

Czechoslovakia's Velvet Revolution (1989)

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Summary of events related to the use or impact of civil resistance
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Conflict Summary:

Only eleven days after 17 November 1989, when riot police had beaten peaceful student demonstrators in Prague, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia relinquished its power and allowed the single-party state to collapse. By 29 December 1989, the so-called Velvet Revolution, led by the nonviolent coalition Civic Forum, transformed Václav Havel from a dissident playwright into the President of a democratic Czechoslovakia.

The 17 November event began as a communist-sanctioned commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the martyrdom of Jan Opletal, a student murdered by Nazi occupation forces and a symbol of Czech resistance. The denunciation of the Nazis morphed into an anti-communist protest and eventually a movement. After the official ceremony ended, protesters continued into downtown Prague toward the symbolic Wenceslas Square until confronted by riot police who began to beat them. Although the record remains murky, apparently one of the security force officers posing as a student demonstrator feigned martyrdom and a rumor spread that the police had killed one of the protestors, fanning the flames of outrage.

Havel convened an emergency meeting of the Charter 77 (an organization explained more fully below) activists and others at the Magic Lantern Theatre. The meeting resulted in the creation of Civic Forum, which undertook a series of grassroots actions and public demonstrations, such as people shaking their keys to sound the end of the regime. The movement culminated in a two-hour general strike ten days after the November 17th protest, showing the breadth and depth of opposition and leveraging negotiations with the government and Communist Party officials. These swift developments in turn led to the resignation of the entire Politburo, the formation of a compromise government, and the regime's resounding electoral defeat and creation of a democratic government.

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Political History:

Czechoslovakia became a nation state after World War I when it became independent of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Following its division and partial incorporation into Nazi Germany until the end of the Second World War, it became a part of the East European Soviet sphere.

In the famous Prague Spring of 1968, massive reform swept through the Czechoslovakian government, with Alexander Dubcek at the helm. Although modest compared to Gorbachev's own 1980s reform in the Soviet Union, human rights and a free press were encouraged, and civil society flourished. This was too much for the Soviet regime of the time, however, and in August of 1968, Warsaw Pact troops invaded. Mass nonviolent civil resistance by Czechs ensued, which increased the cost to the Soviets of their occupation, and stalled their complete control for about eight months. Ultimately, in the aftermath of the 1968 invasion, the most repressive of the East European regimes was installed and the pre-invasion reforms were swept away, leaving serious restrictions on economic activity and education, as well as free speech, even in comparison with neighboring communist countries. Between 1945 and 1989, according to Lawson (2005:83), 250,000 Czechs were imprisoned for political acts; "243 were executed, 3,000 died in prison, camps or mines, 400 were killed trying to cross the border and 22,000 were sent to forced labour camps."

Resistance to the authoritarian government persisted throughout the communist period, from "home seminars" held from the 1950s on down to Charter 77, an organization created to monitor the government's commitment to human rights as part of a Helsinki conference. A robust underground intellectual life flourished within a fairly narrow circle, attracting major European intellectuals who lectured in the home seminars. Opposition to the regime was primarily cultural, rather than political, however, and sometimes symbolically represented in drama and music after 1968, because of the severity of government repression of dissent. A month after the August 1968 Soviet invasion, for example, rock music became a medium for much political dissent, including the Velvet Underground-inspired rock band, Plastic People of the Universe, who donned satin togas, painted their faces with bright colors and wrote incendiary protest songs in English (see Bilefsky 2009). When they were thrown into prison in 1976, Havel himself championed their cause.

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Strategic Actions:

The signature actions of the Velvet Revolution were enormous mass demonstrations (up to onemillion in a country with less than 16 million total population) and the public rattling of keys as a dramatic collective show of defiance. If the movement had a flair for the dramatic, it was because much of its choreography came from playwright Vaclav Havel. Decades of underground organizing and cultural dissent erupted in a November 1989 choreographed revival of the political memory of previous resistance, against Nazis and Communists. The movement had its roots in parallel structures, especially critical theatre, music, and home seminars that cultivated the spirit of dissent within the country's intellectual culture during the years of the worst repression.

Twenty-one years after official reform of Czech communism had been crushed in 1968 by the invasion of Warsaw Pact troops who invaded Prague and put down the reform movement, memorials to a student killed by the Nazis and to the 1968 Prague Spring and its subsequent repression were orchestrated by students who marched through the city. They were met with police tear gas and water cannons but the students nonetheless created more protest events. Marches and mass demonstrations paralleled grassroots organizing by actors and students around the country. False rumors of a martyred protester led to outrage and organizing, mass demonstrations, negotiations with government and party officials that forced the resignation of the Politburo, and the creation of a new government dominated by non-communists.

British author Timothy Garten Ash (1990:129), who witnessed the revolution, noted that the Velvet revolution was "swift, entirely non-violent, joyful and funny." Some of the major strategic actions of the civil resistance campaign include:

Protest and Persuasion

- Mass demonstrations, marches
- Rattling of keys to signal the regime's end

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- Underground press publishing writings of Vaclav Havel and other intellectuals
- Computers and mimeograph machines used to disseminate announcements, proclamations, and critiques of the regime
- Songs of banned and exiled musicians sung at public gatherings, published in flyers and bulletins
- Actors and drama students go to the countryside to speak with people and inform them of actions
- Cardinal Tomasek announces, during a Sunday Mass, "the Catholic Church stands on the side of the nation"
- Negotiations with government officials
- Public appearance by Alexander Dubcek, legendary leader of the 1968 reforms crushed by the Warsaw Pact invasion
- Skillful use of the media, including the official press, to disseminate their grievances and broadcast demonstration

Noncooperation

- Strikes and boycotts by students, artists, actors
- Two-hour general strike to demonstrate nationwide dissent that went beyond the more visible students

Nonviolent Intervention

- Mass demonstrations occupying Wenceslaus Square, the symbolic center of the nation
- Demonstrators surrounding the parliament building

Ensuing Events:

After the 1989 democratic transition, efforts to craft new democratic constitutions for the Czech, Slovak, and federal governments were subverted by the remaining Communists and others. This fissure in the new republic led to what some have dubbed the "Velvet Divorce," which created two independent nations: the Czech Republic and Slovakia. (Vaclav Klaus, then finance minister and later prime minister, claimed that Slovakia was a drag on

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the economy; [see Lawson 2005: 95].) In the Czech Republic, where Havel remained in office until 2003, the fragile Civic Forum coalition fractured into competing political parties. The socialist economy was quickly privatized with considerable initial economic success. The state security apparatus (Statni Bezpecnost, the StB), which was condemned by the dissident Havel as a “hideous spider whose invisible web runs right through the whole of society”, was dismantled and the formal links between the military and security forces were severed. The military was depoliticized and transferred from communist to democratic civilian control. During Havel’s administration, the size of the armed forces was cut almost in half and the number of generals reduced from 240 to 20 (Lawson 2005: 102).

Both successors to Czechoslovakia have a multiparty parliamentary system and enjoyed rapid economic growth until the 2009 global economic crisis. On the 2009 Human Development Index, the Czech Republic was rated very high and Slovakia high. The Czech Republic was the first East European country to join the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and it joined the European Union, as did Slovakia. The cost of the economic transition was considerable, however, and many Czechs reported a significant loss of purchasing power for basic goods from 1988 to 1993 (see Krejčí and Machonin 1996).

In 1997, at the urging of President Havel, the Plastic People reunited and in 2009 they were celebrated at Prague’s National Theater with a production of a Tom Shepherd play, “Rock ‘n’ Roll,” staged in London and New York as part of the celebrations of the success of the Velvet Revolution.

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