

AFTER THE 'VELVET' REVOLUTION

Czech Dissident Oldrich Andrysek peers into the future of his
fast changing country

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The speed with which Communism in Eastern Europe collapsed before everyone's eyes calls is staggering.

Only several months ago the questions were: when will Czechoslovakia follow the path taken by Poland and Hungary, when will the Czechoslovak leadership admit an urgent need to enter into a dialogue with the opposition and live up to its own proclamations of *Glasnost* and *Perestrojka*?

No-one forecast the rapid succession of events sparked off by the brutal suppression of a totally peaceful demonstration of Prague students commemorating the 50th anniversary of the murder of student Jan Opletal by the Nazis.

An officially condoned demonstration was to be the beginning of the end of yet another totalitarian regime.

The Czechoslovak Communist Party - at great public expense - relished nothing else than to preside over mammoth displays of synchronized gymnastics or to review parading ranks of citizens from elevated platforms during orchestrated celebrations.

Orchestrated is the word, and methods of inducement to slogan chanting were most ingenious. Perhaps only those that took part in these 'voluntary' events can ever appreciate the full extend of the irony.

Though loathed and attended by many only until roll-call, when students had to report to the class teacher, most people too such celebrations as a 'necessary evil'.

There were advantages too. Regularly anniversaries and monster events were preceded by the miraculous appearance of such scarce items as bananas or canned pineapples. Unfortunately the pitfalls included a proliferation of police activities.

The riot police in battle gear were always close at hand to uphold socialism with the use of water canon or other methods of persuasion while their more discreet colleagues in plain clothes were called up for special duty to mix with the crowds and man key posts

The organizers of the fateful demonstration of November 1989 expected a turnout of 5,000 students, while realists counted on some two to three thousand. When some 15,000 moved out from the assembly point still no-one could have anticipated the snowball effect the students would create.

Only hours later the crowd swelled to 50,000 and made its way - in a perfectly peaceful manner - towards the building of the National Theatre. By this time the officially approved scenario was dropped and the whole event lost its 'planned character'.

The authorities answered the calls for a dialogue in the only way they knew, and 'someone' - investigations are still under way to determine who gave the fateful order - unleashed

the riot police. The accounts of their vicious behavior appalled even some representatives of the establishment. Indiscriminate baton charges, people dragged of into detention by their hair and others kicked into senselessness.

This time however the cup flowed over and the anger of Prague was not to be tamed. The Communist Party leadership acted as if paralyzed and gradually lost control over the rapidly unfolding events.

Having lost the respect of the nation a long time ago, the apparatus did not 'regroup' in time to generate sufficient fear. The traditional methods of intimidation and threats used against the individual to end his and her career were hopelessly futile in the case of students. In addition this time there was little hope of 'fraternal' tanks helping out.

In the week that was to follow hundreds of thousands assembled in spite of freezing temperatures and demanded radical changes. At the same time the rest of the country was still under a news black-out relying only on hearsay and foreign transmissions.

In this respect the students were running out of time. Fortunately they were not to strike alone and soon the theaters closed. Within a few days similar patterns emerged in a number of towns and finally a general strike was called.

In a typically Czech way of telling someone to do some proper work for a change, the bosses were receiving shovels through the post.

Fascinating accounts of closely guarded state secrets about the environment or the salaries and privileges of the party elite were distributed in leaflet or poster form. People were shocked by the disclosures and the police somehow lacked direction and hopelessly failed to keep pace by tearing down every poster which appeared.

Gradually the newspapers published a wide array of stunning reports and began to comment on real events.

Finally one of the last and certainly one of the most potent bastions of Communist propaganda - the television - caved in six days after the fateful demonstration and screened footage documenting police brutality in suppressing a peaceful march.

PARA FROM ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPT (EDITED-OUT FOR SPACE REASONS FROM PUBLISHED ARTICLE):

The whole country awoke and the Communist Party leadership, still totally disoriented, pathetically carried on as if nothing had happened, loosing in the process much of its remaining legitimacy. After several reshuffles, countless defections and criminal charges pending against some of its leading representatives, it had to make the largest concession and relinquish its constitutionally guaranteed monopoly of power and vacate most of the country's top offices.

The unexpected but substantial political vacuum had to be temporarily filled.

Dozens of political parties emerged and former dissidents took office in preparation for the first free elections since

1946.

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President Václav Havel, who a little more than a year ago was serving a prison sentence, has elevated his small country to new heights. He has travelled widely, meeting with President Bush in Washington and Secretary General (now also President) Gorbachov in Moscow. In return he has invited a number of statesmen and personalities who include His Holiness the Dalai Lama of Tibet and Frank Zappa to Prague. Even the first bishop of Rome, John Paul II, is on the agenda.

The country began its struggle to return to the mainstream of democratic development by doing away with a heritage of complacency and rampant injustice.

A new foreign policy is being formulated by a new foreign minister who upon entering office embarked upon reconciliation with the neighboring German States, the restructuring of the East European Trade organization COMECON and by pressing the Soviet Union to pull out their 75,000 troops by the end of 1990.

It is clear that these will not be easy tasks, but now that the bill for the past has been presented one cannot but wonder which way will the man on the street turn.

After all, the last 40 years left their mark and the suddenness of liberty and the responsibility incurred can be dazzling.

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A ruined environment, out-dated and ill-equipped factories and an economy that all but ground to a halt through the systematic inefficiencies of rigid central planning are an unhappy inheritance of the past. Still worse - what disillusionment it must be for countless Czech and Slovaks to find out that decades have been wasted and that they must buckle down for a painful transition. Indiscriminate policies of state atheism and "the communist code of conduct" has alienated much of the population. Not to anyone's surprise, many today search for lost moral and ethical values only to find security and comfort in the words of a priest.

Free elections have not been held since 1946 making those in June 1990 crucial to the countries future. The Czechoslovak people have a chance to get a 'new deal', and whether they realize it or not, they are the dealers.

The nation is certainly not accustomed to making choices in political affairs - 'democratic centralism' did away with that long ago.

It is an alarming fact is that not even the discredited Czechoslovak Communist Party which enters the elections with depleted ranks is not totally out of the running. Definitely it is one of the few parties to enter the election race with a

reasonably functioning structure, and perhaps the only party to have the material means and resources to carry out an election campaign.

Many observers expect the emergence of a re-grouped Communist Party with a re-varnished image that might still attract enough votes to play a key role in Czechoslovakia's political landscape.

But the key issue is whether the electorate will swing to the right or left. With the Swedish economic model a goal for many - in spite of the latest difficulties of the Swedish Social Democrats - and with Mrs. Thatcher's style of government the prime objective of others, there exists plenty of room for political speculation.

Leading the election race are Civic Forum and Citizens Against Violence, the two broadly-based organizations which toppled the communist regime.

The polls estimate that they can expect some 30 per cent of the vote, but the question is: will they last? As long as they were in opposition to the totalitarian regime they were cohesive. Whether this will last now is anyone's guess.

Literally dozens of political parties are mushrooming throughout the country. Most of the new ones share several common traits: they reject communism, have little or no experience and even less resources. One such party bears the name the 'Non-violent Anticommunist Party' and for obvious reasons its establishment delighted many.

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Another curious one is the Beer Drinkers Party (probably based in Pilsen), which pledges to reduce beer prices, declare 1991 as "International Beer Drinking Year" and promote the brewery trade. The Party of the Silent Majority intends to remain silent during Parliamentary debates while another real "vote puller" might be the Erotic Party which intends to pursue a completely different course.

Admittedly many parties will be short lived and have little impact other than splitting the vote - but even this factor must be taken into account.

Another major factor is that of a revival of religious feelings which are no longer the opium of the poor as defined by Marx.

Certain regions of Czechoslovakia will in all probability be controlled by the Czechoslovak People's party, a party with strong links to Catholicism.

Another great unknown are the Greens - a grassroots movement which is busy formulating a political platform.

Similarly, the Social Democrats have their headaches. As the oldest political party with a 111 year tradition and silenced in 1948 it must still make a choice between the anachronism of 'classical marxist' socialist doctrines and the programme of the modern social democracy of Western Europe.

Certainly the political struggle will be intense and even

fierce, and for much of the electorate also somewhat confusing.

The key question will be how well the major parties manage to convince the voters of their devotion to creating and maintaining a socially just and fair society.

The nation as a whole will first need to muster its moral strength to continue its efforts in the spirit of the 'Velvet Revolution' and refrain from collective punishment of communists. While those directly responsible should face impartial tribunals under the due process of the law, the last thing Czechoslovakia needs today are recriminations and witch-hunts - a notion made very audible by President Havel when addressing the country in the tradition a New Year's speech.

It remains to be seen whether the Czechoslovak Social Democratic Party will manage to rise from the shambles of a 'Socialist' regime created by the Communists and proceed to find a formula which would capture the hearts and the imagination of the voters. Czechoslovak Social Democracy, which has through its party in exile remained affiliated with the Socialist International, must make an effort to pick up where it was forced to leave off decades ago.

Rijswijk, 19 March 1990