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## **“A CRIMINAL COMEDY BUT OF A REVIVALIST SPIRIT”**

### The Beginning and the End of the Prague Spring

A day after St. Nicolas Day, when the streets were overrun by men posing as St. Nick in bishops' hats, accompanied by red-horned devils, the Ideological Commission met in Prague. It was December 7, 1964, and the commission, appointed by the Communist Party's Central Committee, was charged with keeping the lid shut on Pandora's box of postwar revelations about Stalinism.

As in the rest of the Eastern Bloc, Nikita Khrushchev's disclosures about Stalin's crimes had forced the Czechoslovak government to open up its prison doors and send home those political prisoners now known to have been falsely accused. But that had been in 1956. For a decade afterward, the Czechoslovak Communist Party had managed, rather effectively, to stave off the larger consequences of the de-Stalinization that swept through the region. While Stalinism's victims were being routinely rehabilitated elsewhere, their innocence declared retroactively, Prague remained mute. The Czechoslovak Communist Party rebuffed any attempts at public remembrance and especially the calls for accountability and reform that inevitably accompanied them. At this time the only confessions of guilt, let alone remorse, that the party was willing to make were made securely behind closed doors.

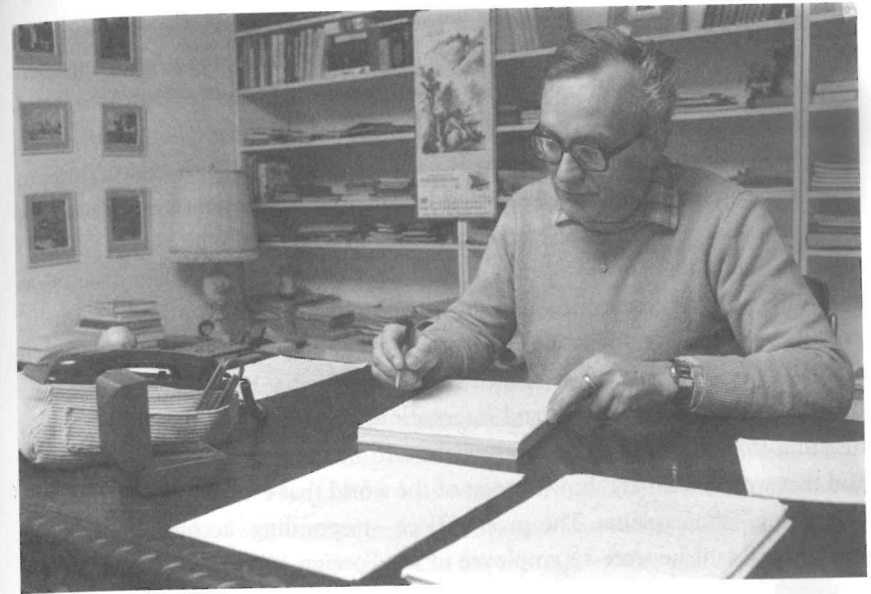
The 1952 Slánský trial stood at the epicenter of the party's postwar fabrications. It had been one of the most defining show trials of the Stalinist era, replete with memorized scripts co-written by Soviet advisers flown in especially for that purpose and a live radio broadcast of defendants' confessions and judges' pronouncements. Fourteen Communist Party leaders and bureaucrats were charged with treason; eleven of them were executed and three imprisoned for life. Of the

fourteen accused, eleven were Jewish. Such a statistic suggested that attitudes ripe under Nazi occupation had had currency in communist postwar Czechoslovakia as well, much in the same way that Stalinism and post-Stalinism continued to intertwine. There were no clear demarcation lines yet regardless of who might wish to draw them.

Heda Margolius Kovály, wife of one of those executed in the trials, was among the few “civilians” privy to these initial, closed-door confessions by the Communist Party. In February 1963, the party issued a document that “only carefully selected Party officials were permitted to see” but that Kovály had heard “almost... verbatim by the following day.” In it, the party finally “conceded that all the people who had been convicted at the trials were innocent, that their confessions had been extorted by illegal means, and that during the interrogations a range of brutal and inhuman procedures had been used.”<sup>21</sup> For Kovály, a concentration camp survivor, as her husband had been as well, this was all too familiar. Two months later, she was summoned before the Central Committee, where this same document was read out loud to her. She asked whether it would now be made public, to which the party apparatchiks replied, “Out of the question! The Party has decided to handle the whole affair internally. Nothing will be made public.”<sup>22</sup> When asked to return with a list of losses that had resulted from the arrest and execution of her husband so that she and her son might be compensated (although on terms favorable to the State Treasury), she drew up a list that included not property but life: “Loss of Father. Loss of Husband. Loss of Honor. Loss of Health.... Loss of Faith in the Party and in Justice.”<sup>23</sup> In June of 1963, the party permitted a small notice to be published in the country’s newspapers. It announced that the men executed in the Slánský trial had been rehabilitated. Any more than that still remained off-limits.<sup>4</sup>

### ***A Young Lady for His Excellency, Comrades!***

It was against this backdrop that the Central Committee’s Ideological Commission now met. One of the items on the agenda for this December meeting seemed to be of a more frivolous nature: a theater play written by a popular television writer, Jaroslav Dietl. Titled *A Young Lady for His Excellency, Comrades! A Criminal Comedy but of a Revivalist Spirit*, it was a light-hearted romp about a financially strapped spa town. After some brief discussion, the commission members unanimously agreed that the play was not to be performed “under any circumstances” because of its “erroneous political orientation.”<sup>25</sup> That it had an “erroneous political orientation” was clear to all of them.



Writer Jaroslav Dietl at his desk, 10 December 1982 (Czechoslovak Press Agency; photographed by Karel Vlček)

To those uninitiated in the subtle balancing act between consenting to de-Stalinization and fending off potential antiparty revolt, the play might have seemed innocuous, belonging merely to the genre of absurdist theater popular at the time. At first glance, it is a play about an acting troupe that, in need of cash, decides to put on some light entertainment because—as they agree—vaudeville sells and everyone is fed up with serious thoughts. The play the actors improvise is set in a fictional spa town that, like them, is bankrupt. When superficial efforts to spruce up its facades fail, the local authorities agree that to survive they must inject capital into the town. They will do this by negotiating a multimillion contract for “our country’s industry” with His Excellency, who, it is implied, rules over a wealthy Arab state. What follows next is a farce that clearly mimics the growing communist crisis in the early 1960s.

His Excellency’s arrival in the spa town is introduced through an official press conference for which the young communist press officer is instructed to follow normal procedure and answer the reporters’ questions by reading unrelated responses from a piece of paper. He successfully does so. But such typically staged public relations begin to run aground as His Excellency makes demands that stretch beyond the parameters of these well-rehearsed gestures and countergestures. First His Excellency requests “a young lady.” Flabbergasted, the town

officials weigh their pressing need for foreign currency against their allegiance to official policy stating that the sexual exploitation of women has long been abolished. They eventually agree that while prostitution has died out “as a state-registered business,” the young press officer should go ahead and comply with His Excellency’s wishes. He is sent off to the “club de luxe” with instructions to find “a young lady” and the advice that he must practice what he was taught at the party university: he must “generate policy” as he goes along.

At the club, the press officer is immediately ensnared in a lively discussion about the current economic situation with the husband (also pimp) of a local prostitute. Then, left briefly alone with the wife (also prostitute), he is given an earful of her own financially related marital problems. Her husband, she tells the press officer, wants to expand internationally with the business. “He keeps insisting that we must tear ourselves away from these small Czech standards, and that we must finally show the rest of the world that even we can accomplish something,” she explains. The press officer—responding, according to Dietl’s stage notes, as if he were an employee of the Foreign Ministry—sides with her husband: “I understand where your husband is coming from. We can exist only if we develop in pace with the rest of the world and each one of us has a direct responsibility to know how our field is developing elsewhere—and that counts for you [and your profession] as much as it does for me.” Later he adds, “We have a lot to learn from capitalism on that front.”

The price is set and she is hired as “the young lady” for the visiting Excellency. Since her business is officially illegal, to receive her “honorarium” she is registered as the new director of the Press Office. But it turns out that “with a millionaire’s typical perversity,” His Excellency in fact had wanted a young woman merely to accompany him to official gatherings. The hired prostitute must now be taught certain social skills or, at the very least (as the town authorities agree), “etiquette, modern dance, basic economy, a concise history of the spa people’s liberation movement, and songs and tales from the lives of the spa people.” But with no time even for these basics, she is instructed on how to fend off all potential criticisms. If, for example, she is asked about the bad condition of the roads, her teachers prompt her to “explain how many kilometers of asphalt road there were before the war—the First World War, that is—and immediately it will become clear just how much we have advanced.” When all else fails, she is told, always state the following: “Anyhow, it’s you people who lynch blacks.”

Yet it turns out that His Excellency is interested in a different woman altogether—the chief director of the spa town. She and her colleagues object (presumably to being prostituted by and for the town), but the young press officer insists that this is too important an opportunity for international trade to pass up. She objects further, this time on ideological grounds: “But we’re on the

other bank of the river from them, no?” The press officer replies that the whole world is watching to see what they will do and that it is really a question of how far they are willing to step into the water and get wet. Unable to decide for themselves on “which bank of the river” they stand, she orders a call to be put through to “the capital” “because only the capital can decide if we can finally go into the water without getting wet.”

## Reading between the Lines

As one might guess, Jaroslav Dietl’s banned play read like a thinly (and for the Ideological Commission not so thinly) disguised allegory of contemporary times. In 1953, Stalin had died; in 1956, Khrushchev had declared Stalin a *persona non grata*, after which the Hungarians had waged an unsuccessful but embittered revolution; and in 1962, the Stalin statue that had towered over Prague was dynamited out of sight. These events, like the message of the play, would be the lead-up to the 1968 Prague Spring, which, as the Czech-born Oxford historian Z. A. B. Zeman wrote on his first trip back after World War II, was quite different from the “passionate, emotional” 1956 Hungarian revolution. The 1968 democracy movement in Czechoslovakia would prove to be “more of an intellectual exercise. Even under extreme pressure the Czechs and the Slovaks kept their emotions in the background as much as they could. They negotiated, argued, ridiculed.”<sup>6</sup> *A Young Lady for His Excellency, Comrades!* most certainly ridiculed.

Thus Dietl’s play was representative of the times. Indeed, perhaps it was even ahead of its time because, as its subtitle declared, it was of a “revivalist” rather than a revolutionary spirit. But it would have taken the members of the Ideological Commission little time to unravel the play’s multiple meanings and sharp jabs. That prostitution—like so much else—had been eradicated merely on paper but continued in practice not only was true but also represented a widespread hypocrisy typical of postwar communist rule. The laments of the husband-pimp are characteristic of those uttered in the early 1960s by industry managers trapped within the confines of short-sighted policies devised by a centrally planned economy. The responses of the young press officer—spoken in the parlance of the Foreign Ministry—echo the complaints being made by progressive party apparatchiks who soon would drive the reform movement forward. The desire to compete on a world stage was a desire heard during the 1960s within both literary and economic circles. The wife-prostitute is taught the most imperative of diplomatic skills: to fend off valid criticisms with a litany of absurd achievements accomplished under communism (the most ludicrous of which compares the number of paved roads present in the 1960s with the number in

the closing years of the Habsburg Empire in the very early 1900s). Sharp reminders of American imperialism and racism are then rolled out as a last resort.

But perhaps what most threatened the members of the Ideological Commission about Dietl's play (and ironically, it was this same commission that was later accused of encouraging the Prague Spring instead of restraining it) was its ending. The head director of the spa town is unsure by now on which bank she and her cohorts officially stand: do they not represent the bank of the river that is directly across from that of His Excellency? No one is sure any longer. Moreover, do they stick in a toe, a whole foot, or do they plunge headfirst into the river that flows between these two banks (that is, between socialism and capitalism)? Indeed, by 1968, four years after Jaroslav Dietl's play was presented to the Ideological Commission for review, the Prague Spring reform movement would become centered on this very question: few people wished to swim directly across the river to the other bank, and most intellectuals certainly preferred to stand in the river that flowed somewhere between communism and capitalism. But to do so would prove to be too unstable a balancing act.

## Writers as Resisters

As the play also suggests, 1968 found its beginnings in theater. Intimate theater venues, most famously Prague's Theater on the Balustrades, served up J. Topol's play *The End of the Carnival*, which traced the absurdity of local officials implementing collectivization in one small and angry village; Václav Havel's *The Garden Party*, which parodied central planning and the planners; and Milan Uhde's *King Vávra*, a transparent portrayal of the current party leader, Antonín Novotný, and his uncanny resemblance to an ass. New or else revamped literary journals (*Literární noviny*, *Mladá fronta*, *Host do domu*, *Plamen*, and *Kultúrný život*) also did continuous battle with their assigned censors, managing to publish cutting-edge work and quietly but steadily loosen the censors' noose. This continuous testing of boundaries opened the door to the publication of two novels in 1966 that resonated with the reading public because of both content and style: Milan Kundera's *The Joke* and Ludvík Vaculík's *The Ax*. Both books described how their narrators, thinly disguised versions of the authors themselves, came to terms with their postwar support for communism and their later disillusionment with it.

Clearly, the growth of this word industry went hand in hand with revelations and disclosures, a casting off of the past that moved from the personal to the public as the 1960s advanced. For the novelist Milan Kundera, the previous author of odes to Stalin, to admit (albeit in fictionalized form) to his political naiveté in those early postwar years was much more than mere titillation. It spoke

to the pressing issues of culpability, deceit, idealism, delusion, and the transposition of wartime values onto a postwar world, which had served to normalize an inhumane level of physical and moral violence—of which the Slánský trial was the extreme example. This literary output spoke to what the Communist Party was not yet willing to say out loud. Among the reform-minded, language slowly began to be stripped of official-speak making way for words that could create meaning again. Once this was done, language was used to delve back into the recent communist past.

It was for these reasons that the 1967 Writers' Congress was poised for a confrontation between the increasing number of disillusioned party-affiliated writers—such as the aforementioned Milan Kundera and Ludvík Vaculík—and First Secretary Novotný's literary apparatchiks charged with forcing the writers back in line. Writers at the congress, held in June of that year, took turns at the podium to lambaste the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, of which they themselves were the architects or at least valued assistants. Forty-year-old Vaculík, author of *The Ax*, reflected on the almost twenty years of communism that had passed since the February 1948 Communist Party takeover of Czechoslovakia: an event that he, like so many other young Czech intellectuals, had embraced in the aftermath of war, the disappointment of Western Europe's Munich Pact with Hitler, and the devastation, physical and moral, that had accompanied World War II and the Holocaust. Now, twenty years later, in what would become the speech that signaled the beginning of the reform movement, Vaculík criticized the "ruling circles" and insisted that, contrary to what they continued to maintain, the end had not justified the means because the end point offered little to cheer about. He insisted that "in twenty years not one social question [*lidská otázka*] has been solved—from people's primary needs... to more subtle needs.... And I fear that neither did we rise on the world scene; I feel that our republic has lost its good name."<sup>7</sup> For the Czechs especially, who saw their place both geographically and symbolically as very much in the center of Europe, this was a serious blow.

It is important to recognize, however, that Vaculík and his fellow party-affiliated colleagues who took to the podium at the Writers' Congress were not demanding an end to socialism. The struggle between communist reformers and communist hard-liners for control of the country's ideological future was not about wading to the other bank of the river (to borrow from Dietl's play): it was about the nature of the river, of socialism itself, that flowed in between. They were all firmly within the socialist camp. But the party leader, Antonín Novotný, either did not understand that the writers did not wish to end communism or felt that any discussion of any kind was simply too incendiary.<sup>8</sup> So he turned his back on the Writers' Congress, made a public show of attending instead the graduation festivities of the Prague Communist Party College, and

shortly before leaving for the Soviet Union for his holiday, set about putting two writers on trial.<sup>9</sup>

## Student Protest

The intellectuals' defiance at the Writers' Congress in 1967 had been preceded in part by that of the students, which was particularly on show during the so-called *majáles*, an annual springtime bacchanalian homage to the nineteenth-century romantic Czech poet Karel Hynek Mácha. This customary celebration of spring and love had been banned following the 1956 *majáles* procession that wound through the streets of Prague with "a group of gagged and blindfolded marchers representing the editors of the youth daily [newspaper] *Mladá fronta*."<sup>10</sup> It returned in full force, however, in 1965 with the election of the American Beat poet Allen Ginsberg as king of the *majáles*.<sup>11</sup> In 1966, the *majáles* took a more political turn when "students, apprentices, clerks, workers, most of them between 17 and 23 years old," marched through town calling out slogans such as "We want freedom, we want democracy" and "A good communist is a dead communist."<sup>12</sup> Again, Novotný responded by putting twelve of the youths involved on trial: all were found guilty.

The push and pull between Novotný's nonreformist government and the intellectuals and students, who were increasingly finding both a desire and a way to critique the past and the present, was backlit by changes in the very atmosphere of daily Czech life. The American journalist Tad Szulc described the cultural vibe of 1960s Czechoslovakia as synonymous with "jazz and the big-beat sound," and with "blue jeans and beards," "as if in retaliation against years of Stalinist monotony and boredom."<sup>13</sup> Indeed, much of youth behavior during the 1960s was more about style than politics as young people began for the first time to carve out their own identities as generationally separate from those of their parents. In this, they were most certainly on the same wavelength as their Western counterparts. Paul Berman notes, too, that while differences abounded in 1968, "in quite a few places there was, as everyone recognized at the time, a common theme. It was the split between the young and the old."<sup>14</sup> The May celebrations and rallies, the jeans, and the beards were not, at least initially, a political thesis as much as the expression of a basic discontent to which the members of this generation, the first to have grown up under communism, believed they had a unique right. As one Czech nineteen-year-old explained to the journalist Alan Levy: "The Stalinists of the 1950's, they wrote off our parents, but they counted on us. They shouldn't have. I've lived all my life under one system, so I have every right to criticize it."<sup>15</sup> These sentiments were confirmed through the new scholarly

field of youth studies, which had emerged alongside the official resuscitation of sociology.

In the West, the new emphasis on youth highlighted how carefree this generation's life, played out in the midst of a booming postwar capitalism, was in comparison with their parents' and grandparents'. In France, Germany, and elsewhere, this prosperity troubled its youth. As one young writer and political activist wrote, "After the veterans of Verdun, of Mauthausen [the Nazi death camp] and of Indochina, we will be veterans of the cinemathèque."<sup>16</sup> Czech youth, on the other hand, like their counterparts throughout the Soviet Bloc, did not feel particularly pampered and so largely evaded such pangs of guilt. Moreover, with the working class pushed to the forefront under communism and eagerly offered opportunities for education and career advancement as never before, many of these Czechoslovak youth were in fact from the working classes. If no longer working-class, they were first-generation middle-class (although of course never called that). By contrast, Tony Judt writes that in Paris the young demonstrators "were overwhelmingly middle-class" and "it was their own parents, aunts and grandmothers who looked down upon them from the windows of comfortable bourgeois apartment buildings as they lined up in the streets to challenge the armed power of the French state."<sup>17</sup> In Prague things were different: the playwright Václav Havel had not been a beneficiary of the system which he now defied—as the offspring of a wealthy and influential Czech family, under communism he had been barred from a conventional university education.

But while Czechoslovak youth were not tormented by their frivolity, the Communist Party was. As a 1965 internal government survey asserted, this generation was politically disadvantaged for never having experienced World War II or "the consequent class war" that, for their parents' generation, had functioned as "the greatest school of life."<sup>18</sup> Citing surveys and interviews with students and young workers, it lamented their physical comforts, ample leisure time, and unending demands (which—inadvertently repeating the clichés of class—they claimed were material among young workers and cultural among university students). But this generation's demands had also begun to extend to the political; as government reports confirmed, these youth unflinchingly critiqued the shortcomings of socialist society, feeling they had earned the right.

Despite the participation of young workers in this generational discontent, the Prague Spring that was then brewing was not a workers' revolt. That would come later, in the aftermath of the Soviet invasion—an affront that galvanized workers to take action, organize, and make real demands, although by then futile. But during the Prague Spring, Gerd-Rainer Horn has pointed out, "[W]orkers were reluctant to confront the regime that had permitted trade unions to exist for the first time in twenty years."<sup>19</sup> Many workers were also suspicious of the people

behind this new push for change and reform—the intellectuals, the students, and the intelligentsia, to whom the Prague Spring ultimately belonged. Czechoslovakia was a workers' state, which meant that the party encouraged an ambiguous stance toward white-collar pursuits. It was one of the complaints made in 1968 by Czechoslovakia's students that since "studying" was viewed as nonlabor, university students were expected to compensate for this with "heightened [official] political activity and, once they'd finished studying, with as low a salary as possible."<sup>20</sup> The working class was the beneficiary of what the party had had to offer, and it continued to stand firmly at the center of the country's postwar political identity. In contrast, the Prague Spring was almost entirely reliant on the ambiguous terrain of words and ideas, the favorite tools of those held suspect by the state, even if they were aligned with the party and its institutions.

In the autumn of 1967, a few months after the Writers' Congress, everyday student life was transformed into a key political event that began the avalanche toward the Prague Spring. On the night of October 31, the lights went out at the Strahov dormitories located just behind the Prague Castle next to the Strahov Monastery. The dormitory had been experiencing electrical outages for some time, an inconvenience that usually caused students to curse the inadequate electrical output, float burning slips of paper from their windows, and then congregate in small groups in the courtyard, from where they moved on to Prague's pubs and nightclubs. But on this night the students gathered in the courtyard shouting, "Let's all go out!" According to one of the students there, they all began to march toward the castle and then further down the steep Nerudová Street leading to Little Quarter Square, chanting, "We want light!" They were quickly surrounded by police cars, and when they turned to climb back toward the castle, the police drove their vehicles up and down the street, squeezing the students back onto the narrow sidewalks. The pivotal moment came when the police followed the students into the courtyard of the dormitory, which students had assumed was a safe zone, and there attacked them with batons and tear gas.<sup>21</sup> Intellectuals, cowed by the Novotný-led backlash against them following the Writers' Congress, now came out on the side of the students, and so began the steady revolt that would find Novotný out by the end of the year and a new unknown, the young Slovak politician Alexander Dubček, in his place.

## Television as Political Stage

By 1968, television was already the dominant medium in the West. In the United States, the gruesome televised images from the Vietnam War changed public opinion, and live scenes from the 1968 Democratic National Convention in

Chicago turned a demonstration into a historical event. In France, Judt writes, May 1968 was "a revolution apparently unfolding in real time. . . . Its leaders were marvelously telegenic; attractive and articulate young men leading the youth of France through the historical boulevards of Left Bank, Paris."<sup>22</sup> But for the countries behind the Iron Curtain, it is more often thought that television's role was significantly smaller, if at all relevant. The editors of a notable collection of essays on 1968, for example, write that "in most of Eastern Europe and in the Third World the media played a markedly different role than in the West. Whereas members of Western societies 'could literally watch' the unfolding of worldwide events, in communist and Third World societies news was mostly obtained from sometimes heavily censored radio and newspapers [*sic*] reports or through informal networks."<sup>23</sup> While in part true, this assumption overlooks a different kind of historical "unfolding," one that was probably visible only to a native viewer. For the disclosures and confessions that had begun in the literary world made their way onto the communist screen before finally infiltrating the streets and eventually the upper echelons of the party.

In June 1963, Jiří Pelikán became the new head of Czechoslovak state television. A committed socialist but, like so many others now, one who was intent on pushing for reform, he steered programming so that it increasingly echoed the demand among the intelligentsia that society open up to allow for constructive criticism and individual decision making. Because of Pelikán, Czechoslovak television was at the forefront of political and social change in 1968. But even before his arrival, it had provided a gathering place for those wishing to push existing boundaries. In late 1962, for example, Brno television studios produced *I'll Add My Two Cents' Worth!* (*Budu do toho mluvit!*), a discussion program (still then a novelty) aimed at young people, for whom the topics under discussion were of special interest. Although talking about relations between students and teachers, procedures for university acceptance, and the like might not seem particularly provocative, it was the atmosphere of the show that signaled something new and progressive: "In the studio dozens of randomly chosen participants were gathered; on the podium and darting right in among them was the show's presenter, Josef Křivánek, with a microphone in hand." The press response was instantly favorable: "The evening's program provoked one to think, it revealed the unused opportunities of television."<sup>24</sup>

Pelikán built upon the philosophy behind such innovative programming as *I'll Add My Two Cents' Worth!* In an interview published in February 1967, while still pushing for more freedoms, he insisted, "So far it's been the case that every word stated on television is taken to be an official opinion, and that ties the hands of our television journalists. . . . Television first and foremost needs to make space for a personal approach and for the right to make mistakes. . . . for individuals

who would be able clearly to formulate their own opinions.... I believe that we have such people but they need the opportunity to express themselves."<sup>25</sup> Like the writers and students, Czechoslovak television was not always given that opportunity and was frequently reprimanded for stepping beyond what First Secretary Novotný, ever fearful of post-Stalinist reform, considered an acceptable level of criticism. Following an overly polemical discussion about the state of the economy on the television program *Face to Face* (*Tváří v tvář*), for example, its presenter, Jan Drda, disappeared from the screen; and when journalist Otká Bednář chose the north Bohemian tramping movement as the topic for a television report, the Czech communist daily *Rudé právo* (*Red Law*) came out with a rebuke against the program and the tramping movement in the form of an extended "letter" titled "Examples of Behavior That Do Not Benefit Our Young."<sup>26</sup>

But Novotný could not fight the changing climate indefinitely. When he invited the Soviet general secretary, Leonid Brezhnev, to Prague, Brezhnev famously insisted that the conflict be resolved quietly and internally: "Eto vashe delo" ("It's your own affair.")<sup>27</sup> With that proclamation, whether intended or not, Novotný's legitimacy slipped away. In January of 1968, party leadership was passed on to Alexander Dubček, a little-known politician, young by the relative standards of the geriatric party leadership and considered by much of the political elite to be a malleable compromise candidate.<sup>28</sup> Foreshadowing the atmosphere that would dominate the coming year, in the final showdown at a party plenum, Dubček chided Novotný, "[Y]ou do not, comrade Novotný, welcome the opinions of others."<sup>29</sup> One would imagine that such an exchange between Communist Party leaders would warrant close attention, but, at least at first, the majority of Czechs and Slovaks viewed the change of leadership as a merely bureaucratic move, of no particular interest to them, and so settled into the New Year with a shrug. Instead, it would be the media that signaled the new age. Although radio waves still dominated it was the television screen that was capable of driving the point home.

That politics, recent memory, and everyday life were about to change was made clear on television one night in January by the scholar Eduard Goldstücker. Goldstücker's life embodied his generation's complex destinies. Born into the Habsburg Empire, in the interwar years he became a communist student leader. During World War II he was fortunate enough to make his way to England, where he worked with the Czechoslovak government-in-exile. After the war he was for a short time a diplomat before becoming one of the communist regime's victims and being imprisoned in 1951. After his release in 1955 during the political thaw, he turned his efforts to studying and teaching German literature and in particular Kafka, whose nightmarish view of the world seemed to mimic his own very real experiences. He became known to the public in 1963 when he organized

an international conference on Kafka in the Czech town of Liblice. This quickly turned into a well-publicized statement about many Czech intellectuals' identification with Western Marxism over Soviet communism, and it highlighted their sense of alienation, reflecting that of Kafka's most famous protagonist-turned-beetle, Gregor Samsa, encapsulated in a carapace that was not his own.

After that Goldstücker had become chairman of the Writers' Union and thereby chief editor of the union's important cultural weekly, *Literární noviny* (*The Literature News*), which had only recently been wrested from Novotný's lackeys. During a television interview that evening, Goldstücker was asked why he was changing the name of the weekly from the old name, *Literární noviny* (with which the paper was so closely identified), to the new name of *Literární listy*. Goldstücker made it clear to television audiences that as far he was concerned, the journal had been tainted by Novotný's regime, and thus a name-change was necessary. Television viewers watched in wonder. A few days passed, and when none of the expected reprisals materialized, the media took their feet off the brakes.<sup>30</sup>

Goldstücker's performance was the first of many such moments on the television screen in 1968. On one occasion, he spoke to a group of university students, explaining, "The world is watching whether we shall be able to do what history has not yet known—to unite socialism with freedom."<sup>31</sup> On another occasion, he did a show-and-tell, holding before the cameras before-and-after photographs featuring former communist leaders who, purged, imprisoned, or else executed, had subsequently been airbrushed out of existence. Together these doctored photographs narrated the Communist Party's forged pictorial history of postwar Czechoslovakia. Milan Kundera would later write about the same in one of his novels: all that had remained officially of Foreign Minister Clementis, executed in the 1952 Slánský trial, was his hat propped on top of party leader Klement Gottwald's head, to whom Clementis had lent it on the cold February day when they stood together triumphant on the balcony in Prague following the Communist Party's takeover of power.

As a way to make amends for these and other distortions in the weeks and months that followed, "television arranged confrontations between former political prisoners and their torturers from the secret police or prison staffs."<sup>32</sup> When Prague's chief of police was invited to the television studios, he looked into the cameras and, visibly embarrassed, apologized for the brutal treatment of students by the police during the Strahov dormitory demonstrations in autumn 1967.<sup>33</sup> With the media now at the forefront of change, and certainly much further along than traditional political institutions, the public's previous distrust of the media melted away, and as journalist Helena Klímová wrote, "the two parallel monologues: the monologue of official public opinion and that of genuine but private opinion,"<sup>34</sup> finally came together.

Television screens now filled regularly with live broadcasts of impromptu political meetings and news programs that “wound late into the night, and were excitedly watched by viewers, as evidenced by the light coming off of the television screens and projecting through windows into the city night.”<sup>35</sup> On his return to Prague, a taxi driver remarked to the historian Zeman that he and his colleagues no longer had time to discuss football down at the pub: now it was only politics.<sup>36</sup> Zeman witnessed this even more directly at the hotel where he was staying: “As rebellion flickered across the television screen in the lobby of my hotel, the staff, drivers whose taxis stood deserted outside and Czech-speaking guests came to watch it. Public questioning of members of the party, the government, the army, with a few writers thrown in, was the most popular pastime those days.”<sup>37</sup> A foreign journalist in Prague wrote, “Tape recorders disappeared from the market; the insatiable ones would record radio programs at the same time they were watching TV.”<sup>38</sup> Dubček conceded to the media that it was “impossible to imagine the public’s participation in politics without your active work.”<sup>39</sup> It was the media that had moved the political dialogue out of the exclusive literary domain, from behind the closed doors of reform-minded party apparatchiks, and fully into the public sphere. And though what was on the screen there was not as visually startling as the images beamed from Vietnam that were fueling much of the activism in the West, the experience of watching television in Czechoslovakia in 1968 was revelatory.

The television stars that year were the ordinary people who appeared daily on the screen. As meeting after meeting was broadcast live, students and workers, men and women, made themselves heard. In a live broadcast of a meeting of party members working at the agricultural cooperative in Horoměřice, opinions exploded, and one excited participant insisted that the days of “divide and conquer” were over: “We know that there were such people among us who wished to create rifts not only among party members but also in the public in general—to separate off, on the one side, the intelligentsia, on the other, workers and agricultural workers.” She insisted that “today we needn’t worry that one social group here would somehow like to rule over the other.”<sup>40</sup> But her experiences in the past as a Communist Party member had been quite different: “If we did [speak the truth], then we were silenced.” She recalled a regional women’s meeting at the Radio-Palace in Vinohrady, Prague, where she had tried to say something and had been cut off by one of the party functionaries. When later she asked why, she was told, “Comrade, you know, at the meeting there are also politically unaffiliated women and we didn’t want you to say it in front of them.” To which she had replied (she now told television viewers), “Do you imagine that the unaffiliated [nonparty members] somehow live separately from us? [In fact,] they see things better than you do.”<sup>41</sup>

Surpassing even these bold statements, the Horoměřice agricultural worker ended her speech with the sort of inflammatory conclusions that would rapidly ruffle the feathers of less reformist communists as well as Czechoslovakia’s Soviet Bloc neighbors: “It is imperative,” she stated, “that democracy is rejuvenated, for people to have at least four parties to choose from in their districts. And then it would further be necessary to introduce, as we wanted to long ago, cooperative stores alongside state stores.” While such talk was not welcomed by the detractors of the Prague Spring, it was embraced by many television viewers, who after the program sent in letters documenting their enthusiasm for such honest discussions. One letter declared, “The reportage from the Horoměřice Agricultural Cooperative provoked in me serious political questions. Most of all it was exciting because of its sincerity, openness, and truthfulness.”<sup>42</sup> In the same spirit, state television sent mobile broadcasting units into the streets to ask people what they thought. The American journalist Alan Levy, living in Prague, recalled watching these “man in the street” reports that included “a minor civil servant awakening” to the atmosphere of the Prague Spring as he gingerly admitted, “Yesterday I didn’t think I could say what I think. Today I think maybe I can.” [and] a factory hand in his late twenties reflecting on the future: ‘I hope our children won’t be afraid to tell the truth like we were.’”<sup>43</sup> It was further evidence that, as Kieran Williams has shown, any reformist efforts by the party machine, “still populated by petty bureaucrats,” “lagged well behind the media.”<sup>44</sup> It was for this reason that the media were proving a threat.

## Lost in Translation

Jiří Hájek, a former professor who in 1967 had come out in support of the Strahov student demonstrators and was now the Czechoslovak foreign minister under Dubček, reported in frustration: “[W]ith few exceptions, the Soviet comrades do not understand the situation in our country. They are not familiar with Czechoslovak history, the composition of Czechoslovak society, the mentality of our people, or our democratic traditions. That is why the openness of the Czechoslovak press and radio has evoked such bewilderment, and why opinions have even been expressed that this development is abetting the enemies of socialism.”<sup>45</sup> Hájek’s assurances to the Soviets that few Czechs and Slovaks had any desire to abandon socialism (indeed, this had been fully borne out by the findings of the recently resurrected Institute of Public Opinion)<sup>46</sup> fell on deaf ears or, worse, was interpreted as the cunning propaganda of anticommunist perpetrators. Moscow responded to the unfamiliar by playing up its most comfortable role of Big Slavic Brother, with the Politburo even penning a chummy



personal letter from Comrade Brezhnev to Comrade Dubček. In it Brezhnev detailed his angst over events in Czechoslovakia, describing his sleepless nights over Prague's recent transgressions. Finding it difficult to express himself, to find the right words, he wished he could "put my thoughts down on paper, without worrying too much about polishing my phrases."<sup>47</sup>

But the Prague Spring, and the language it employed (which Moscow was finding so objectionable), was being lost in translation in the West too. While the Soviets were trying to bring the Czechs and Slovaks back into the Marxist-Leninist fold, political activists in the West had embarked on their own love affair with Marxism. According to Tony Judt, Marxism was then still the "one grand theory," the "Master Narrative offering to make sense of everything while leaving open a place for human initiative."<sup>48</sup> Daniel Cohn-Bendit and other student leaders have since distanced themselves from some of the excesses of the discourse that emerged, yet Kristin Ross, arguing for the resuscitation of 1968 as a political movement (as opposed to a youth-driven, "socio-hormonal frustration, a biological convulsion," as the writer Raymond Aron would have it), notes that it "brought together socially heterogeneous groups and individuals whose convergence eroded particularities, including those of class and age."<sup>49</sup> Particularities of class and age, however, were easier to dispel in 1968 than the more often ignored particularities of geography and political happenstance.

When the West German student leader Rudi Dutschke (aka "Red Rudi") first visited Prague in spring 1968, Czech students, although anxious to tap into the revolutionary language from across the Iron Curtain, found it difficult to place that language: "Is he a Maoist, Trotskyite, Marxist, even a Liebknechtist, or else simply an ordinary beatnik who provocatively enters into discussions...in the uniform of today's protesting youth: in jeans, a sweater, an overgrown shock of raven hair?" asked Milan Hauner, an admirer of Dutschke who tracked his visit to Prague for the radical Czech university newspaper *Student*. Dutschke's charisma electrified the crowd, but his speech was less impressive. When he speaks, continued Hauner, "German romanticism and revolutionary radicalism are wed. In our circumstances, he perhaps was able merely to garner tired surprise [from his audience]."<sup>50</sup> Following his formal presentation, Dutschke met informally with Czech students. Here the situation went from bad to worse, and as Hauner admitted, a certain "embarrassing mutual schooling" took place. Apparently (and not surprisingly), Dutschke was highly critical of current capitalism and at the same time excessively optimistic about its transformations under a "direct democracy," whereas for Czech students, their young lives thus far lived under communism, "the situation was just about the opposite. And even Rudi's well-formulated phrases did not manage to convince [them] that the future direct democracy with 'new people' will not lead to the abuse of power."<sup>51</sup> Even as

the Prague Spring grew more radical over the course of the next few months, these differences between East and West did not evaporate.

On the contrary, in May a Czech student delegation met in Berlin with Dutschke, who was convalescing after the failed assassination attempt on him. Again, while the students were awed by his rock-star status, over the course of "two improvised discussion evenings, the deep disagreement between our group and the German interrogators visibly revealed itself."<sup>52</sup> The rub for the Czech students was the German students' inability to distinguish utopia from reality, and theory from practice: "We did not hide our deep skepticism toward any kind of perfect utopia," Hauner noted. The German students' main emphasis, he wrote, was "the creation of an ideal type socialist democracy whose main foundation had to be the control of production and decision making by all workers based on a system of representative councils at all workplaces, for purposes of guaranteeing the growth of initiative from below." While they all agreed that this was a sound idea, since Czech students, like Czech intellectuals, remained rooted to the idea of socialism, the two groups ceased to agree the moment conversation turned to the practical application of these ideas. The Czechs insisted that the application of a theory "always rests on living people and historical conditions," making it messy and more complicated than initially anticipated. The German students, much to the annoyance of the Czechs, maintained their orthodox theories even though the Czechs offered them "an expansive palette of empirical examples based on our twenty-year history." In this cross-border interaction, language—even the sort of Marxist language with which they themselves remained deeply entangled—sounded meaningless to the Czech students if unaccompanied by hard-earned experience or else the willingness to learn from the experience of others.<sup>53</sup> In the political turbulence of 1968, the Czechs seemed without an ally even as socialism with a human face was being feted all over Europe.

## The Invasion

Dietl's 1964 theater play *A Young Lady for His Excellency, Comrades!* concludes with the head director of the spa town picking up the telephone to call "the capital" (Moscow?) to ask permission for the town leaders to finally dip into the murky waters of the river that flows between the two banks. In the play, the audience never learns whether this permission was granted. But in the nonfictionalized world of 1968 Czechoslovakia, the answer was clearly heard in the early hours of August 21 with the rumbling of tanks on the cobbled streets of Prague and other cities, a noise first mistaken by many to be no more than the sounds of late-night city traffic. But by morning it was clear that under the auspices

of the Warsaw Pact Treaty, the Soviets—along with token Bulgarian, East German, Hungarian, and Polish armed forces—had entered the country to bring the Prague Spring to a premature close.

The media were the first to be attacked, with tanks and then censorship. The battlefield on the morning of August 21 was quite literally outside the Czechoslovak Radio building in the Vinohrady section of Prague, immediately north of Wenceslas Square. The attack on radio turned into a battle between citizens and armed forces after the station broadcast a statement by the Central Committee condemning the invasion. Prague citizens, hearing this, headed off to the radio building. As Alan Levy, an eyewitness to the events, wrote, "Statistics are not precise, but at least five Czechs died in the Battle of Radio Prague. And, before the broadcasters were finally evicted from their headquarters, sixty-five Czechs were taken to Vinohrady Hospital with 'shot wounds, lacerations, lesions, wounds caused by grenade fragments and shots from tank grenades.'"<sup>54</sup> When the radio building was finally stormed, and broadcasters were shut down in midsentence as they insisted to their listeners that truth would prevail (the motto inscribed on the King Wenceslas monument just a stone's throw south of them), the Soviets began to broadcast a proinvasion "Radio Vltava" from a transmitter in Dresden. The telltale sign was the broadcaster's "poor pronunciation and grammatical errors...it was the same antiquated Czech (an obsolete Moravian dialect) that Soviet advisers and interrogators were trained (in Moscow) to speak."<sup>55</sup>

Radio Prague, despite the fact that its headquarters were now occupied by troops, continued to operate for at least a week longer through various underground and covert locations, including "a studio disguised as a ladies' room."<sup>56</sup> The announcers warned listeners to ignore Radio Vltava, urged that unarmed citizens engage in passive resistance (such as the successful removal of all street signs), listed areas with heavy shooting to be avoided, and offered a reassuring presence, particularly through their oft-repeated mantra and station identification: "Be with us, we are with you!" It was because of the continued transmission of Czech radio that delegates to the Extraordinary Fourteenth Congress of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, a meeting since known as the Secret Vysočany Congress, were able to gather on August 22, less than two days after the invasion. Summoned over the radio, they arrived in Prague "by train and by car, by bicycle and on foot" and were led to the congress, held clandestinely inside a factory, by city residents and factory workers.<sup>57</sup>

In contrast to the violent confrontation at Prague Radio, Czechoslovak Television pursued an extended game of cat and mouse with the occupiers. At five in the morning on August 21, Kamil Winter, head of the news department, along with cameramen and television presenters, most notably Kamila Moučková, made their way to a studio location in Prague's first district, where they broadcast

news of the invasion. At 8:30 a.m., soldiers tore into the studios, sent everyone out, and shot up the equipment. Television broadcasting promptly shifted to another location in Prague, the Skaut Cinema, from which scenes from the streets that camera crews were filming throughout Prague were broadcast on television. Broadcasting then switched over at around 11:00 a.m. to a transmitter on the Cukrák Mountain near Prague.<sup>58</sup> Vladimír Škutina, a popular television personality during the Prague Spring, was on air at the Cukrák location when Soviet troops finally arrived there, having been sidetracked by actors dressed as American soldiers for the shooting of the American film *The Bridge at Remagen*.

The Cukrák showdown, as described by Škutina part tragedy and part comedy, was seen by millions of television viewers. At 11:45, with the transmitter surrounded by troops, the staff simply turned the cameras onto the intruders: the television screen filled with pictures of the occupying forces' planes flying overhead as uniformed soldiers on the ground "surrounded the building and advanced in jumps, forming a big circle around the transmitter, [and] hiding behind trees."<sup>59</sup> Although Czechoslovak Television's formal broadcasting locations were now disabled or under siege, television operations still continued for a short while longer with the help of improvised studios. For example, at one point the station broadcast out of the offices of Tesla, the behemoth electronics manufacturing state enterprise in Prague-Hloubětín, with the help of Tesla employees, and from Kletí in southern Bohemia, where the local Czech army unit gave the television staff army uniforms for camouflage.<sup>60</sup>

In the meantime, Dubček and members of his cabinet had been forcibly flown to Moscow, where they were essentially held under house arrest. When they were returned to Prague, Dubček went on the radio to address the nation. In his now famously halting and highly emotional announcement on August 27, a week after the invasion, Dubček revealed that an "agreement has been reached regarding measures aimed at a rapid *normalization* of the situation."<sup>61</sup> It signaled the start of the second era of postwar communism in Czechoslovakia, a period of twenty years known first officially, and then colloquially, as normalization.

A month later, at what was to be the last Czechoslovak Communist Party plenum at which hard-liners and reformists still sat side by side, a Moscow preapproved resolution was read out in which the role of the normalized mass media was described bluntly as serving the state in its engineering of human souls: "The press, radio, and television are first of all the instruments for carrying into life the policies of the Party and state."<sup>62</sup> The new censorship law outlined what normalization would mean in the long term. No longer was it to be decided on by appointed censors, as had been the case in the past: the new censorship law now relied on self-censorship and mutual control. In its bare form, the post-1968 notion of self-censorship might have seemed more benign than the pre-1968

system of assigned censors, but in practice it was not. To great effect, the publisher would watch the editor in chief, who would watch the editors, who would watch the writers. Not only were writers watched, but they monitored themselves.<sup>63</sup> During normalization, the writer Ludvík Vaculík would wistfully recall the time “when censors in Czechoslovakia had their own building, address, their directives and their own morals,” and were therefore tangible, nameable, and someone with whom one could “forge relationships...bend the rules.”<sup>64</sup>

## Capitulation

With this new form of censorship in place, the Soviets could afford to orchestrate the handover of power from reformists back to hard-liners at a more leisurely pace than originally planned. At first the Soviets had expected that the change-over would be carried out immediately following the invasion: naive and ignorant or perhaps merely disbelieving, they were surprised by the Czech and Slovak disdain for the pro-Moscow politicians they had lined up to assume power. The initial regime change, therefore, was not only delayed but reshuffled, and Alexander Dubček was allowed to linger in power. It was this slowed pace that actually played into the hands of the Soviets. It lulled Dubček and some of his Prague Spring government colleagues—the “men of January,” as they came to be called—into believing they could hold on to power as long as they met Moscow halfway, with the halfway mark, of course, being drawn and repeatedly redrawn by the Soviets.

But the men of January were not the only ones to be fooled and to fool in turn. The writer Milan Kundera, at least initially, believed that with Dubček still in power, reform would continue, albeit more slowly. In an essay titled “The Czechs’ Lot,” Kundera praised the Czech propensity for level-headedness (as opposed to revolutionary ardor). Most likely still buoyed by the significant acts of bravery and unity that had played out in the early weeks after the invasion, Kundera framed the Czechs’ heralded pragmatism not as capitulation or an over-eagerness to adapt or collaborate but instead as an ability to create values and act ethically in times of hardship. He criticized those who had fled Czechoslovakia since the invasion, as well as their dire predictions that the worst was yet to come: “People who today are falling into depression and defeatism, lamenting that there are not enough guarantees, that everything could end badly, that we might again end up in a miasma of censorship and trials, that this or that can happen, are simply weak people, who only know how to live in the illusions of certainty.”<sup>65</sup> Václav Havel, disturbed by Kundera’s conclusions, offered his reply in the journal *Tvář*: “Really. How much easier it is to say to ourselves how good we were before

August and how marvelous we were in August (when those evildoers came here after us) than to examine what we are like today, who among us is still good and who not at all, and what must be done so that we are true to our previously earned merits!”<sup>66</sup> In a way, Havel was already worrying over what Ernest Gellner would later describe as the Czechs’ “consensual tendency.”<sup>67</sup>

Someone else who did not agree with Kundera, who watched the rapidly changing political climate with alarm, was a young university student named Jan Palach. Imagining he could stop the steady retreat of reform by calling attention to the passivity that had set in since the invasion, and inspired by the similar protests carried out by Buddhist monks in Vietnam,<sup>68</sup> he set fire to himself in Prague’s Wenceslas Square in front of horrified passersby. Signing his short and succinct suicide note as “Torch Number One”—for he had drawn the first number among this group of “volunteers who are willing to burn themselves for our cause”—Palach wrote, “Because our nations are on the brink of despair we have decided to express our protest and to wake up the people of this land...” The first of his demands was the “immediate elimination of censorship.”<sup>69</sup> But by January 1969, when Palach committed his act of self-immolation, his demand was already impossible for Dubček and his reformist colleagues to meet. They were unwilling to rock the boat, convinced as they were that compromising with the new sheriffs in town might yet save the day.

Media coverage of Palach’s morbid protest against censorship only further confirmed its presence. That day’s evening radio news included just a brief and official government report of the incident and made no mention of the suicide note that the twenty-one-year-old Palach had left behind. The next day, as Palach lay dying in a hospital from his burns, the now Moscow-controlled Radio Prague distributed a memorandum to its staff forbidding anyone to broadcast programs or segments on Palach. The only exception was made for the youth broadcasting division, which was ordered to provide carefully crafted information on Palach and his suicide with the sole purpose of deterring young listeners from following suit.<sup>70</sup> But in a last-ditch effort to retain some modicum of independence, however fleeting, Czechoslovak Television’s Prague studios managed to stage a live program discussion about Palach. In its aftermath, hard-line normalizers angrily claimed the program had been knowingly planned “to create a [nationwide] psychosis with the intention of stirring up a crisis over the death of J. Palach.”<sup>71</sup> The Soviets were no less irate, insisting this was an organized campaign intended to provoke “nationalist, anti-Soviet moods.”<sup>72</sup>

Thus, despite a great outpouring of national grief over Palach’s painful death, Dubček and his ministers responded hazily, thereby ensuring a yet greater estrangement between the public and Dubček, who was becoming politically prudent to the point of collaboration. It was left to the students to organize the

funeral procession. The funeral was not only for Palach but, in a larger sense, for the death of the Prague Spring: thousands of people wound their way through the streets of Prague in mournful silence. Students at Charles University issued a statement that summarized the grief, the anger, and the guilt: they blamed the Soviets for Palach's death, the Czechoslovak political leadership for its betrayal, and themselves for their failure to bring permanent political change.<sup>73</sup> Students, only recently politicized, now resolutely turned their backs on politics.

## Setting the Tone

This silence was punctured briefly on March 28 when Czechoslovakia defeated the Soviet Union at the Hockey World Championships in Stockholm. The entire country sat glued to their television screens, and when the Czechoslovaks scored the winning goals, having physically assaulted the Soviets to the vicarious delight of television viewers, crowds rushed out into the streets to celebrate and to release their shared frustration and anti-Soviet, anti-normalization sentiments. The most infamous outcome of this was the shattered glass window display at the offices of the Soviet airline, Aeroflot, on Wenceslas Square. But even here it turned out that the Soviets and their allies in Czechoslovakia were a few steps ahead: cobblestones had been placed outside Aeroflot by the secret police, encouraging demonstrators to pick them up and fling them through the windows, thereby creating official justifications for a clampdown. Indeed, a couple of days later, on March 31, the Soviet minister of defense, Marshal Grečko, arrived in Prague to protest the destruction of the Aeroflot offices. On April 2, unprecedented levels of censorship were put in place.<sup>74</sup> On April 17, Alexander Dubček was replaced as first secretary by his friend and fellow Slovak Gustáv Husák, who would rule over normalization for the next eighteen years until his retirement in 1987.

Dubček was left hanging on as a member of the Central Committee. As the one-year anniversary of the invasion neared, Václav Havel, knowing that Communist Party pressure for Dubček to repudiate the goals of the Prague Spring would increase, wrote to him privately. He urged him to remain resilient, to "behave the way a majority of us still hope you will behave." Havel outlined the three paths that were now open to Dubček. One was to "carry out a thorough self-criticism, acknowledge the failings and negligence of your leadership, entirely endorse the Soviet interpretation of events"; the second was to "remain silent"; and the third was to resist "all pressure on you and once again [to spell] out openly and truthfully your plans, your policy, and your understanding of the reform politics of the Prague Spring." Havel urged Dubček to grasp this third

option. Yes, it would lead to his immediate expulsion from the party, but it might also force through a significant political crisis or, at the very least, damage the smooth passage of political consolidation. If nothing else, it would leave Czechoslovak citizens feeling less betrayed. Most important, wrote Havel, such an act of defiance could "become a yardstick for [citizens'] own behavior, a compass needle pointing to a more meaningful future."<sup>75</sup> It would, in other words, represent the first public act of "living in truth" under normalization, a dissenting state of being that Havel would elaborate on over the next few years.

But Dubček chose to remain silent. In contrast, others with far more to lose came out into the streets in a series of violent demonstrations in Prague, Brno, Liberec, Opava, Havířov, and elsewhere during several days surrounding the first anniversary of the August 1968 invasion. The police, but especially the people's militia, shot into the crowds, killing two in Prague and two in Brno. An eyewitness to late-night demonstrations in Prague on August 21 sent a report out to the West: "Still before my eyes I see that young man... as he ran away across the lit-up Náměstí Míru Square... From all sides police officers appeared and with a sharp command they released their dogs onto the poor young man. I shouted—Gestapo, Gestapo! The young man shot as fast as an arrow across the grass on Náměstí Míru chased by a black German Shepherd."<sup>76</sup> Members of the police, the army, and the people's militia who took part in shooting, beating, and arresting the demonstrators, were rewarded with hard-to-find consumer durables such as specially inscribed watches, transistor radios, electric razors, and photo cameras, as well as recreational vouchers and even cash.<sup>77</sup> Dubček was rewarded for his collaborative silence by being purged from the Communist Party once and for all by the men of normalization whose favor he was still trying to court.

A year after the August 1968 invasion a government fully committed to normalization, led by the new general secretary, Gustáv Husák, was in place. Much later, after the collapse of communism in 1989, Husák would lament, "The concept of normalization was not my invention. We all voted for it as the only possible outcome. If some country experiences an earthquake—what then? It tries to normalize life. And what can it do when a 100,000-plus-strong army descends upon it?"<sup>78</sup> Despite this apparent sense of helplessness, Husák set about his task with vigor, working fourteen to sixteen hours a day, seven days a week; he claimed that he wanted to bring Czechoslovakia out of not only its political and economic crises but also its crisis of values.<sup>79</sup> That is to say, normalization would do away with the Prague Spring and its residue, but would also instill a new and more appropriate set of values in its place. What those values might be, Husák and his fellow normalizers probably did not yet know, and consequently the early years of late communism seem largely improvised. But in August 1969,

two things were clear to the Communist Party and its leadership: first, that the public sphere, so central to communist ideology and yet dangerously tainted by recent events, needed to be reconceptualized; second, that the media were to be tamed and then fully incorporated into the task of shaping a post-1968 political state. This was to be a distinctly new era of postwar communism.