
THE QUIET LIFE VERSUS A LIFE IN TRUTH

Writing the Script for Normalization

With the absence of postwar idealism to forge political unity, and with the suppression of a reformed communism that might have reshaped ideology and its practical application, the question was, what was communism to be, and for whom, after 1968? The purge had recast late communist society; the official re-writing of the Prague Spring had introduced the necessary paradigms; but what remained was to define everyday life in the years ahead. The question presented itself early on at the Czechoslovak pavilion of the 1970 World Exposition in Japan. The national pavilion, on display halfway across the world, exhibited a significantly different image of normalized Czechoslovakia than did the purges that were then in full swing back home.

Czech radio station *Rádio Hvězda*, reporting on the World Expo, noted the historically rich fantasy world on which the national pavilion heavily leaned: "The visitor is immediately engulfed by the pervasive music of Dvořák's 'New World' symphony....Religious motifs and Gablonz bijouterie predominate. Small devotional articles are presented as [is] the country's venerated [jewelry]. A Hussite goblet from [the] 14th century is featured next to glassed cages with fluttering birds, giving the exhibit liveliness and color."¹ It seemed to showcase the very best of Czech precommunist culture—the farther back in time, the better. As if to underscore the point, a young guide to the exhibit, instead of handing out the hammer-and-sickle emblem of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, distributed postcards of the Prague Castle. When asked about the current politics of her country, she answered that she did not have any personal experience with

the situation since she had left the country two years earlier—in other words, she had left in 1968, probably in the aftermath of the invasion.

Vladimír Selecký, a deputy director of Czechoslovak Television, was among those who condemned the exhibit at the 1970 World Expo. He was convinced that “the disorientation and confusion of the past crisis period [was] clearly [present] during the creation of our pavilion.” Although the pavilion was seemingly disconnected from politics, its planning and creation prior to the invasion was sufficient proof for Selecký that the exhibit included, as he said, “coded symbols and allegories” put together by the sorts of people “who in the past years have more than once used state means for expressing their very problematic and subjective feelings and attitudes.” Most troubling, Selecký believed, was what the pavilion said (or did not say) about post-1968 Czechoslovakia: “When a Czechoslovak has seen about a dozen of our ancient relics and another dozen works of our present creative artists, he has to ask: Is this all? Is this to be the Socialist Czechoslovakia?”²² Inadvertently, Selecký had verbalized the regime’s most urgent question.

Jaroslav Sodomka, the secretary general of Czechoslovakia’s exhibit at Expo ‘70, dismissed Selecký’s criticism. Sodomka reported that the Czechoslovak pavilion was being widely praised, and “experts spoke highly of the harmony of the architecture and interior decorations of the pavilion, which was also favorably viewed as an oasis of calm and light in comparison with other noisy and garish pavilions.” In addition, the Czechoslovak restaurants at Expo ‘70 “had been among the most popular,” where visitors commended “the quality and large selection of dishes as well as the . . . perfect service.”²³ In describing the enticements offered up at the pavilion, Sodomka had inadvertently tapped into the very images with which the normalization regime, too, would barter over the next few years: images of a normalized Czechoslovakia triumphant in its victory over reform communism, offering capitalist-type consumption and the “calm and light” that only a return to normality could bring. While arguing over the Czechoslovak pavilion thousands of miles away in Japan, Selecký had come up with the vital question and Sodomka with the answer.

Postinvasion Consumerism

By late 1969, according to one account, First Secretary Gustáv Husák had concluded that once people “have their creature comforts, they won’t want to lose them.”²⁴ In October 1969, he requested financial help from the Soviets but did not use the handout to modernize Czechoslovakia’s antiquated industrial infrastructure. Opting for short-term necessities over long-term needs, he used the

funds to satisfy consumer demands. In December 1969, the government thus was able to announce to the public an early Christmas present—a permanent price freeze on all basic food stuffs and fuels. As a result of this freeze, which remained largely intact throughout the next twenty years, consumer consumption could, and did, increase; per capita consumption of meat, for example, rose from 68.9 kilograms in 1969 to 81.1 kilograms in 1975.⁵ In case the message was not yet clear following the announcement of the permanent price freezes, on May 3, 1971, in the lead-up to the Fourteenth Party Congress, where the tone for post-purge normalization was to be set, temporary price cuts were made on a broad range of consumer goods as a way to showcase “the correct line of the new leadership and Central Committee, [and as] evidence of the success achieved . . . in the consolidation of political and economic life.”⁶ From 1970 to 1978, private consumption on the whole went up by 36.5 percent.⁷

These gestures, Husák correctly assessed, would improve the “party-people alliance.”⁸ Even Bílák, not one to succumb to the people’s whimsical demands, admitted that in 1948 “we had posters in the shop windows about how socialism [was] going to look, and people were receptive to it. That was a different kind of excitement and a different historical time, and today we can’t put up posters about how socialism is going to look, but today shop windows have to be full of goods so that we can document that we are moving toward socialism [i.e., communism] and that we have socialism here.”⁹ But the normalization regime was offering more than merely the sort of consumption available to the wealthier pockets of the Soviet Bloc; the trend toward consumption over production had begun in the 1960s and would continue. More important, it was offering the “quiet life,” which was understood as vital to delivering this promise of consumption.

The Quiet Life

Political scientists Kieran Williams and Grzegorz Ekiert, when documenting the postinvasion climate in Czechoslovakia, point to the repeated calls for calm and order by the reform leaders in the face of the public’s desire for some sort of collective action against and protest of the invasion. The defining moment came on the eve of Jan Palach’s funeral, which had the potential to unite the nation and propel it toward effective protest; instead, Alexander Dubček went on the radio to plead for calm and order.¹⁰ Grzegorz Ekiert argues that Dubček’s and others’ appeals reflect how, despite the Prague Spring, the Czechoslovak Communist Party had never let the reigns of power slip from its hands and had always remained in control, and that ultimately there was no “clear state-society cleavage”

as had existed in 1956 in Hungary and would again with the Solidarity movement in Poland in the 1980s.¹¹

Certainly, these calls for the quiet life might have been no more than desperate pleas by fearful politicians still wedded to the Communist Party and anxious to avoid the bloodshed of the 1956 Hungarian revolution. But they set the tone and fixed the ideological plane for normalization. Quoting an expert on the Gorbachev period, Soviet historian Susan Reid has observed that “the political order evolving under Khrushchev and Brezhnev was not Stalinism *redux* but something quite different.”¹² One of the key differences between Stalinism and late communism was not only the absence of political idealism in the latter but the concomitant and officially endorsed rejection of political extremism of any sort. Philosopher Slavoj Žižek, himself a former citizen of late communism in Eastern Europe, has wittily remarked that the very last thing the late communist regimes wanted was for their citizens to act out communism.¹³ In this, the Soviets showed the way: during the false jollity and vigorous handshakes that had followed the signing of the Moscow Protocol between the Kremlin and the “kidnapped” Dubček-led government delegation, Alexei Kosygin, Soviet adviser to Czechoslovakia, confided to one of the Czech delegates that from now on it would be best for Czechoslovakia to “avoid extremes at both ends of the spectrum.”¹⁴ As if taking this advice to heart, upon returning to Prague, Dubček pleaded on the radio with Czechoslovak citizens: “We truly need order....[T]he sooner we succeed in normalizing conditions in the country and the greater support you give us, the sooner we shall be able to take further steps along our post-January road.”¹⁵ Dubček’s downfall would be his willingness to be a spokesperson for the postinvasion quiet life, which paved the way for normalization as well as his own ouster from government.

Marie Miková, a member of the Central Committee and a lifelong communist who had been sympathetic to the Prague Spring, also was persuaded to vote for the Soviet occupation because of the national call for calm and order. Shortly before the vote to legalize and make permanent the Soviet occupation, the then Czechoslovak president Ludvík Svoboda, a trusted war hero, called her aside, adamant that she vote for the occupation. When she protested and laid out her reasons why, he insisted that “we already told them [the Soviets] all that—that they came uninvited and so on, no one can change that anymore, but they’re now becoming nervous, they’re losing their patience and they need a little peace and quiet.” When Miková asked Svoboda what might happen should the vote not pass, he described a bloodletting of epic proportions: “Pray you won’t have to see that, that would be terrible, I can’t allow that,” Svoboda replied. “You know, I’ve told you more than once how much blood was spilled during the war, what I went through, what I saw, and this I never want to see again.”¹⁶ When Miková

voted for legalizing a permanent Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia, she believed she was voting for the necessary calm and order. Just prior to the April 1969 party plenum, at which Dubček would be replaced by Husák, *Rudé právo*—continuing to pound the same drum—carried headlines such as “Only in a calm atmosphere is it possible to live well,” and “Introduce the necessary calm, certainty, and order.”¹⁷ Dubček himself joined in with the chorus, appearing on television on April 3, 1969 (his last television appearance until the 1989 Velvet Revolution) to plead for calm in order to stave off the rumored second military intervention.

Zvi Gitelman, writing in the early 1980s, considered the claim that people wanted quiet and calm merely “another cliché of the period.”¹⁸ His evidence was a published survey by Slovak pollsters less than a year after the Soviet invasion. In answer to their question, “Husák emphasized the desire of our people to live in a calm atmosphere and their demand that the activities of those people who spread chaos and intensify socialist disintegration should cease. Is this also your view?” Fifty-nine percent agreed that it was their view, and presumably the rest did not.¹⁹ But what is lost here is that the official endorsement—indeed, encouragement—of calm and order was expansive in its definition. It meant, for example, not merely acceptance of what was most certainly another descriptive cliché of the time—people’s political apathy—but the state’s active endorsement of it. The call for calm and order, and the way in which it became synonymous with normalization, was not merely programmatic; it was also ideological. Jan Fojtík, sensitive to the post-1968 ideological shift, warned during plans for the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Czechoslovak Communist Party that “the point is not to overdo the celebrations, not to irritate [*neotrávit*—literally, not poison] people with our programs.”²⁰ Once in the leadership position, Husák continued to sound the themes of calm, order, and quiet. Even before he was the first secretary, when he was still chairman of the Slovak Communist Party in the aftermath of the invasion, Husák had already indicated what normalization was to be about: “[A] normal person wants to live quietly,” he said, and “this party wants to safeguard the quiet life.”²¹ What is also important here is the assumed agreement between state and society about the pursuance of the quiet life, with neither state nor society planning to be in the political vanguard.

The Newly Purged

As challenging as the task of defining late communism was, normalization’s leaders were always able to rely on positioning themselves in opposition to the (irrational) reform communists of 1968 and to proffer their vision of normalization

as an antidote to the “abnormalcy” of the Prague Spring. In contrast, for the newly born post-1968 dissidents, forging an identity and offering a script for post-1968 would prove much more trying. Part of the problem, at least initially, was that Czechoslovakia’s post-1968 dissidents were largely a creation of the purge. That is to say, many of these new dissidents were former communists from the 1950s, drawn to reform communism during the 1960s and purged for it in the early 1970s. Czech-born Oxford historian Z. A. B. Zeman has observed that very few among his generation, the ‘68ers, voluntarily renounced their positions of power after the invasion. The purge did this for them, taking away high-powered careers that had been built, at least partially, on membership in the Communist Party. The purge, rather than political conscience, compelled them, as Zeman notes, “to stand outside of things without actually standing up for anything specific—before that they had felt themselves to be standing close to political power, but then that power disintegrated.”²² Eva Kantůrková, a writer who belonged to this 1968 generation of party-affiliated intelligentsia, has described the swift and traumatic transformation from a privileged to a persecuted generation that played out after the invasion.²³ She and her classmates had enjoyed the rewards that communism offered, finishing university “in the midfifties [with] our hands... clean, for the revolutionary terror had taken place at a time when we were still too young to take part.” They had grown up in a communist state and yet had had the good fortune to forgo any direct responsibility for Stalinism; consequently, they were at once critical of the regime and loyal to it, “enjoying all the advantages” that communism offered them—“whether we realized it or not.”²⁴

Government officials, however, did realize it, and they fretted over this generation’s critical impulses, born—they argued—of these very advantages. A 1965 internal report claimed that Kantůrková’s generation was politically handicapped precisely because it had been spared the most formative experiences of its parents’ generation, especially World War II and the “the consequent class war.” The latter, argued the report, had been their parents’ “greatest school of life”—although the report was reserved about what sort of school Stalinism might have been and what lessons were taught there. Unlike their parents’ generation, Kantůrková’s generation had never had to dream of socialism but instead had lived it, the report explained, and so was more prone to dismiss its achievements and instead focus on problems of “social economics” and “independent thought.”²⁵ This government report, like others of its kind, seemed uneasy with the post-war generation and its unwillingness to accept the Party’s political path without commentary, be it individual or collective. But Kantůrková and her fellow reform communists, the driving force behind the Prague Spring, saw themselves not as a brash antigovernment opposition but as a “loyal opposition,” who “wouldn’t have dreamed of wishing for...[the regime’s] downfall.”²⁶ They worked within

the framework of the Communist Party and its institutions to try to achieve socialism with a human face, even as they made it their job to criticize it.

Seeing themselves as critical insiders rather than any sort of external opposition, the Prague Spring intelligentsia felt not only shocked by the invasion but betrayed by what followed. Yet because of their earlier stance, it would take time for those who had once made up the loyal opposition to begin to re-form as a disloyal opposition. In May 1969, the political scientist and later dissident Milan Šimečka, wrote, “[T]oday Husák was on television jumping about at a Party meeting in Vysočany. He is quite clearly a psychopath. He managed to make statements that were strongly reminiscent of the croaks of a troglodyte from the 1950s.... The scum and the dirt rise slowly to the top, impotent men and idiots with complexes shake about on the screen and babble their bullshit. I’m amazed I was once in the same party with those people.”²⁷ But even as he wrote this, Šimečka had not left the party. It was a year later, on his fortieth birthday, that the party purged *him*.

Similarly, the Brno-based playwright Milan Uhde later wrote about the “mechanisms of ostracization” that had led him, almost unwittingly, down the path toward dissent. Writing about this in a samizdat journal in 1987, Uhde recalled that soon after taking power, General Secretary Husák had announced “that everyone writes their own personnel file and that the determining factor is not what someone did or said earlier but how he acts now.” Despite his previous affinities for reform communism, Uhde accepted this to be the core of normalization’s reality: “I was willing to join in on this consensus,” he writes. “I made my living as a writer.... I was prepared to keep quiet in the future about what I did not like in the Czechoslovak political system and to try for my literary creations to fit into the framework of the new state cultural politics.” Despite his willingness, in 1970 he began to hear rumblings that the state cultural agencies were no longer looking favorably upon him and his work. By 1971, a local theater director had asked him to sign his work under a pseudonym, and by 1972, the state theater agency had terminated its prior agreement to renew foreign rights contracts for Uhde’s plays. That same year, a prominent writer known to have good relations with the new apparatchiks of Czech culture invited Uhde over for a chat. He advised Uhde to submit a letter to the Communist Party expressing his willingness to work in literature under the new conditions. Uhde wrote the letter. The same writer next asked him to go speak with the secretariat of the new Writers’ Union, where an official was already expecting him. But Uhde never went, and as his official status consequently declined still further, he gradually found himself among other blacklisted writers who, having no other venue, began to write for samizdat publications. Of the process, he concluded, “[I]f they had only treated me a little bit better, they would have had me.”²⁸

But Uhde's path away from the party and the official sphere of which it was in charge was also in part an intellectual journey. Milan Šimečka, in the aftermath of his own purging from the party, wrote a series of private letters in which he tracked "how those who had shaken off their juvenile belief in Communist utopia and were now shedding the last remnants of Marxist and pseudo-Marxist ideology were continuing to mature, both politically and as people in general."²⁹ Presumably Milan Šimečka included himself in their ranks. This is not to say, however, that every reform communist turned into a dissident. Former reform communists tried out and adopted any number of new guises. As one member of this generation, a former adviser to Party First Secretary Novotný and head of the Central Committee's cultural division, wrote in 1971 about his generation's post-1968 fallout: "[W]e make up a touching spectrum—from the governing salons of Prague Castle to employees of the city sewage system, intermittent residents of prison cells or else involuntary emigrants."³⁰ He himself had wound up in the latter category of involuntary emigrants when he left for the West in the aftermath of the invasion. Still others signed up with normalization and returned comfortably to "the governing salons of Prague Castle." Those who began to take a stand against the new regime or who had been classified by the state as political enemies became "intermittent residents of prison cells." But the majority of former reform communists got on with their lives, whether they were permitted to keep their jobs, demoted to lesser positions, or even reduced to "employees of the city sewage system."

Purging Marxism

What many of this generation did continue to share, however, was their way of seeing. They had grown up in and continued to inhabit a bifurcated world, a dialectical framework in the spirit of the Marxist philosophy that many had embraced with hopefulness in the aftermath of World War II and that they had been immersed in ever since. And while the Communist Party had disappointed them, its ideology remained for many a familiar construct through which to see even their current circumstances. The paradigm of "us versus them" (with the "them" having been "us" until very recently) was a cross borne, and uneasily abandoned, by many of the Prague Spring intelligentsia. The former dissident and sociologist Jiřina Šiklová has made the point that to remain committed to one's dissident principles during the 1970s and 1980s required the sort of certitude and conviction only available when seeing the world as black and white, as a fight between good and evil. She sheepishly recalls quoting the words of Czech philosopher and dissident Jan Patočka ("Our people have once more become aware that there

are things for which it is worthwhile to suffer, that the things for which we might have to suffer are those which make life worthwhile") to her son as she was led away in handcuffs by the secret police in 1981.³¹

Strongly linked to this view of the world was the concept of sacrifice. In his extensive travels through East Central Europe's opposition circles, Timothy Garton Ash noted that the philosophies of Václav Havel and fellow Polish dissident leader Adam Michnik shared "the conviction of the *value of sacrifice*." Both believed that, in the words of Michnik, "there are causes worth suffering and dying for."³² Garton Ash sees Christianity's ethical precepts as feeding into this central idea behind political opposition in Poland but, more surprisingly, also Czechoslovakia after 1968. Again, however, the notion of suffering and dying for a greater good is a deeply Marxist-Leninist idea, one championed by the early postwar communists, who, István Rév reminds us, "gave up, betrayed, imprisoned, then stabbed in the back, executed, and buried each other over and over again; ... slept with each other's wives, slept with each other's husbands, and with the widows of their victims."³³ Everything was done in the name of the party and their sacrifices to it and for it. These men (and some women), founders of postwar communism in East Central Europe, had such a finely honed sense of sacrifice that, as the private confessions of the Stalinist show trial victims on the eve of their hangings pitifully revealed, many continued to believe in the righteousness of their falsified trial and its fatal outcome.³⁴

The purge, if understood for this purpose as a small-scale version of the show trials, also did not necessarily or immediately expel a lifetime of Marxist sympathies and Marxist-Leninist catechisms. Because of these still deeply felt affinities, the last gasps for organized resistance to the invasion and to Husák's assumption of power centered around last-ditch attempts to reinvigorate socialism. For example, some of the newly purged former communists created a secret organization called the Czechoslovak Citizens' Socialist Movement, which operated in Prague and Brno. Brno-based members of the Czechoslovak Socialist Party in turn formed the Small Action Program of the Czechoslovak Movement for Democratic Socialism.³⁵ Further oppositional groups included the Revolutionary Socialist Party and the more radical Movement for Revolutionary Youth, headed by the Trotskyite Petr Uhl and disguised as a student futurist group. But in the winter of 1971 to 1972, these fledgling underground organizations were swept clean, many of their members arrested, and some imprisoned. What followed was an extended period of malaise and a private but largely ineffective opposition to normalization. In June 1973, feeling beaten down by normalization despite his earlier optimism, Milan Šimečka confessed, "It's the passivity which we have in part voluntarily entered and in part been cast in to; but what is worse for this subjective state is that we have, after careful consideration, voluntarily

accepted it as the attitude that best corresponds to the period.”³⁶ It was not until 1976, as a result of the government’s trial against the nonconformist underground rock band the Plastic People of the Universe that the passivity that Šimečka described was finally punctured.

Charter 77

Playwright and philosopher Václav Havel attended the trial and reported on it to his friends. He wrote that it was an event of the kind that at first seemed to be “nothing out of the ordinary, [but] which suddenly illuminate[d] with an unexpected light the time and world in which we live.”³⁷ What had struck Havel especially was the absurdity of a regime frightened by a group of long-haired young men who were doing nothing more than playing music and enjoying themselves. The Plastics, however, were not quite as innocent as all that. The cacophony of their musical output, their open admiration of foreign shock bands such as the Velvet Underground, and their own lyrics suggested more than just some East European version of the Beach Boys out to have fun. The sound of the music and the words sung (or, more often, bellowed) were clearly intended to undermine normalization’s message of a quiet life. One short lyric, repeated over and over, simply asks, “Spring, summer, autumn, winter/ Spring, summer, autumn, winter/ Whose fault is all this anyway?” (*Jaro léto podzim zima: Jaro léto podzim zima/ či je to vina?*). Another song, even more succinct in its message, incorporates the popular slogan of East European regimes at the time but finishes it off with a pithy lament: “Peace, peace/ No better than crap paper” (*Mír, mír/ jako hajzlpapír*). In Czech, it is a perfect rhyme.

Czechoslovakia’s most famous dissident movement, Charter 77 (*Charta 77*), was born of the Plastics’ trial and the solidarity that it helped provoke among the otherwise loosely knit groups of people who had been pushed to the periphery by normalization. On January 6, 1977, Václav Havel, the writer Ludvík Vaculík (author of 1968’s *Two Thousand Words* manifesto), and the actor Pavel Landovský (who later played the affable pig-owning farmer in the film version of Milan Kundera’s *Unbearable Lightness of Being*) climbed into a car and set off to deliver the Charter 77 founding proclamation to the Czechoslovak Federal Assembly. Police authorities, warned ahead of time (as had been expected), intercepted the car and arrested all three. Normalization’s leadership insisted that the Charter had to be quashed immediately to guarantee “the much needed quiet necessary to get work done.”³⁸

In the Charter, the country’s postwar political past, present, and future came together. The name Charter 77 was coined by Pavel Kohout, playwright, former

supporter of the regime, and now dissident. In his 1969 *Diary of a Counterrevolutionary*, Kohout confessed to the intense joy he had felt on the day of the Communist Party takeover in 1948. The sight of party leader, Klement Gottwald, waving victoriously to the crowds had evoked in him the “hope that once, in desperation, I looked for in God and then in Love.”³⁹ The text of the Charter 77 proclamation was cowritten by Václav Havel and the former Central Committee member Zdeněk Mlynář. Like Kohout, Mlynář had been an eager young communist despite his early exposure to Stalinism-in-practice while studying in Moscow. There, he later recollected, he watched his fellow Soviet students treat vodka binges as an opportunity to turn the portrait of Stalin to face the wall, turn the key in the lock, and open “the door to several hours during which duplicity was unnecessary and people whose intoxicated tongues became increasingly tangled still managed to make more and more real sense.”⁴⁰ Havel, too young in 1948 to have participated in Kohout’s “revolution” and too wealthy to have benefited from party policy that cleared the path for working-class advancement, had proved himself the most immune to postwar political exigencies. He had found his way into politics through his work in the theater, later as a playwright and essayist. When the Charter nominated its first round of spokespersons, the choice was Havel, the elderly philosopher Jan Patočka (who would soon die in custody following interrogation), and the former Prague Spring government minister Jiří Hájek.

Politics versus Antipolitics

The original founders, signatories, and spokespersons of the Charter were, as is clear, a motley group who had intentionally agreed to put aside political and ideological differences and unite their varied voices under one organizational umbrella. What made the Charter unique was that Marxist and Catholic thinkers stood side by side, as did former victims and perpetrators of Stalinism. But this otherwise admirable formation also defined the Charter’s weaknesses: for such a varied cast to put its name to one single document, the Charter proclamation had to be universal and nonspecific, which meant that when translated into the everyday concerns of ordinary citizens, it was also uninspiring and vague. Thus the Charter proclaimed that its signatories would help ensure that the Czechoslovak government keep its promise of respecting human rights as outlined in the recent Helsinki Accords. Moreover, because the Charter wanted to remain active despite the government’s inevitable repression of it, the founding document went out of its way to declare the group a benign force; it declawed itself

for the purposes of survival. On paper, at least, it described itself as not being *against* the government or the program of normalization. For the same reason, the Charter never referred to itself as an organization and insisted that it was “a voluntary, informal, and open association of people of various opinions, faiths, and professions, joined by their desire to defend civic and human rights here and in the world.”⁴¹ But the Charter’s efforts to be quasi-legal by squeezing into the interstices of the communist state’s domestic and international laws contributed to its ineffectuality on the ground.

While in the West what became known as a philosophy of antipolitics—about which not only Havel but the Hungarian György Konrád wrote—was applauded loudly, living in a politicized state such as normalized Czechoslovakia opened up tensions between politics and a policy of antipolitics. Important, too, was that these tensions had a history. The Czech historian Milan Otáhal (himself a Charter signatory although he has not shied away from critical assessments of the Charter) has pointed out that the debate between politics and antipolitics had begun ten years earlier in the editorial offices of the political-cultural journal *Tvář* (*Countenance*), the intellectual must-read of the 1960s.⁴² It was on these pages that political scientist Emanuel Mandler and playwright Václav Havel went head-to-head over the issue of politics versus antipolitics. Arguing very much against the fashion of the times, Mandler rejected the idea of reforming communism because he considered it unreformable. Instead he called for a gradual and pragmatic approach to political change, which caused him and his supporters to be labeled “realists.” By contrast, Havel and his supporters were called “radicals” because they demanded a broader and more absolute approach to uncovering the past, to moving forward, and to applying ethical truth in private and public life.

In practical terms, the difference between these two approaches can be gleaned from an article Mandler wrote for the influential university weekly *Student* in May 1968, in regard to the question of introducing oppositional parties into the political arena:

If we are *realistically* to consider other political parties, we must do so based on reality and not fiction. Therefore I reject the statement of Professor Goldstücker that an oppositional political party is out of the question because in Czechoslovakia there no longer exists a class-based society (what an argument!). But neither can we make do with Havel’s stand that in a democracy a second party is *necessary*. Because as of yet we do not live in a democracy....Havel does not ask how we can attain democracy, he is interested in what democracy is....A second political party will come about only when the Communist Party allows

it....Moreover, the existence of a second political party is no guarantee of democracy *in and of itself*, it can after all be a party that works in conjunction with the Communist Party.⁴³

Ten years later, these Prague Spring debates between the realists and the radicals were reignited in the Charter.

Havel’s “Living in Truth”

Before the Charter went public in January 1977, its foundational document was circulated among friends and acquaintances for signatures. Among those approached were Emanuel Mandler and a fellow 1968 realist, Karel Štindl. Both turned down the opportunity to sign because they objected to the Charter’s content and tone.⁴⁴ For Mandler, the main issue centered on the Charter’s relationship with the public and its “elitism” vis-à-vis ordinary citizens. Moreover, neither Mandler nor Štindl believed that a society’s moral and ethical crisis could be solved in any way other than politically. They wanted to see realistic solutions, which they understood as being political solutions; for example, they advocated pushing for the state-sponsored rehabilitation of those who had been most seriously affected by the postinvasion purge and trials.⁴⁵ In disagreeing with the Charter’s content, tone, and purpose, Mandler and Štindl argued that, first and foremost, the majority of citizens were interested in getting their children into university, receiving permission to travel to the Balkans for their holiday, and building a garage for their long-awaited Soviet Bloc-brand car. Few people, that is, were willing to defend the abstract notion of human rights and to lose the privileges of education, leisure, and consumption for doing so. As the historian Otáhal explains, according to Mandler and Štindl, it was the Charter’s “ethical radicalism that would be untenable for the population.”⁴⁶ If this was so, then the Charter’s political effect would be minimal.

The Charter certainly did not intend to exist in a vacuum, nor was it ignorant of these realities. In fact, the Charter document specifically pointed to the association’s genuine willingness to open up a dialogue with the state. The problem was that the regime itself did not wish to engage in any such dialogue. And as long as the Charter could not demonstrate significant support from the public (which, unlike the Solidarity movement in Poland, it never could), the regime did not have to contemplate seriously any such exchange. Backed into a corner by the regime’s rejection of its olive branch and needing to unify and close ranks in the face of the state-sponsored repression against its signatories, the Charter sought to reinvigorate its collective identity. It found this identity in

the writings of philosopher Jan Patočka, a founding member of the Charter and leading phenomenologist, who reconceived of the decision to sign the Charter as constituting a moral act. Following Patočka's tragic death instigated by a series of interrogations by the state security police, Havel took up the gauntlet and elaborated on Patočka's ideas in his famous essay "The Power of the Powerless."

In this essay Havel familiarized readers with the story of a greengrocer under normalization who places a political banner in his shop window, a banner that in all likelihood he received with his usual shipment of carrots and potatoes. By complying with the official request to display this meaningless banner and by never paying attention to the words on the banner—"Workers of the World Unite!"—that he exhibits so unquestioningly, the greengrocer continues to "live within the lie." To live within the lie was to go through the motions of a ritualized and banal everyday existence under late communism without ever piercing its veneer. Thus, by extension, to live in truth—to live authentically—would mean to free oneself of the daily rituals that the majority of citizens had long since absorbed. Of these insidious rituals incorporated into the everyday lives of ordinary citizens, Havel wrote, "[B]y consenting to them, he [the greengrocer] himself enters the game, he becomes one of its players, he makes it possible for the game to continue being played, for it basically to continue, simply to exist."⁴⁷ This was another way of saying that everyone was culpable.

Through this antigreengrocer manifesto, as brilliant an exposé of normalization as it was, the elitism of which Mandler had accused the Chartists was seemingly confirmed. Havel's greengrocer would seem to be a typical person, the ordinary citizen in 1970s Czechoslovakia, and rather than appealing to him, Havel held him up to a measure of unrealistic ideal behavior that few citizens could afford to pursue. Overcome by his own interest in politics as philosophy, Havel called for an existential revolution of which the Charter would presumably be the fulcrum. Heavily influenced not only by Patočka, a student of Husserl, but also by Heidegger, living in truth reflects a similar search for authenticity in the face of the modern world, of which Havel considered normalization, understood by him as post-totalitarianism, to be one of the extreme manifestations. Unlike Heidegger's disgraceful embrace of Nazism, the authenticity of living in truth would lead one not into the arms of an ideological totality but away from it.

Living in truth must also have been in some measure a conscious response to the state-endorsed quiet life. Earlier, in his 1975 open letter to General Secretary Husák ("Dear Dr. Husák"), Havel had written: "The entire political practice of the present regime... confirms that those concepts which were always crucial for its program—order, calm, consolidation, 'guiding the nation out of its crisis,' 'halting disruption,' 'assuaging hot tempers,' and so on—have finally acquired the same lethal meaning that they have for every regime committed to

entropy... True enough, the country is calm. Calm as a morgue or a grave; would you not say?"⁴⁸ The almost primal desire to pierce the silence of the mortuary and in so doing bring the public out of its moral turpitude is central to the greengrocer essay. Nevertheless, the conflation of the Charter and living in truth (for the implication, whether intended or not, was that the Charter signatories, unlike the greengrocer, had decided to free themselves of living in the lie by signing on to this singular petition) became particularly troublesome for some. Mandler and others argued that the presumption here, shared by ordinary citizens, was that the dissidents had not consented to normalization while everyone else had. And although ordinary citizens might well be accused by the dissidents of not living in truth, these same citizens were not exactly convinced that truth was on the side of the dissidents either.

Mandler's Realism

Among the Charter's ranks were not only former communists active during the Stalinist 1950s but also reform communists who had failed the public when it counted most. It had been a Federal Assembly filled with reform communists who ratified, with an overwhelming 94 percent of the vote, the decision for Soviet occupying troops to remain "indefinitely" in Czechoslovakia. "Disoriented citizens" had watched in dismay as Dubček and his fellow reformists had handed over power to hard-line normalizers. The result was that when Husák proceeded to "deliver on a large part of his promises," particularly consumerist ones, and to pacify the Slovaks by creating a federalized state, normalization was not loudly and categorically rejected, even if for no other reason than that the alternatives looked decidedly slim. As the political situation normalized, ordinary citizens took up Husák's offer of the quiet life. Mandler wondered, "How can one be angry with the average, ordinary citizen... when the representatives of the reform movement left him in the lurch."⁴⁹

Mandler further objected that as a result of this emphasis on antipolitics and living in truth, all social actions, including the political, were seen by the Chartists as originating in philosophy. The political was depoliticized, and philosophy and politics became interchangeable. At the same time, however, both philosophy and politics remained in the shadow of Marxism. For evidence, Mandler pointed to Patočka's seminal essay "What Can We Expect from Charter 77?" in which Patočka wrote that the Charter "will bring into our lives a new orientation of ideas, which does not stand in contrast to a socialist orientation, which until now had such an exclusive monopoly... an orientation based on human rights, on moral elements in political life and in private [life]."⁵⁰ Coming at it from a somewhat different

angle, Havel also felt that parliamentary democracies were not necessarily a ready-made antidote to the pervasive existential crisis of both East and West.

But Mandler's most persuasive criticism was also the most personal: that the dismissal of political analysis in favor of philosophy, even if well meant, was convenient for many within the dissident ranks. For those born of the communist era and reluctant to renounce its ideology, even after the party had renounced them, the Charter's emphasis on antipolitics provided "an unexpected possibility to be contemporary dissidents and at the same time to preserve from their communist pasts a basic distaste for parliamentary, bourgeois democracy."⁵¹ It was an inflammatory accusation that was not easily forgotten or ignored. Nor were such doubts exclusive to Mandler; other signatories also worried about the efficacy of antipolitics. In 1978, only a year after the Charter's creation, one of its key signatories, the mathematician and philosopher Václav Benda, responded to the growing unease by conceiving of a "parallel polis."

Benda's "Parallel Polis"

The parallel polis was to be a way for signatories and nonsignatories alike to create a parallel culture, a "second culture," that would function independently alongside the official world of normalization. It would nurture important elements of citizenship (education, creative independence, innovation, charity, economic initiative) that were either absent or censored in official culture. The motivation behind the parallel polis, according to the dissident and fellow philosopher Martin Palouš, was to reconcile a certain identity crisis that had appeared soon after the élan of the first year of the Charter's founding when signatories realized that there would be no dialogue with the regime even though this was one of the Charter's two main goals.⁵² The difference in intent between Benda's parallel polis and Patočka's and Havel's antipolitics became a central point of difference in all future debates among the signatories. As witnessed by Palouš, "the never fully resolved conflict between Patočka's stand—defining itself in contrast to the political sphere, emphasizing the significance of morals for the functioning of human society, the significance of political de-regularization...—and Benda's positive program for a parallel polis, which through its basic existence imagines a political space, trailed the Charter during the whole of its existence."⁵³ The traditional point of departure, however, continued to be Havel's antipolitics; the concept of a parallel polis never found a wider audience beyond the rarefied world of dissent and, without a large number of participants, was nearly impossible to implement.

Moreover, the question arose of what exactly to implement; as Aviezer Tucker points out, ultimately "Benda's characterizations of parallel political structures

were vague."⁵⁴ Eventually, most dissidents agreed that the parallel polis could realistically develop only in the spheres of art and literature. But if so, then this was hardly an innovation, for samizdat publishing was already thriving, and the cultural underground's reigning philosophy, of which the Plastic People of the Universe were an important part, had always been to live as if government repression and Communist Party ideological domination did not exist. If the parallel polis beyond arts and literature was ever realized anywhere, it was not in Czechoslovakia but in neighboring Poland and Hungary, where pockets of independent political, cultural, and economic endeavor developed, often quite successfully, during late communism.

The sociologist Gil Eyal, returning to the idea of sacrifice, argues that Benda's goal went further; that in fact the parallel polis was intended to help Benda's fellow dissidents escape "the isolation of sacrifice" on which they had staked their claim.⁵⁵ Havel and others, Eyal points out, rejected the idea of a separate sphere of "dissidents," a professionalization of protest, and instead insisted that a dissident was anyone—doctor, poet, worker—who was taking responsibility for his actions (as the greengrocer failed to do). But who was to say whether taking responsibility for one's actions had any effect? "Too many Czechs (and reform communists)," writes Eyal, "could have laid claim to this ideal." Yet clearly not everyone was a dissident (even as Havel bristled at the term). Some form of special behavior had to be defined, and "their solution was a very old one": to introduce the notion of a "willingness to *sacrifice*," which had already been injected "into dissident discourse" by Jan Patočka.⁵⁶ What emerged from this was the link between dissidents and moral authority—in Eyal's words, they were understood to be special because they possessed "pastoral power." But within a year of the Charter's founding, it had become clear that sacrifice was too precarious a notion upon which to stake their claim for pastoral power. Although the party had lashed out at the Charter at its inception, the regime soon learned that locking up the signatories merely increased their claim to sacrifice, and so instead, in the words of Benda, they used the silent "acts of strangulation in the dark."⁵⁷ With the dissidents' sacrifices thereby seeming less sacrificial, pastoral power, to have any validity, had to be moved out into the open, into the more public space of the parallel polis.

Rezek's "Living in Conflict"

Both Benda, who attempted to improve on Havel's concept of living in truth, and Mandler, the naysayer of the concept, sought to rethink the relationship between the individual and the state and so concretize the meaning of dissent.

But in the literature on these debates, Petr Rezek is seldom if ever mentioned. Rezek, a well-reputed Czech philosopher himself, although largely unknown abroad, also took issue with much of Havel's political philosophy. Although he never signed the Charter, and despite his frequent polemics with Havel, he was taken seriously as both a dissident and a philosopher (he had also been a close pupil of Patočka). In a 1987 article titled "The Life of the Dissidents as a 'Life in Truth?'," first published in a samizdat issue of the journal *Střední Evropa* (*Central Europe*), Rezek criticized the Charter but, unlike other critics, he offered an alternative vision of dissent: in his version, the aim was not to live in truth but to "live in conflict."⁵⁸

Rezek began by pointing out that living in truth did not in fact make any sense. Did it mean never to lie? And if so, did it mean that someone with a child-like inability to lie lived in truth? For Rezek, a willingness to search for truth, on the other hand, did make sense. Since searching for truth in any country of the Eastern Bloc automatically brought on danger, then in order to search for truth, one must be willing to be in conflict with power.⁵⁹ This was real dissent, and it was innately political. The advantage to the approach that Rezek outlined was twofold. First, it meant that not everyone who chose not to live in conflict was automatically, by definition, relegated to live a lie. Second, living in conflict introduced a political aspect to dissident activity rather than merely producing a political result from an antipolitical approach (which is where this tension between politics and antipolitics within the Charter always arose).⁶⁰ At the same time, Rezek's life-in-conflict approach did not assume that the outcome had to include suffering (to come into conflict with power might also be fun, he suggested) or that it had to be political in nature (there was no rule on what that conflict had to be about); but the assumption was that this struggle would play out in public life.⁶¹

Rezek's principal aim was to ensure that what was key was not conscience and a fixed set of values but a *willingness*, because engaging in conflict with power without the willingness to do it was mere victimhood, as opposed to dissent. Rezek seemed to imply, correctly, that some dissidents were in fact victims of power (had had the role of dissident thrust upon them) rather than genuine dissenters. Viewing dissent as the willingness to live in conflict allowed for someone who did not have this will—who was content to live a comfortable and quiet life—to one day be moved to disturb that very same peace in order to preserve it.⁶² As Rezek seemed to suggest, living in conflict would have offered a more fluid and inclusive approach to normalization's power hold and ultimately also a better-defined alternative to the rigidity of living in truth.

Alexei Yurchak has compared Havel's notion of living in truth to a similar formulation for late Soviet society wherein the citizen "was a dissimulator who

acted differently in two different spheres, the 'official public' and the 'hidden intimate.'"⁶³ The problem, observes Yurchak, is that all these theories continue to portray late socialism in terms of binaries—perhaps not the ready clichés of the cold war but instead a new set of false presumptions about "'truth' and 'falsity,' 'reality' and 'mask,' 'revealing' and 'dissimulating.'"⁶⁴ Yurchak, an anthropologist, suggests that language and performance are much more complex and were doubly so during late socialism, and that understanding "ritualized acts and speech acts as constitutive of the person is different from the view of these acts as divided between mask (acting 'as if') and reality, truth and lie."⁶⁵ Here Yurchak echoes Rezek, who sees the citizen of late communist Czechoslovakia as intimately tied to a system within which he or she can still act out without laying claim to either truth or lies, both of which have been made meaningless anyway.

Stejskal's Resignation

Faced with the inflexibility, or the perceived inflexibility, of living in truth, most citizens resigned themselves to maneuvering within the more malleable framework of official normalization instead. Havel had summed up this very resignation in his portrayal of the greengrocer, except that Havel's greengrocer had seemed to lack self-knowledge. More to the point was a character in the last episode of the previously discussed television serial, *The Thirty Adventures of Major Zeman*. The setting for this last episode is 1975: the Prague Spring is fading into memory, and normalization has taken root. Major Zeman, police officer and protagonist, speaks for the last time with his departing colleague, Stejskal. Stejskal had once saved Zeman's life but had joined with the reform communists in 1968 and, unwilling to recant, is being removed from his position. On this, his last day at work, he summarizes to Zeman his future relationship to the current ruling elite (to which his former friend and partner, Zeman, once again belongs):

[STEJSKAL]: I will have to [deal with you guys] since you're in power.

But I warn you that I don't know of anything, I don't want to know about anything, and I want nothing to do with anything. I am now an ordinary, stupid gas pump attendant who doesn't read the papers, who swears at the television and at football, and otherwise thinks only about tips, girls and beer. So what's your problem with that, gentlemen?

[ZEMAN]: For God's sake, Mirek, this can't now be your lifestyle! What have you come to?⁶⁶

The answer to Zeman's question is clear. Mirek Stejskal has come to a conclusion, one shared by other Czechoslovak citizens. But Stejskal's summation of "what is to be done" (to borrow from Lenin's famous tract) was not broadcast to these very same citizens. This concluding script, in which Stejskal confesses to his "normalization strategy," was shelved and never filmed. In its place, an altogether benign last episode of *The Thirty Adventures of Major Zeman* was aired. Stejskal's declared policy of resignation had probably hit too close to home.

The Televised Anti-Charter Rally

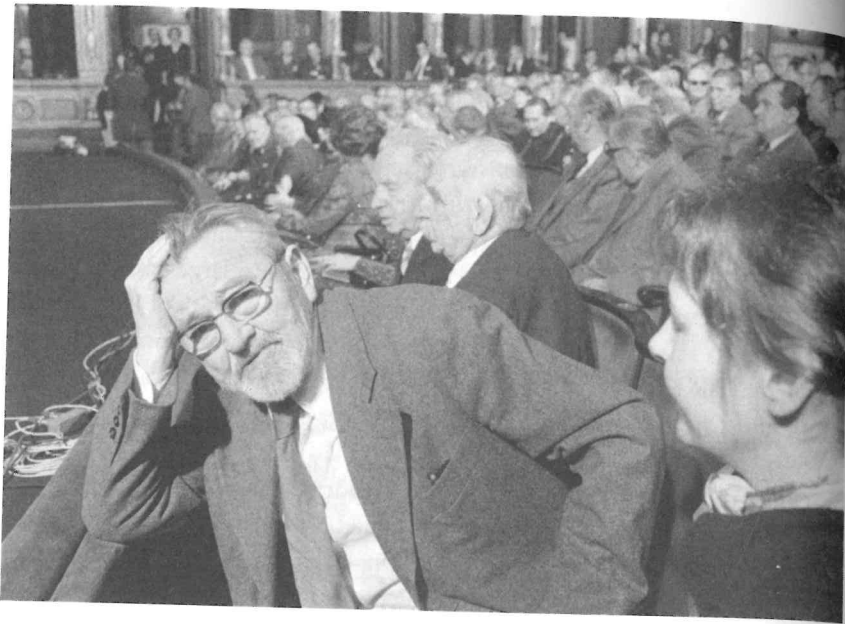
What was broadcast on television, however, was the conflict between Charter 77 and the government. Upon first hearing of Charter 77, Ideology Secretary Vasil Bil'ak cautioned his colleagues that tens of thousands, and perhaps even hundreds of thousands, would sign their names to the document.⁶⁷ In fact, fewer than two thousand Czech and Slovak citizens signed the Charter from its founding in 1977 until the end of communist rule in 1989. Nevertheless, the party responded as if Bil'ak's estimates had been correct, and it retaliated with the largest political spectacle to take place during normalization—the Anti-Charter Rally.

The campaign against Charter 77 began the moment that Havel, Vaculík, and Landovský were intercepted on their way to the Federal Assembly to deliver the group's proclamation. A widely publicized article appeared immediately in the party daily, *Rudé právo*, and was later reprinted in large numbers like *The Lesson*. It was provocatively although rather abstractly titled "The Losers and the Pretenders" (*Ztroskotanci a samozvanci*). Citizens were rallied to come out in support of this statement against the dissidents, and the leadership congratulated itself over the turnout at a Presidium meeting shortly afterward, where they described the public response to the government's official statement on the dissidents as positive: "Throughout the whole of the republic a great wave of protest arose from our citizens aimed at the unfriendly approach of the signatories of Charter 77."⁶⁸ There was little that was voluntary and spontaneous about this great wave of protest, however, especially since few of the protesters in fact knew what or whom they were protesting. The article in *Rudé právo* had been intentionally oblique, not wishing to stir up unnecessary interest in the new dissident association, and so it merely alluded to antigovernment gestures perpetrated by enemies from within. At the same time, the party waged a private and more direct war against the Chartists themselves—removing signatories from their jobs and confiscating their telephone lines, driver's licenses, and car registrations. Interrogations were commonplace.

Publicly the media portrayed the signatories as petulant children of wealthy families out of touch with the common man, paid agents of Western capitalist countries, and active participants in decadent and unseemly lifestyles. One periodical went so far as to publish nude photographs of Ludvík Vaculík, confiscated by the secret police during a house search, in order to demonstrate the dissidents' debauchery.⁶⁹ Newspaper and magazine headlines proclaimed, "They are Led by Class Hatred," "They'll Even Join Hands with the Devil," and "Elitists, Signatories, and Weekend Cottagers."⁷⁰ Television came to play a large part in demonizing the Charter and its signatories. Each evening in the month of January 1977 the television screen filled with declarations and docudramas condemning the dissidents. The television nightly news soon became too short to accommodate all the anti-Charter broadcasting and was temporarily expanded.⁷¹ But the greatest television event was yet to come.

On January 28, 1977, in a live televised broadcast, the nation's celebrities and popular culture icons filed into Prague's gilded National Theater on the banks of the Vltava River for what would be known as the Anti-Charter Rally. As these famous faces entered the theater, television cameras swept across the arena, cataloging their attendance, clearly linking these men and women to normalization in the most public manner. In a shrewdly choreographed display, the nation's entertainers and celebrities were trotted out in opposition to the nation's dissidents, who hovered over the proceedings—absent yet present—like the dearly departed. Actors, entertainers, comedians, and writers who had agreed to continue to work within the official structures of normalization now were called upon to represent the government's interests before the public. The regime pitted the official against the unofficial, the sanctioned against the blacklisted, and in many cases, friends or former colleagues against one another. The brilliance of the Anti-Charter Rally was this visual aspect—linking the famous and familiar faces to the infamous and faceless regime.

Some of the participants sat sheepishly in their theater seats, visibly embarrassed by the spectacle. Others saw their participation as yet another meaningless gesture of loyalty toward a regime that fiercely demanded it. Certainly the smaller anti-Charter rallies that would take place regionally all over the country over the next few weeks—organized by the secretariats of local artists' unions—were viewed by many as just that, a necessary evil. Singer Eva Pilarová recalled her participation in one such rally after the head of the official concert agency, Pragokonzert, called everyone together and explained, "You will prepare declarations about how grateful you are that you are permitted to sing publicly."⁷² When Pilarová begged off, explaining she had no experience writing such declarations, he told her, "Fine, so you'll read out the statement." As she later recalled, "And so I read out the statement. What should I have done? I was grateful that they



The beleaguered Jan Werich at the Anti-Charter Rally, 28 January 1977. The official caption read, "Today on the 28th of January, renowned representatives of the Czechoslovak cultural front gathered at Prague's National Theater to proclaim their firm resolve to actively contribute to the socialist development of our society through new creative works. At the gathering are National Artist, actor Jan Werich, and his daughter Jana (on the right) in the audience of the theater." (Czechoslovak Press Agency; photographed by Jiří Karas)

were again letting me go abroad for concerts. Not everyone can be a resister."⁷³ But while participation in the regional anti-Charter gatherings and rallies perhaps could be shrugged off, this larger televised and voraciously photographed affair could not. The regime was unsparing: the old and beleaguered Jan Werich, half of the Werich and Voskovec comedy duo of the 1930s and 1940s who undermined the Nazi occupation through humor, believed his participation would remain low key. But the television cameras and the next day's newspaper singled him out.

The Anti-Charter Rally was led by committed communists assembled on stage. Among them was the actress Jiřina Švorcová, head of the now normalized Czech Theater Artists' Union, who stood at the podium and read out loud the gathering's declaration of censure against the Charter 77 signatories, which was no less oblique than the earlier article in *Rudé právo*: "Thus we will hold in contempt those who irresponsibly write high-handed conceits out of self-interest, or who for lowly financial gain...choose to extricate themselves and isolate



Actress Jiřina Švorcová reading out the proclamation at the Anti-Charter Rally of Czech artists in the National Theater in Prague, 28 January 1977. (Czechoslovak Press Agency; photographed by Zuzana Humpálová)

themselves from their own people—and even among us here such a group of opportunists and traitors has been found."⁷⁴ As a finale, the participants left their theater seats and lined up to sign a document (the Anti-Charter, now understood to be "their" Charter) that promised, as its title proclaimed, "New Creative Works in the Name of Socialism and Peace."

The signatories of the Anti-Charter were by no means all enthusiastic supporters of the regime, but they nevertheless signed despite some recent claims that it was quite possible to avoid doing so.⁷⁵ A week later, artists working in the field of popular music met at the Theater of Music to perform their own version of the same. Here it was the Czech crooner and East Bloc übercelebrity Karel Gott who addressed the participants and urged them to join the public backlash against the dissidents.⁷⁶ The potency of the Anti-Charter was in its extensive list of V.I.P.s. Ultimately it did not matter whether the participants were enthusiastic; it mattered only that they were there. The Anti-Charter Rally worked because it was played out on the television screen and because its participants were television celebrities with whom the public identified.

The Forty Signatories

That the public did not by and large identify with the Charter, and that in fact even its own signatories increasingly did not, came to the forefront in 1987, during the tenth anniversary of its founding. In recognition of this milestone (for to have survived a decade despite the punitive intervention of the state was laudatory) but also of the significant changes that were afoot with the ascent of Mikhail Gorbachev in the Soviet Union, the Charter's leadership issued two key documents. They were intended to redefine, or at least redirect, the Charter's future. One was addressed to the country's citizens as a whole and the other to the Charter's signatories. Literary critic Josef Vohryzek, one of the three Charter spokespersons at the time, in an interview in the underground press insisted that these documents did not suggest some sort of radical coup within the Charter. Charter 77 was remaining loyal to its original conception, he explained, but at the same time "the conditions here have changed and there are far more people now who take part in independent activities or even those who combine work in the [official] structures with independent activities as well."⁷⁷ The Charter was hoping to address this significant shift.

The first document, "A Word to Our Fellow Citizens," called on Czechoslovakia's citizens to live in truth in the most straightforward manner possible: "One frequently hears the question—'What to do?' ... Tomorrow immediately we can all start saying the truth. Not only at home, but in the workplace, during social gatherings, at a variety of meetings."⁷⁸ Reminding ordinary citizens that they were the "us" of "us versus them," the document pointed to commonly heard grievances: "[The Party elite] have their own special advantages, special suppliers, special services, special health care, special and secret salaries.... We do not want to provoke envy or jealousy, for these are not good impulses on the path toward democracy. We mention it so as to emphasize how deeply many leading officials have distanced themselves from ordinary citizens."⁷⁹ But the Charter was feeling equally uneasy about its relationship with ordinary citizens. In April and May of the same year, it attempted to gauge this relationship by conducting a poll about the public's knowledge of Charter 77 and its activities.

Four hundred and nine evaluations filled out by Charter signatories and other activists were collected, and the results were not inspiring. Three major points emerged from the survey: "People have very little knowledge about the activities of Charter 77 and other dissidents; most Charter 77 signatories are isolated from Charter activities; and many people believe that Charter 77 should concentrate more on its originally declared aim—the defense of human rights—and less on political goals."⁸⁰ Thus, not only did many, if not most, signatories feel isolated from the Charter core in Prague, but the persistent question of whether

the Charter should function as a political or a nonpolitical association was no closer to being resolved.

A particularly worrying aspect of the spring 1987 findings was that while the Charter had hoped to gauge the opinion of approximately 1,000 signatories still living in Czechoslovakia, only 133 had bothered to respond to the survey.⁸¹ Some signatories had emigrated, but the low response was also due to an increasing sense of alienation among most signatories from the Prague-centered Charter core. This was especially the case among the younger generation, and it became the subject of the other major document issued and distributed by the Charter on its tenth anniversary, "A Letter to the Signatories of Charter 77." In it, the Charter argued that it was the association's very diversity of opinion that defined it best and that this diversity, in combination with an intentional lack of a clearly framed political program, had allowed the Charter to rely merely on the "moral quality" of its signatories. "A Letter to the Signatories" went on to explain that concessions were now being made to the growing number of second-generation signatories who were demanding an increased political stand from the Charter. As part of this effort, the Charter would partially reorganize by adding a "collective" of Charter spokespersons (as opposed to the usual number of three who were selected from the older generation at the core of the Charter) as well as a Charter Forum at which relevant questions and issues would be collectively debated.⁸²

But to many, these concessions were insufficient and vague, and came no closer to addressing the ever-increasing resentment felt toward the Charter core. Among the disgruntled were forty Chartists who joined together to compose a public, and biting, response to "A Letter to the Signatories." In their rather awkwardly titled "A Letter from Forty Signatories of Charter 77 regarding 'A Letter to the Signatories of Charter 77,'" they introduced themselves as what the original Charter letter had described as the association's "passive majority." Evidently offended by the label, they explained that they and others like them had been written off as passive simply because they did not have a way with words, were unable to wield a pen to the same effect as some of Charter's famous writers, and thus were without a voice. This, they argued, did not by any means define them as passive. In fact, so incensed had they been by the original letter and its implications that, despite their lack of writing talent, they felt compelled to take up the pen and make known their grievances.

With pen now firmly in hand, they wrote that "A Letter to the Signatories" had explained that as the Charter core aged, the leadership ranks would need to be replenished with a younger generation but that communication with this generation seemed awkward at best. The Charter was seeking a solution for this in its newly created Club of Charter spokespersons. But the forty signatories insisted that this would not change the basic problem, as they saw it, of a Prague and

Brno Charter core that intentionally seemed to exclude other lesser signatories. The original letter sent out to Charter members had argued that this Prague-based core had become the decision-making center out of default rather than intention, a habit that turned into custom. But the forty signatories saw something far more intentional behind this “accidental” power structure:

But didn't it by any chance take place differently... that this “active core” was formed rather willfully? Did not this “active core” take for itself all the important work (and, admittedly, also the bothersome and often unwelcome work) with such ferocity that it became sort of “self-sufficient,” and as a result of that, there appeared this “passive majority” around it? Were initiatives “from below,” offers from the ranks of this so-called passive majority to partake of activities—most of all from the ranks of the young and the younger generation—really given the proper attention they deserved? And were their offers for co-participation and co-responsibility really fully accepted?⁸³

Because of the way in which this younger generation had been rejected and excluded, explained the forty signatories, they were now far more likely to meet with one another informally. Moreover, these meetings were based less on their identity as Charter signatories than on the special interests they shared or the locales where they lived.⁸⁴ The forty signatories, who claimed to be useless with the pen, ended on a most devastating note: “Charter 77 has gained a huge respect and influence internationally, but its position among our own young generation does not respond to this same respect and influence.”⁸⁵

Indeed, the Western media's attraction to Charter 77 had much to do with their fascination with these core intellectuals, against whom younger signatories now seemed to be rebelling.⁸⁶ The antipolitics approach of the Charter, by being philosophical rather than political, permitted a wider context of operation—not just within Czechoslovakia, it would seem, but across its borders and beyond the Iron Curtain. Like passive resistance, antipolitics could be applied elsewhere. In some ways, Havel staked his claim in political philosophy based on the recognition that what he had to say about the human condition in late communism was just as relevant in any postmodern, consumer-oriented society—that, on some level, Western societies were just as troublingly post-totalitarian as was Czechoslovakia's normalization.

Unanswered Questions

As the fissures within the Charter began to show, Havel, too, expressed his doubts about the dissident script for normalization. In an essay titled “About the

Meaning of Charter 77,” he continued to defend the original ethical grounding of the association but also allowed that its resonance within society had proven dim. Havel conceded that “even society does not in any obvious way identify with [the Charter]: the number of signatories does not rise, ... no public expressions of sympathy for it exist; it seems, if anything, that people stand to the side, that they fear having anything to do with it, maybe even have no interest in it.”⁸⁷ Havel would continue to speak of ordinary citizens' fear during late communism as standing in the way of their political opposition, but here, even if briefly, he acknowledged that maybe they “have no interest in it.” Dissident tracts, of which Havel's are the best known and certainly among the most sophisticated, were largely unwilling to tackle the two questions that remained essential for most citizens: why should the dissidents be trusted as the nation's ethical guardians, and what, in the aftermath of 1968, was wrong with the regime-endorsed quiet life?

To Havel and others, the answers seemed self-evident; but not necessarily to those outside of dissent. Czech sociologist Ivo Možný has argued that by the 1970s most political dissidents were viewed by the general public with suspicion and that this was an attitude not entirely unjustified: “First off, one could find among them too many who had participated in the breakup of one's traditional world at the beginning of the 1950s. And then, once a person had sort of put the remnants of his life back together, even more of them again in 1968 who through yet a new experiment—transparently motivated first and foremost by a bad conscience from the earlier experiment—destroyed his daily everyday existence: and did so in the name of improving on ideals that had already proved unreliable.”⁸⁸ This stumbling block, the question of personal pasts intimately tied to the exigencies of the nation's recent political history, was never addressed sufficiently. Had it been, living in truth might have made more sense.

Furthermore, the quiet life, as the following chapters will show, was about much more than consumerism, which in turn made it both more alluring and insidious. The regime connected the quiet life to new notions about socialist “self-realization” and what I call “privatized citizenship.” Husák's government recognized that television would be the most effective purveyor for this vision of post-1968 communism that had been inadvertently unveiled at the 1970 World Exposition in Japan. Television thus became the golden chariot that the normalizers hoped to harness. They had watched helplessly as it had careened across the political landscape during the Prague Spring, causing both mayhem and awe, revealing a versatility they had not suspected, and now they wanted to take control of its reins and use it to take them to the finish line.