

Czechoslovakia in 1989. The East German Refugees in Prague

The issue regarding East German citizens in Prague is remarkable. Although the Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany and its immediate surroundings were the epicentre of the dramatic events that unfolded, but plenty of plots, the involvement of many participants and influences originating in Czechoslovakia and outside the country were played out in these events. This article provides a clear chronological perspective on the state of affairs. The question of how these events influenced the country's atmosphere before the Velvet Revolution, which resulted in the end of the local communist rule, is also dealt with at the end of this chronological line.

Prelude to Drama

The story of East German refugees from the German Democratic Republic (GDR, East Germany) at the Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG, West Germany) in Prague started before 1989. The origins of these events lie much deeper in the past. The baroque Lobkowitz Palace situated in the centre of Prague in Malá Strana became the seat of the West German Embassy in 1976. Since then many East Germans (initially individuals and small groups) sought refuge in the palace. In 1984, the number of people rapidly increased to 160 East Germans occupying the palace (many of them for several months) at the end of the year. In order to deal with regular administrative work, the embassy had to be closed from October 1984 to February 1985. The then Ambassador Klaus Meyer did not hinder the influx of refugees into the building, despite the pressure of the communist regime of Czechoslovakia.¹

¹ T. Malínek: „Dub” v „oboře”. *Západoněmecké velvyslanectví v hledáčku Státní bezpečnosti v letech 1968–1989* [An ‘Oak’ in a ‘Game Park’. Ambassadors of West Germany in the spotlight of the State Security 1968–1989], “Securitas Imperii” 2017, No. 30, p. 190;

However, the efforts of the East Germans to flee to West Germany by this means were upset, as the West German travel documents issued by the embassy would not be recognized by Czechoslovak passport control at the border. Refugees would then be arrested at the border and released to the GDR. This deadlock situation leaving East German refugees stuck at the embassy forced them to accept the only compromise solution that the GDR was willing to offer a voluntary return to the 'mother' country, where they would submit an application for eviction to the FRG. Also, the Federal Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, arrived in Prague to explain the absence of any other alternative to the refugees.

In practice, this agreement was really fulfilled and after returning to the GDR these people were relatively quickly allowed to go to the FRG.² This way allowed the GDR to maintain some control of the situation and reduce the adverse effects of the refugee problem.

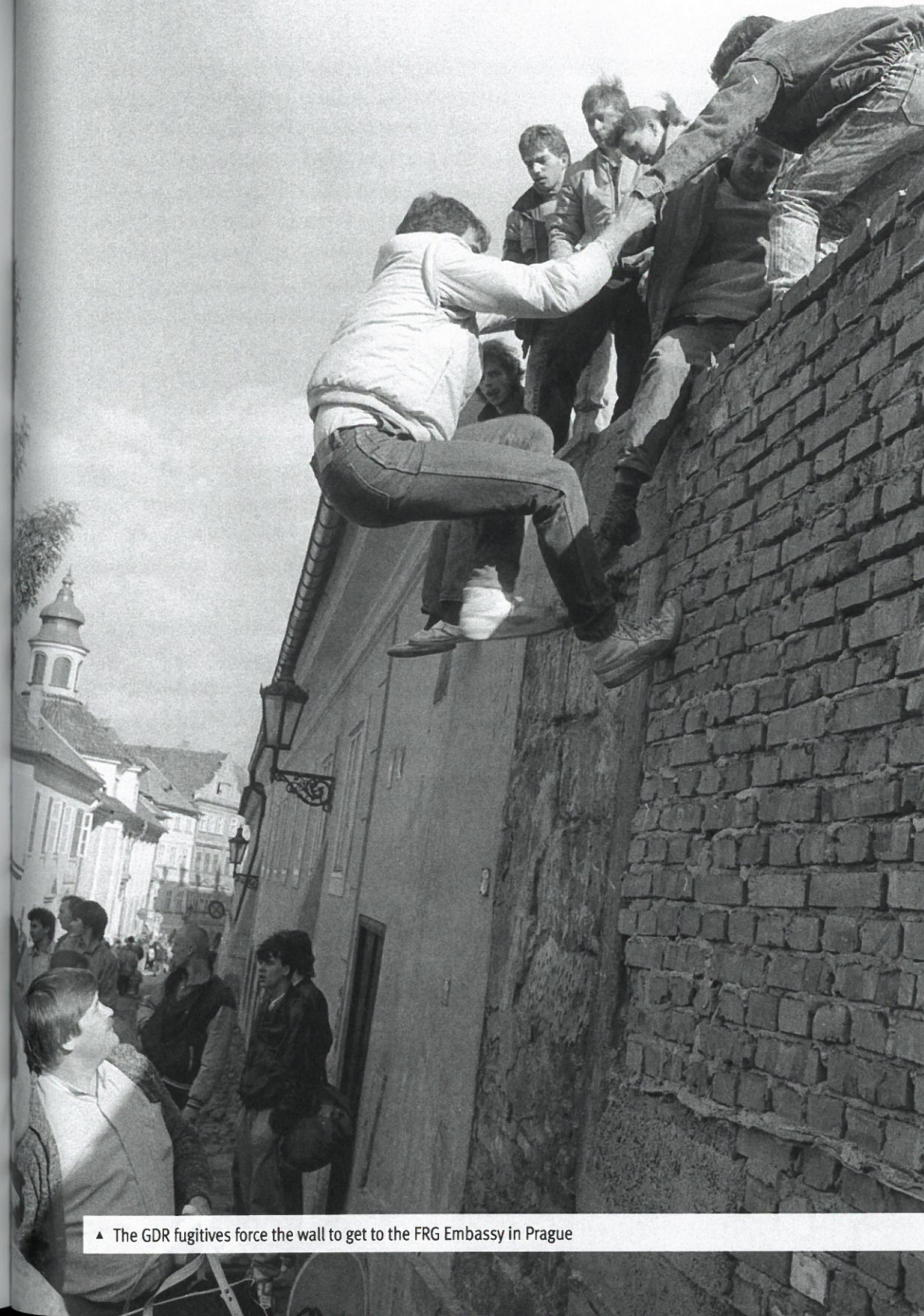
A few years later, the situation evolved very differently, although it showed some similarities. During the summer of 1989, large numbers of the GDR citizens began to flow into Czechoslovakia again, hoping to reach Western Europe through this country. At the beginning, however, they did not aim to go to the West German Embassy in Prague. Their goal was to seek refuge in a neighbouring country of Czechoslovakia, Hungary. Hungary's transition to democracy focused also on gradual liberalization of Hungarian travel policy that led to removing barbed wire barricades and opening up borders with Austria. Such a policy opened East German refugees a way out of the Eastern Bloc.

Czechoslovakian communists were loyal to its long-term GDR ally and did not allow East Germans to cross the Czechoslovak-Hungarian border without travel documents intended and valid for this purpose. This led to illegal attempts of East Germans to quickly cross borders to Hungary in their cars. Such attempts were occasionally accompanied by warning shots fired by the border guards. Other people tried to swim across the Danube, which sometimes ended tragically. In August 1989, there were dozens of 'border violations' (according to the terminology used by communist regime) followed by hundreds more over the course of September.³

W. von Wnendt: *Der 30. September 1989*, in: H. Salfellner, W. von Wnendt: *Das Palais Lobkowitz. Ein Ort deutscher Geschichte in Prag*, Prague 1999, p. 23.

² T. Malínek: „Dub” v „oboře”, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

³ O. Tůma: *9:00, Praha-Libeň, horní nádraží. Exodus východních Němců přes Prahu v září 1989* [9.00 a.m., Upper Prague-Libeň Station: The East German Exodus through



▲ The GDR fugitives force the wall to get to the FRG Embassy in Prague

The leadership of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ) unequivocally rejected opening up borders according to the Hungarian example and forced its Budapest comrades, though unsuccessfully, to remove this 'magnet' that was attracting so many fleeing East Germans. The Czechoslovak Communist Party did not approve of several Hungarian steps and opinions, such as identifying the intervention of the Warsaw Pact forces in Czechoslovakia in August 1968, in which Hungary participated, as a fundamental error. The then current leadership of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia built its legitimacy on the rightfulness of this intervention, which ended the attempt to liberalize the Czechoslovak communist regime.

The deterioration of mutual relations was also reflected in the situation on the Czechoslovak-Hungarian border, where Hungary reduced security measures. These measures were also enforced on the border between Hungary and Austria. In October 1989, the increased mutual tension led to complaints about Hungarian 'provocation attempts against members of the Passport Control Department' which appeared in the reports of the Czechoslovak Ministry of the Interior intended for the leadership of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia.⁴

In order to understand the state and thinking of the leadership of the Czechoslovak communist regime in the summer of 1989, it should be noted that in the last two years there had been a change in personnel. The superannuated Secretary-General Gustáv Husák was replaced by a slightly younger Miloš Jakeš. Yet Jakeš was a typical professional functionary (apparatchik) of the Communist Party without any vision and ability to effectively respond to the approaching disintegration of the Eastern Bloc. Similarly, the majority of the Board of the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party (although pragmatists, such as the Prime Minister of the Czechoslovak Government, Ladislav Adamec, were also its members) was thinking in such a non-innovative and stereotypical way. At the end of the communist regime, the leadership of the Communist Party focused mainly on addressing the growing supply and economic problems. A particularly bizarre subject of the party's meeting was, for

Prague, September 1989), "Soudobé dějiny", 6(2-3), p. 151; E. Pond: *Beyond the Wall: Germany's Road to Unification*, Washington 1993, p. 96.

⁴ *Denní situační zpráva č. 161, Federální ministerstvo vnitra* [Daily situation report No. 161, Federal Ministry of the Interior], ref.: OV-039/A-89, October 26, 1989, p. 14.

instance, repeated debates about the lack of toilet paper or sanitary pads in the country.⁵

With their mentality, the leaders of the Czechoslovakian Communist Party did not fundamentally differ from the similarly predominantly diehard Communist Party of East Germany led by Erich Honecker and regarded the party as one of its last allies in the disintegrating Eastern Bloc.⁶ However, the influx of East Germans, which in the autumn of 1989 turned into an uncontrolled human avalanche motivated by the desire to leave the failing 'socialist paradise', put this alliance to a difficult test, the result of which was for both allies unsuccessful.

Exodus and Its Fatal Political Consequences

As the East Germans heading for the West were not able to reach Hungary, they arrived at the Lobkowitz Palace in Malá Strana in Prague. In August, the number of refugees increased (initially there were several dozen people occupying the palace's premises in the first half of 1989), forcing the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the FRG to close the embassy to the public just like in 1984. The embassy was closed on 23 August 1989. Even then the number of refugees continued to rise. The GDR's attempt to use the tried-and-tested model and return the refugees to East Germany with the promise to move to the FRG later and which would apply to their relatives living in East Germany as well, failed. This special offer was introduced to East Germans by Wolfgang Vogel, an East German lawyer, who came to Prague in the second week of September. He had been providing these types of agreements since the 1960s. Around two hundred and forty people made use of Vogel's offer, bringing the number of East Germans staying at the embassy to less than half.⁷

However, this 'letting off steam' did not last long, as hundreds of new refugees soon arrived. The number of refugees escalated at the end of September.

⁵ J. Suk, J. Cuhra, F. Koudelka: *Chronologie zániku komunistického režimu v Československu 1985-1990* [The End of the Communist Regime in Czechoslovakia, 1985-1990], Prague 1999, p. 34.

⁶ To compare the leadership and state of both communist regimes, see the classic work by K. Durman: *Útěk od praporů* [Escape from the Battalions], Prague 1998, pp. 297-390.

⁷ E. Pond: *Beyond the Wall*, *op. cit.*, p. 97; W. von Wnendt: *Der 30. September 1989*, *op. cit.*, p. 27.



▲ East German refugees at the FRG Embassy in Prague

Several thousand people were staying on the embassy premises in poor hygienic conditions. There were not enough toilets and people slept everywhere including tents, which were set up at the embassy's garden. This large group of mainly young people (a lot of children as well) were at serious risk of epidemic outbreak and a humanitarian crisis loomed large. Another attempt to repeat the previous offer and 'let off steam' through a new Vogel mission to Prague failed at the end of September.

Prague was very attractive for the GDR refugees for several reasons: visas were not needed in order to travel to Czechoslovakia (identity cards were sufficient); information about the upcoming closure of the border between the two states was spreading quickly (this really happened in early October); the wall and fence around the West German Embassy in Prague could easily be climbed over. This 'easy' way was popularized by the Western Bloc, especially West German TV crews that monitored the situation around the embassy.⁸

⁸ O. Tůma: 9:00, Praha-Libeň, horní nádraží, op. cit.

On the contrary, the Czechoslovak media hardly informed the public (due to an order which came from on high) about the growing number of refugees, at the beginning of the events in particular. The greatest obedience to the party line could be traced in the main newspaper of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, "Rudé právo" ('the Red Law'). Here, for instance, in connection with the closure of the embassy to the public, only a short and vague explanation of the 'presence of some GDR citizens', or a day later of 'about hundreds of GDR citizens' was published.⁹

This factual silence of the Czechoslovak media was gradually broken due to the escalation of the refugee problem, which became highly noticeable in the centre of the capital. Hundreds of abandoned East German vehicles (Trabants and Wartburgs) blocking the streets in Prague's centre represented perhaps the most striking signal that something extraordinary was happening there. There were almost 1,300 abandoned vehicles on the streets by 10 October.¹⁰

The West Germany Ambassador, Hermann Huber (in the position since late 1988), as well as other representatives of the West German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, repeatedly tried to convince the Czechoslovak authorities of the need to provide refugees with additional premises outside the embassy but always faced a strict rejection. In late August, in a debate on the issue at the Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Czechoslovak Ambassador in Bonn firmly pointed out that if the 'camping' around the embassy in Prague were to start, the police would react forcefully and East Germans would be sent straight to the GDR.¹¹

The newspaper, "Rudé právo", often published articles written with the typical communist jargon about 'an event planned far ahead of time and by people in high places in the FRG' with the aim of destroying the GDR, or articles stating that 'East German citizens were enticed and then driven into an uncertain fate'.¹²

⁹ *Přechodně uzavřeno velvyslanectví NSR* [The Embassy of the FRG Temporarily Closed], "Rudé právo", August 23, 1989, p. 2; M. Kuzmiak, D. Mácha: *Víza NSR přes cestovní kanceláře* [FRG Visas through Travel Agencies], "Rudé právo", August 24, 1989, p. 2.

¹⁰ J. Suk, J. Cuhra, F. Koudelka: *Chronologie zániku*, ed. cit., p. 88.

¹¹ Document 2, 1989, August 24, Bonn, Velvyslanec ČSSD Spáčil ministerstvu zahraničí v Praze. [ČSSD Ambassador Spáčil to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Prague], in: *Through Prague to Freedom: Exodus of GDR Citizens in Autumn 1989*, V. Prečan [ed.], collection of documents, Prague 2009, p. 42.

¹² V. Plesník: *V rozporu se zájmy vztahů NDR-NSR* [Contrary to the interests of GDR-FRG relations], "Rudé právo", August 25, 1989, p. 7; J. Kovařík: *Podporujeme našeho přítele* [We Support Our Friend], "Rudé právo", September 16, 1989, p. 7.

Sometimes even harrowing rumours about the sad fate of some East Germans who got to West Germany through Hungary, such as 'they found him with his veins slit'¹³ were presented to the public.

However, at the same time Czechoslovakia did not officially want to interfere with the situation around the embassy and claimed that it was up to both German states to find a solution. Czechoslovak authorities also did not (given the diplomatic purpose of the embassy) hinder the enormous supply of food, medicine, blankets, tents and new staff, including nurses from the German Red Cross, which were sent to Prague to help East Germans. Czechoslovakian authorities took cautious steps towards East German refugees trying to reach the embassy, as the situation in Prague was being followed around the world with great interest. The authorities were apprehensive about possible negative reactions from the world if the situation was dealt with inappropriately. Therefore, the leadership of the Communist Party did not dare to impose stringent security measures around the Lobkowitz Palace, which would prevent further influx of refugees. The ambassador also strictly refused to apply such measures.¹⁴

At the end of September, the Ministers for Foreign Affairs of the FRG, the GDR and Czechoslovakia intensively and bilaterally discussed the situation at the crowded embassy (the FRG discussed the situation also with the Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs). East German communists were therefore under pressure from different sides.¹⁵ Honecker had no support in Gorbachev's Soviet Union and knew that without the FRG financial aid, the collapsing GDR economy could not survive.

According to Oldřich Tůma, who conducted a detailed survey of these negotiations, the initiative of the Czechoslovak communists became an impulse for a key breakthrough.¹⁶ In spite of the fact that the Czechoslovak Communist Party, as well as the East German leadership considered the FRG the culprit of the situation in the Lobkowitz Palace, Jakeš and others (unlike Honecker's leadership)

¹³ *Dopis z Hamburku* [Letter from Hamburg], "Rudé právo", September 26, 1989, p. 3.

¹⁴ W. von Wnendt: *Der 30. September 1989*, op. cit., pp. 26–28; O. Tůma: 9:00, *Praha-Libeň, horní nádraží*, op. cit., p. 163.

¹⁵ K.H. Jarausch: *The Rush to German Unity*, Oxford–New York 1994, p. 21; Ch.S. Maier: *Dissolution: The Crisis of Communism and the End of East Germany*, Princeton 1997, pp. 129–130.

¹⁶ O. Tůma: 9:00, *Praha-Libeň, horní nádraží*, op. cit., p. 158.

concluded that 'it was not possible to wait any longer', that the situation could not be further delayed, and decided to put pressure on the GDR leadership.

The motivation of Jakeš's leadership to take such steps did not originate only from the great negative international response to the situation around the embassy. More significant was the fear that the events taking place in the heart of the capital could activate domestic opposition groups and the public and subsequently cause protests, destabilizing the Communist regime.¹⁷

The Czechoslovak proposal submitted to Honecker's leadership assumed that East Germans would be transferred from Prague through the GDR to the FRG borders, where they would be released from GDR citizenship. On 29 September, the leaders of the East German Communist Party agreed to this appeasement. The transfer of refugees across the GDR was a face-saving compromise for Honecker's leadership that allowed him to maintain seeming control over the development of events. At the same time, the transfer was supposed to dissipate the impression that Prague was the 'guaranteed address for the exit to the West' for the fleeing East Germans, which suited the Czechoslovak communists.¹⁸

In the afternoon of 30 September 1989, Hans-Dietrich Genscher announced in his speech from the balcony of the West German Embassy in Prague to the assembled East Germans that he had reached an agreement with the Communist Czechoslovak government that the refugees could leave. It was Genscher's return visit to Prague after five years, but now under radically changed circumstances. That evening and during the night of 30 September to 1 October, East Germans were transferred by buses to one of Prague's smaller railway stations. There they boarded special trains and travelled through East Germany to the FRG. Thousands of newly arrived East Germans, however, poured into the embassy almost immediately despite the efforts of the police. Therefore, on the night of 4 to 5 October, further train transfers were arranged. Overall, more than 14,000 East Germans had been sent to West Germany through the Lobkowitz Palace since the end of September.¹⁹

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 161–162, E. Pond: *Beyond the Wall*, op. cit., p. 97.

¹⁸ O. Tůma: 9:00, *Praha-Libeň, horní nádraží*, op. cit., p. 159.

¹⁹ V. Prečan: *A few sentences about topic, sources, and literature*, in: *Through Prague to Freedom: Exodus of GDR Citizens in Autumn 1989*, V. Prečan [ed.], collection of documents, Prague 2009, p. 28.

The transfers of the refugees took place mainly at night, as they were not supposed to be noticed by both the Czechoslovak and East German public. Despite this, the transfer through the GDR had an unexpected fatal consequence for the East German communists. In Dresden, before the passage of the second wave of transfer, a large clash broke out in front of the main station building between police and a large crowd of enraged protesters, who demanded entry to the trains and release to the FRG. Amongst other things, the demonstration was a reaction to the fact that in the afternoon of 3 October, East Germany introduced a new travel policy concerning journeys to Czechoslovakia (a visa and a passport for this journey were now necessary). This measure foiled the plans of many to travel from the GDR to the West German Embassy in Prague. The transfer of refugees across the GDR, which was supposed to (at least formally) demonstrate Honecker's control over the situation, became paradoxically one of the important moments that weakened the East German communist regime, which definitively collapsed with the fall of the Berlin Wall a month later.

Communists' Dismay Continues

However, between the beginning of October and the second week of November, the problem with East Germans in Czechoslovakia continued to the dismay of Jakeš's leadership. A lot of East Germans reacted to the factual closure of the border by attempting to cross it illegally. During the first two days (from the afternoon of 3 October to the morning of 5 October) more than 400 people were arrested on the border. For the first (and the last) time such a large number of people tried not to leave but illegally reach Czechoslovakia, and hence created one of the most curious situations in the country's communist history. Needless to say that Czechoslovakia was supposed to be only an intermediate stop on their way, and as the border guards reported: the majority of the detainees 'intended to use the West German Embassy in Prague for emigration purposes'.²⁰

But closing the borders did not completely stop the flow of refugees and the Lobkowitz Palace began to fill up again, though this time it was 'only' tens to

²⁰ *Denní situační zpráva č. 147*, Federální ministerstvo vnitra [Daily situation report no. 147, Federal Ministry of the Interior], ref.: OV-039/A-89, October 6, 1989, p. 4.



▲ The view of the tent camp in the garden of FRG Embassy in Prague, the end of September 1989

hundreds of people. The efforts of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia to block the surroundings of the embassy through police closures came across West German protests and police officers were withdrawn. The preparation of the next transfer of East Germans from the embassy was therefore initiated once again.

The transfer of refugees led directly to the FRG and not through the GDR, showing the extent of the defeat of East German communists. From late October, refugees with cars were even allowed to cross the West German borders unsupervised. This time the Lobkowitz Palace 'emptied' slowly and gradually due to the formalities and paperwork required for the release from GDR citizenship, which was ensured at the East German Embassy in Prague.

In late October, the leadership of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia experienced another shock, as East German communists (now without Honecker, who, in view of the deep crisis, was dismissed from his post 'at his request') reopened the borders with Czechoslovakia. For the East German communists (newly led by Egon Krenz) it was one of the steps to show the turnabout ('Wende') of the party policy. In other words, it was a change offering a better

and more pragmatic face of the regime mainly to the masses of protesters on the streets of East Germany.²¹

The idea of Krenz's leadership was presented to the Czechoslovak Ambassador in the GDR as follows:

Any new groups of refugees at the West German Embassy in Prague should no longer cause any problems to the Czechoslovakian side.²²

This idea, however, was completely unrealistic. The Lobkowitz Palace, on the other hand, was more realistic and, after the border was opened, Bonn was informed about the embassy's readiness for another great wave of refugees. Amongst others, hundreds of folding beds, mattresses and sleeping bags were prepared.²³ Indeed, another massive refugee stream from the GDR was heading for the centre of Prague.

The Communist Party of Czechoslovakia headed by Jakeš was taken aback by the repeated apocalyptic refugee scenario in the heart of Czechoslovakia and asked the East German leadership either for the immediate re-closure of their borders, or for official permission to send East Germans directly and freely to the FRG. The latter option would lead to 'a complete absence of any control of the exodus through Czechoslovakia'. In the evening of 3 November, the East German communist leadership, which was already losing control of the situation in their own country, agreed with the free departure of East Germans across the Czechoslovak-West German border. The very next day, above 6,000 East Germans were sent from Prague to the FRG by specially dispatched trains. Hundreds more people travelled by their own cars. The exodus of East Germans through Czechoslovakia continued in the following days. On 4–10 November, more than 62,000 East Germans (!) were allowed to cross the border to the FRG without being restricted by the boarder police.²⁴

²¹ V. Prečan: *A few sentences*, op. cit., p. 29; K.H. Jarausch: *The Rush to German Unity*, ed. cit., pp. 59–60; H. Weber: *Dějiny NDR* [History of the GDR], Prague 2003, p. 300.

²² Document 96, October 25, 1989, Berlin, ČSSD Ambassador in GDR, Langer, to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Prague, in: *Through Prague to Freedom: Exodus of GDR Citizens in Autumn 1989*, V. Prečan [ed.], collection of documents, Prague 2009, p. 145.

²³ Document 98, November 1, 1989, Prague. Embassy of FRG to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Bonn, in: *Through Prague to Freedom: Exodus of GDR Citizens in Autumn 1989*, V. Prečan [ed.], collection of documents, Prague 2009, p. 147.

²⁴ In detail – V. Prečan: *A few sentences*, op. cit., pp. 29–30.

These people were no longer passing through the Lobkowitz Palace. When they travelled by train across Prague, they simply changed at Prague's railway station for a train to the FRG. No further escapes took place through the embassy. Only East Germans with identity document and passport complications passed through the building.

The complaints and pressure of the Czechoslovak communist leadership that feared the influence of the free mass departure of East Germans through Czechoslovakia to the West on Czechoslovakian citizens were one of the factors that contributed to the Krenz's decision to announce the opening of borders to the FRG and West Berlin in the evening of 9 November.²⁵ The Berlin Wall fell.

The alliance of East German and Czechoslovak Communist Parties – this until recently solid and unshakeable bond – ended. The priority of the communists lead by Jakeš was to prevent turmoil in their own country, and anything else, including the support of the East German communists, was secondary. The last East Germans crossed the Czechoslovakian border during the second week of November, and the existence of communist regime in Czechoslovakia was soon about to end.

Impact of the Exodus on Czechoslovakia: Disinterest or Mobilization Impulse?

A question of interest is whether the fear in Jakeš's leadership of the mobilizing effect of the East Germans exodus on domestic opposition and the public were well-founded. At first sight, these concerns seem to be strongly exaggerated. From the beginning to the end of the East German exodus, there was no significant protest that would justify the above-mentioned fears. The main opposition force, Charter 77, only issued a statement in mid-September, describing the current situation at the crowded embassy as abnormal. This opposition group asked the Czechoslovak government to help resolve the situation, including following the Hungarian model and abandon border closures for refugees trying to reach the West. They also asked the government to provide at least an idea on how to ensure additional space for refugees outside the embassy, following the require-

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 31 and *Daily situation report no. 168*, Federal Ministry of the Interior, ref.: OV-039/A-89, November 6, 1989, p. 12.

ment of the FRG.²⁶ Similar statements were made shortly afterwards by some other opposition groups.

In fact, none of the opposition groups went beyond this proclamatory approach. Likewise, none of the few pro-regime demonstrations that took place during the exodus in Prague had taken on the exodus as a *cause célèbre*.

In October 1989, the samizdat *Lidové noviny* ('the People's Newspaper') critically and with ironic sarcasm assessed this little interest of the opposition groups as follows:

There was no sign of independent initiatives. Charter provided only an analytical statement in the very beginning. The East European Information Agency issued a call in five minutes to twelve until last. The peace association stayed independent, and the Peace Club presumably listened to John Lennon's songs. Czech children were sleeping. Democrats have not shown any initiative. There was no resurgence. The fact that the germs of civil society worked poorly were not even changed by the dedication of individuals from the above initiatives.²⁷

The author of the article published in *Lidové noviny* was particularly disturbed by the inability of the opposition groups to help refugees more effectively. However, the leaders of these groups did not even consider such 'organised aid'. On 5 October, just after the second big transfer of refugees from the embassy, Václav Havel, the opposition's informal leader, said:

Certain things are matter-of-course and arise spontaneously. If we joined them, we would immediately start to appear as those who sponge off every possible wave of people's solidarity. [...] This is the matter for individual Charitists if their conscience tells them that they have to do something.²⁸

²⁶ Document 10, September 14, 1989, Prague – The Spokesperson of Charter 77 to the Czechoslovak Government, in: *Through Prague to Freedom: Exodus of GDR Citizens in Autumn 1989*, V. Prečan [ed.], collection of documents, Prague 2009, pp. 49–50.

²⁷ K. Čermák: *Jací jsme?* [What are we like?], "Lidové noviny", October 1989, p. 4.

²⁸ I. Gerová: *Vyhrabávačky: deníkové zápisky a rozhovory z let 1988 a 1989* [Gleanings: Diary Notes and Interviews from 1988 and 1989], Prague–Litomyšl 2009, p. 103.

▲ The Germans from the GDR are leaving the FRG Embassy and will be transported by bus to the train station Praha-Libeň and then to the FRG, the beginning of October 1989

The opposition activists, many of them living in the capital, considered the exodus of East Germans as something they could not and did not want to ignore. However, they were not mentally prepared to understand the East German exodus as something that concerns them and did not consider it as the impetus to an organized mobilization. See right Havel's statement:

I continued to follow the issue (after the issuance of the declaration of Charter 77 from mid-September – author's note). I also went there (to the embassy) and it seemed to me that there was nothing to add. [...] Charter is not an agency, which would daily comment on today's course of events. Charter will eventually comment on some major period events, and it did so immediately. With every new thousand people who will come here or leave, no new documents will be published.²⁹

People from opposition groups as well as 'ordinary citizens' (the Jakeš's leadership was especially afraid of the public's reaction) took quite a different stance on the issue regarding refugees. People adopted an extremely diverse range of attitudes, such as active efforts to help, sympathetic reactions, curiosity, refusal (often anti-German, mainly due to the previous history of conflicts concerning the co-existence of Czechs and Germans, Nazi occupation), efforts to enrich themselves, etc. For instance, shelters were offered to mothers with children, volunteers helped at the embassy, crowds of Prague citizens enthusiastically cheered while buses with East Germans were leaving from Malá Strana to the train station, but some people swore at the Germans and called them names and a (relatively large) number of thieves tried to steal refugees' vehicles that were abandoned around the embassy.³⁰

Various scopes of information about the issue also affected people's attitudes. For instance, one randomly selected report of the Ministry of the Interior

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

³⁰ E.g. O. Tůma: 9:00, *Praha-Libeň, horní nádraží*, ed. cit., p. 162; J. Suk, J. Cuhra, F. Koudelka: *Chronologie zániku*, ed. cit., p. 88; K. Čermák: *Jací jsme?*, ed. cit., p. 4; Z. Kuchyňková: *Na Německou Ambasadu se sjeli pamětníci exodu obyvatel komunistické NDR* [Contemporary Witnesses of the East Germans' Exodus Gathered at the German Embassy], "Irozhlas.cz", October 1, 2014, retrieved from: <https://www.radio.cz/cz/rubrika/special/na-nemeckou-ambasadu-se-sjeli-pametnici-exodu-obyvatel-komunisticke-ndr>.

intended for the leadership of the Czechoslovak Communist Party described attitudes of South Bohemian and Southwest Moravian inhabitants. Although these areas are quite remote from the capital, this report mentioned local people's negative reactions to police interventions in front of the West German Embassy that had taken place in early October.³¹ These people drew on their knowledge from Austrian television, the broadcast of which could be captured (as well as West Germany TV broadcast) in a large part of Czechoslovakia.

Regarding the media coverage of the exodus, it is also worth noting that, especially at the end of the refugee crisis, some newspapers (*Mladá fronta*, *Svobodné slovo*) began to publish articles beyond the control of the communist regime and provided relatively objective information about the situation in Czechoslovakia. This journalistic venture had far-reaching consequences in relation to the collapse of the communist regime after 17 November 1989.

To answer the question about the effect and consequences of the exodus of many thousands of refugees in Czechoslovakia, it is especially important to take into consideration the enormous power of the immediate perception it has left in the minds of many people, Prague citizens in particular. The human avalanche of East Germans and their willingness to risk and give up their property (as evidenced by the numbers of abandoned vehicles) on their journey to freedom in the FRG had impressed a lot of people. During the analysis of oral memories, the historian, Tomáš Vilímek, found out that it was this phenomenon that had affected many dissidents even stronger than events in Poland and Hungary in the final phase of the existence of the communist regime.³² The sign of the upcoming end, carried over from the neighbouring GDR, was just in front of the people's eyes.

It is no surprise that a similar perception of an inevitable turning point appears in the memories of people unrelated to dissent. The founder of the right-wing Civic Democratic Party, Václav Klaus, serves as a good example. In an interview about the year 1989 he said the following:

³¹ *Denní situační zpráva č. 149*, Federální ministerstvo vnitra [Daily situation report no. 149, Federal Ministry of the Interior], ref. OV-039/A-89, October 10, 1989, p. 10.

³² T. Vilímek: *Mezinárodní souvislosti a události* [International Context and Events], in: *Mocní? a bezmocní? Politické elity a disent v období tzv. normalizace* [Powerful? and Helpless? Political Elites and Dissidents in the Years of the Normalization Period], M. Vaněk [ed.], Prague 2006, pp. 364–365.

The definitive transformation [...] was caused by the development in the GDR. The flights to Hungary, 'trains of freedom' dispatched for the journey through Austria to Germany, the occupation of the West German Embassy in Prague by East Germans and enabling them the departure to West Germany were the milestones.³³

Conclusion: East German Exodus as Extraordinary Phenomenon

Thousands of East Germans voted with their feet by moving to West Germany, which became one of the key factors that led to the end of the communist GDR in 1989. Czechoslovakia and the West German Embassy in the centre of Prague became an important target of these GDR citizens in their journey to the West. The enormous mass character of this phenomenon, supported by the determination of most East German refugees to accomplish their dream of freedom, was especially significant. In this respect, the situation in 1989 differed from the earlier precedent of 1984–1985, which created a very inconvenient situation for the communist leadership of the GDR and Czechoslovakia. The altered international context, which rid both communist regimes of the aegis of Moscow and other former allies, such as Hungary and Poland, also played an important role.

At first, Jakeš's Czechoslovak leadership was intransigent on the issue of East German refugees and refused to allow the opening of the borders according to the Hungarian model, and loyally supported its East German ally. At the same time, as the situation was monitored internationally, the communist leadership paid attention to an externally correct approach and did not dare to block access to the West German Embassy. In the past, however, the entry to the embassy would have been prevented without hesitation. With the escalation of the refugee problem at the embassy, the leadership of the Czechoslovak Communist Party assessed the situation as unsustainable and joined in the pressure on the GDR in late September 1989. This decision of the Czechoslovak communists was mainly motivated by the fear of the impact of the exodus within the country, i.e. concerns about the destabilizing influence of this exodus on Czechoslovakia's own political regime. Subsequently, the GDR leadership had no choice but to withdraw and agree with the transfer of refugees to the FRG.

³³ P. Hájek: *Václav Klaus na rovinu* [Václav Klaus: On the Level], Prague 2001, p. 39.



▲ One of the side streets near FRG Embassy in Prague, November 1989. In front a motor cycle with the label GDR, farther some other abandoned vehicles

This withdrawal was intended to be only a one-off in order to resolve the current situation. However, as the East German refugee exodus to Prague continued, this one and only exception became the rule and there was no longer a way back. In early November 1989, the East German communist regime completely resigned and, under the pressure of Jakeš's leadership, which feared the uncontrollable situation in the centre of the capital, agreed with the free departure of East Germans to the FRG via the Czechoslovakia-West Germany border. This act showed the advanced state of the disintegration of the GDR and the definitive end of the alliance between the two neighbouring communist regimes.

The concerns of the leadership of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia about the effects of the exodus inside Czechoslovakia seem exaggerated at first sight. No noticeable mobilization effects were elicited neither in the groups of opposition, nor in the wider public. The proclamatory activities of the opposition and individual help to refugees did not escalate to something bigger and more organized. However, the several-month long and large-scale events with the obvious humiliating result for the communists left a certain impact in the minds of Czechoslovakian citizens. The Lobkowitz Palace and events around it greatly affected the atmosphere just before the Velvet Revolution and contributed to the rapid collapse of the Czechoslovak communist regime.