BLUE VELVET

The 1989 Velvet Revolution and its personal symbol, the playwright Vaclav Havel, embodied all that was democratic and liberal in the Czech character.

Among its former eastern bloc neighbours, the Czech lands seemed best situated to make a successful jump to a society and economy close to the western European model. The post-communist Czecho-Slovak Federal Republic (CSFR) was unique among countries in the region in being able to call upon the legacy of a democratic interwar republic which survived as a working parliamentary democracy until German troops snuffed it out in 1938.

On the streets of Prague and Bratislava in 1989, the Czechs and Slovaks seemed in unanimous consent with the dissidents' starry vision of Czechoslovakia's future. It was not long after those euphoric days, however, that another side of the Czech character also showed its face. Though the average Czech detested the communist system, it was only a tiny minority of dissident intellectuals who, under the dictatorship, had defiantly defended the ideals of civil society.

The past three years have presented a much more diverse picture of Czech and Slovak society. The party of the former Charter 77 dissidents failed even to reach the 5% hurdle necessary for parliamentary representation in last year's elections. Their loss illustrated all too vividly the schisms between the dissident and the average person, the emigre and the local, the intellectual and the worker, the 1968 Prague Spring generation and those who had never hoped for anything more than a telephone, a flat and a car.

The first signs that all was not well surfaced in April and May 1990 when a wave of rightwing violence against Gypsies and Vietnamese workers captured headlines in northern Bohemia. In northern industrial cities, racial Czech skinheads and a confused hybrid of Nazi-Punks set upon unarmed Gypsies with chains and iron bars. Simultaneously, skinheads vigorously intensified their campaign against Czechoslovakia's foreign workers, the majority of whom are Vietnamese. On 1 May 1990, 200 skinheads raised havoc in central Prague, turning on a Canadian tourist group after beating up the Gypsies and Vietnamese on the main square.

Havel responded immediately to the violence, echoing widespread rumours at the time that disillusioned elements of the old apparatus, particularly the security forces, stood behind it. Racial tensions and ethnic animosity, however, existed in the Czech lands long before the dictatorship's frontmen lost their jobs. It was while Havel pondered the human condition from behind bars in the mid-1980s that an underground world of neo-nazi and skinhead hate culture found an audience in Prague. By 1987 or 1988 any tourist could see skinheads at cafes in the Prague Old Town. At beer halls they openly fraternised with German and Austrian skinheads. Underneath heavy metal bands, such as the notorious group Orlik, stirred hatred against punks, Gypsies, foreign workers, Third World students, Slovaks and tourists.

In the revolution's aftermath, legal Orlik concerts drew as many as 600 skinheads. Their stage sets displayed full-size colour posters of Miroslav Sladek, the leader of the newly-formed ultra-rightwing Republican Party. By 1992, experts estimated that there were about 1,000 active skins in Prague, 500 in Pilsen and roughly 2,000 more scattered throughout northern Bohemia. On 24 November 1991, as many as 1,000 assorted rightwing hooligans marched through Prague's Wenceslas Square to cries of "Gypsies Out!", "Czech for the Czechs" and "Gypsies to the gas chambers!". Police intervened only to stop scuffles between the rightwingers and a 400-strong counter-demonstration of Gypsies and anarchists.

The march wove its way in and out of several Gypsy neighbourhoods until police disbanded it four hours later. "If this crowd had been any larger," said Prague's Deputy Chief of Police at the time, "we would have needed water cannons and tear gas." But since December 1989, he noted, such means were no longer at his disposal.

The fact that Czechoslovakia's guest workers were among the first targets of skinhead terror came as little surprise to the victims themselves. In the late 1970s the Vietnamese government offered the services of its workers to help pay off debts it had accrued during the war years. From the moment that they landed at the Prague airport, the Vietnamese workers had no illusions as to their purpose; they were the form of value in a primitive process of barter. The guest workers received only the barest language...
training and a thin introduction to Czech society. Their families and children were forbidden to join them. The state put the Vietnamese to work at the most menial of jobs and promptly forgot about them.

According to Uyen Phem Huu, a 30-year-old Vietnamese computer engineer who has lived in Prague since 1980, discrimination under communist rule took more subtle forms than it does today. "At that time, people couldn't afford to hit someone in the streets. Often you just wouldn't be served in a restaurant or something like that. But that was one thing. Now there's democracy and that means they can hit whoever they want and get away with it."

A problem more deeply embedded in Czech culture, however, is that of the Gypsies. As in other central and eastern European countries, the 500,000 to 600,000 Gypsies in the Czech lands and Slovakia are the poorest, least educated and most discriminated against part of the population. In one opinion poll, 91% of Czechs and Slovaks expressed negative feelings toward Gypsies. Since Nazi measures during the war claimed the lives of almost all of the Bohemian and Moravian Gypsies, most of those in the Czech lands today are Slovak Gypsies, sent there after the postwar expulsion of the Sudeten Germans.

Communist policies, though making dents in chronic problems such as substandard housing and illiteracy, perpetuated and institutionalised the racial prejudices that flourished prior to World War Two. The regime treated the minority as a genetically inferior, second class people, with a worthless culture. It tried to exterminate the unique Gypsy identity by forcibly sterilising women, suppressing Gypsy language and traditions, liquidating rural settlements and outlawing nomadic wandering.

Unlike its eastern European relations, Czech "beer hall nationalism" centres not around issues of territorial expansion, religious identification, national independence or ethnic kin outside its borders. More along the lines of western Europe's new Right culture, it plays primarily upon the racial prejudices and economic anxieties of the lower and middle classes.

As economic conditions worsened and criminality sky-rocketed, the Gypsies in the polluted, industrial wastelands of northern Bohemia found themselves the most convenient scapegoats for popular frustration. Journalists from northern Bohemian cities tell of "running race wars" between Czechs and Gypsies.

By mid-1991 that hostility had come back to its source—the average burgher. According to Charles University sociologist Vaclav Trojan, "the first violence was a barometer of deeper social tensions within society". The former dissident argues that these feelings "had been building up for years, and then finally got the signal to explode". Police forces have come under heavy pressure to crack down on Gypsies, or at least to allow the skinheads to do the dirty work for them. "Local communities have shown clear popular support for the pogroms, for the skins and for the police," says Trojan.

The political manifestation of that hatred is the Republican Party which soared from obscurity onto the Czechoslovak political stage last summer. Their spectacular election gain was one of the most painful of the many kicks that Czech democrats took in 1992. The Republicans marched into the legislature with over 5% of the total Czech vote.

Until the June 1992 elections, the crude Czech nationalism of the Republican Party had found an ear only on the streets. From early on, party president Sladek aimed at his demagogic message at the disillusioned and displaced in Czech society. In those first blissful days of new freedom and dreams of free market prosperity, Sladek's angry appeal found resonance almost exclusively among skinheads and their sympathisers.

The clean-cut 35-year-old bureaucrat turned politician openly courted the young militants, posing the Republicans as the party for social security and law and order. His pre-December 1989 post as a small-time censor in the official Central Bureau for Press and Information didn't faze the young thugs. More important to them was the Republicans' early demand to expel all Vietnamese and Cuban guest workers from Czechoslovakia.

As the revolution began to lose its glitter, Sladek tirelessly traversed the country, painting an opaque picture of society in which conspiracy and impenetrable networks stacked the deck against ordinary citizens. While Civic Forum's leadership made policy from on high in Prague Castle, he peddled his message to the people. At aggressive, highly charged demonstrations, he railed against the "communist agents" in Civic Forum, against the secret police "staged" revolution and against "Gypsy criminality".

Among the Republicans' foremost demands is a full purge and ban on all former members of the communist party from official positions.

As Sladek's star seemed to be rising in 1990, he tried to distance himself from his jack-booted shock troops. But the issues with which he had first won the skins' hearts remained central to the Republicans' agenda. In its program, the party vaguely mentions its intention "to solve the problem of the Gypsies by resettling them". In standard central European phraseology, "resettling" tends to be a diplomatic term for expulsion, in this case sending the Slovak Gypsy populations in Bohemia and Moravia back to Slovakia.

According to Klara Sankova of the Gypsy Civic Initiative (GCI), a Prague-based political party, the Republicans' proposals "violate just about every international statute on human rights that exists". That fact, however, doesn't bother the Republicans. To the contrary, "Sladek is in parliament today because of his hateful rhetoric against Gypsies," says Sankova.

The Republicans, not surprisingly, scored their biggest victories in northern Bohemia—also the site of even stronger showings from the reform communist party. The ultra-right and the Left Bloc took big constituencies from the democratic parties by arguing against full-speed ahead privatisation and the dismantling of social services. Sladek's populism found an audience in the lower and middle classes, disproportionately among working class men in their 20s.
The simple presence of the Republicans in the Czech legislature contributes to the drastically overhauled face of Czech politics in the aftermath of the 1992 elections. Along with the former Charter 77 dissidents, any talk of civil society and expanded forms of democracy has vanished from political discourse. The monetarists of Vaclav Klaus’ Civic Democratic Party (CDP) dominate parliament. Following the recent dissolution of Czechoslovakia human rights activists in the Czech Republic fear that the government’s conservative tint will aggravate tensions between minorities and the majority. “Our two years of grace are over,” says Gypsy spokesperson Samkova, who slipped into parliament as a GCI deputy in 1990 under the Civic Forum umbrella.

Samkova’s efforts to put her organisation under the Klaus party’s wing during the 1992 election campaign were rebutted. “They said that they were sorry but that they simply didn’t want to risk the white vote,” she explains. “The CDP doesn’t see how human rights and minority issues are useful to it. If something doesn’t bring them immediate economic profit, it’s expendable.”


THE JOYS OF SPRING

In Ireland, history has a habit of getting stuck—and usually in the most uncomfortable places, like the 17th century. One German member of the European Parliament recognised that fact during last year’s crisis over the right of a 14 year-old alleged rape victim to travel to Britain for an abortion. “I propose,” he said, “that only states which have experienced the Age of Enlightenment can be members [of the EC].”

But if such dangerously new-fangled concepts such as the separation of church and state have still to be fully accepted in the Republic, the political party system has at least advanced unequivocally into the 20th century—all the way to 1923, to be exact. That was the year in which the brief but savage civil war ended. The war was fought over the treaty signed with Britain in 1921, which granted the 26 counties which now constitute the Republic of Ireland de facto independence, but left the six north-eastern counties with large protestant populations under British rule. The pro-treaty forces defeated the hardline republicans who refused to accept partition. Yet the cleavage between the two was to remain the essential dividing line in Irish politics for the next 70 years, as the opposing civil war factions evolved into constitutional political parties, Fianna Fail (anti-treaty) and Fine Gael (pro-treaty).

It remained so until last November’s elections, when the Labour Party achieved what seems to be a historic breakthrough, more than doubling its representation to 33 seats in the 165-seat parliament. This achievement, modest enough as it appears on paper, has been greeted as a watershed in Irish political history, the ‘end of civil war politics’. The two main parties between them secured only 63% of the primary vote, Fianna Fail registering their worst performance since 1927, Fine Gael their worst since 1948.

After two months of horse trading, Labour rather surprisingly decided to enter a coalition with Fianna Fail, securing six cabinet positions, and the posts of deputy prime minister and foreign minister for their popular leader, Dick Spring. The long-term significance of the result lies less in the particular nature of the government formed in its aftermath than in the vastly increased influence wielded by Labour, the prospect of further erosion of the two main parties’ votes in the future, and the development of a more conventional political system characterised by Left-Right distinctions rather than atavistic mysticism.

Ironically, it is the party representing the losers in the civil war, Fianna Fail (“Warriors of Destiny’), which has dominated Irish political history ever since they swallowed their pride and entered parliament in 1927. Fianna Fail have governed alone or (briefly) in coalition for no less than 44 years since then. Since 1932, Fine Gael (“The Tribe of the Gaels’) has always been the second largest party.