samizdat collection *The*

# **A Study of Intellectualism in Czechoslovakia and its Role in the Velvet Revolution**

Written by Heidi Gordon

*Natural World as Political Problem* Essays on Modern Man Edice Expedice Vol. 188 1984  
Translation by Erazim Kohák/Roger Scruton *Salisbury Review* no. 2  
[http://www.vaclavhavel.cz/showtrans.php?cat=clanky&val=73\\_aj\\_clanky.html&typ=HTML](http://www.vaclavhavel.cz/showtrans.php?cat=clanky&val=73_aj_clanky.html&typ=HTML)  
January 1985

[21] Vaclav Havel *Or Living in Truth* Faber 1987 pps.55-62

[22] Richard Andrew Hall *Theories of Collective Action and Revolution: Evidence from the Romanian Transition of December 1989* Source: *Europe-Asia Studies* Vol. 52 No. 6 Taylor & Francis Ltd September <http://www.jstor.org/stable/153590> 2000 p.1072

[23] Christian Joppke *Intellectuals, Nationalism, and the Exit from Communism: The Case of East Germany* *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37 1995 pps. 213-241

[24] Jerome Karabel *Towards a Theory of Intellectuals and Politics* *Theory and Society* Vol. 25 No. 2 Springer April 1996 p. 214-215

[25] Miroslav Kusy *Role and Responsibility of Intellectuals* Comenius University Bratislava Slovakia <http://www.unc.edu/depts/europe/conferences/ACLS98/kusy.html>

[26] Richard Andrew Hall *Theories of Collective Action and Revolution: Evidence from the Romanian Transition of December 1989* Taylor and Francis *Europe-Asia Studies* Vol. 52 No. 6 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/153590> Sep. 2000 p.1074

[27] José Ortega y Gasset *The Revolt of the Masses* New York W. W. Norton & company 1930

[28] J Schell *The Unconquerable World: Power, Nonviolence, and the Will of the People* New York: Metropolitan Books 186 2003 p.16

[29] Alvin W Gouldner *Prologue to a Theory of Revolutionary Intellectuals* *From Telos* 26 Winter 1975-76 p.34

[30] Stefan Auer *Violence and the End of Revolution After 1989* *Thesis Eleven* 97: 6 Stefan Auer Published by <http://www.sagepublications.com> 2009 p.7

[31] Richard Andrew Hall *Theories of Collective Action, and Revolution: Evidence from the Romanian Transition of December 1989*, *Europe-Asia Studies* 2000 p.1069

[32] Earl Pope *The Role of Religion in the Romanian Revolution in Religion in Eastern Europe* Evangel Press Indiana [http://www.georgefox.edu/academics/undergrad/departments/soc-swk/ree/Pope\\_The%20Role.html](http://www.georgefox.edu/academics/undergrad/departments/soc-swk/ree/Pope_The%20Role.html) 2003

[33] Raymond Aron *The Opium of the Intellectuals* Intro. Harvey C. Mansfield New Brunswick N.J 2001 p.vii

# **A Study of Intellectualism in Czechoslovakia and its Role in the Velvet Revolution**

Written by Heidi Gordon

[34] R Aron *The Opium of the Intellectuals* 2001 p.vii

[35] Victor Neumann *Civic Culture in Banat and Transylvania: The Role of Timișoara in the 1989 Transformation of the Romanian Political Order in Idem Between Words and Reality. Studies on Politics of Recognition and the Changes of Regime in Contemporary Romania* Translated from the Romanian by Simona The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy The Catholic University of America Washington D.C. pp.41-63

[36] Earl Pope *The Role of Religion in the Romanian Revolution in Religion in Eastern Europe* Evangel Press Indiana [http://www.georgefox.edu/academics/undergrad/departments/soc-swk/ree/Pope\\_The%20Role.html](http://www.georgefox.edu/academics/undergrad/departments/soc-swk/ree/Pope_The%20Role.html) 2003

[37] Trond Gilberg *Nationalism und Communism in Romania: The Rise und Fall of Crausescu's Personal Dictatorship* Boulder Co. Westview Press 1990 p. 270

[38] Hall *Theories of Collective Action, and Revolution* p.1080

[39] Jeff Goodwin *Old Regimes and Revolutions in the Second and Third Worlds* Social Science History Volume 18 Number 4 Winter 1994

[40] Vaclav Havel *The Need for Transcendence in the Post Modern World* Independence Hall Philadelphia <http://www.worldtrans.org/whole/havelspeech.html> July 4 1994

[41] Vaclav Havel *International Herald Tribune* 21 February 1990

[42] Barack Obama in an official statement of President Obama on the death of Vaclav Havel [http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Vaclav\\_Havel](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Vaclav_Havel) 18 December 2011

[43] Vaclav Havel *The Onassis Prize For Man and Mankind* Athens 24 May [http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Vaclav\\_Havel](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Vaclav_Havel) 1993

[44] Arnost Lustig and Josef Lustig *Return to Czechoslovakia: Snapshots of a Revolution: The Kenyon Review New Series* Vol. 12 No. 4 Autumn, 1990 p.8 Kenyon College <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4336322> p.7

—

*Written by: Heidi Gordon*  
*Written at: Freie Universitat Berlin*  
*Written for: Julian Junk*  
*Date written: January 2013*