

Vaclav Havel 1936-2011

Living in truth

The unassuming man who taught, through plays and politics, how tyranny may be defied and overcome

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HAD communists not seized power in his homeland in 1948, Vaclav Havel would have been simply a distinguished Central European intellectual. That is how, triumphantly, he ended his career. In between came imprisonment, interrogations, house searches, isolation, heartbreak and betrayals—and adulation on the national and international stage.

Although a highly successful politician, four times head of state and the leader of one of the most famous revolutions in history, he was not a natural public figure. A sincere, impatient and humble man, he detested the pomposity, superficiality and phoney intimacy of politics.

Nor was he like most of his fellow dissidents, mainly ex-communist intellectuals whose glittering careers had been cut short by the Soviet-led invasion of 1968 and the purges that followed it. Mr Havel was never a communist. And he lacked formal academic education. He came from a rich family that had had most of its property nationalised after 1948. As a further punishment, he had to leave school at 15 and was allowed only a technical education, not the literary one he craved. He worked as a laboratory assistant, did military service (in mine-clearing, a task reserved for the politically suspect), and became a stage hand, studying drama by correspondence.

As Czechoslovak communism softened in the 1960s, talented outsiders could begin to make their mark on the country's cultural life. His first full-length play, “The Garden Party”, was performed in 1963. It was a wry look at the nonsense world of communist clichés. A middle-class family, hoping to help their son Hugo, sends him to meet some influential apparatchiks. He readily learns their meaningless office language and his career flourishes—though his parents can no longer understand him.

Scrupulously careful in his choice of words, Mr Havel was especially alert to, and annoyed by, the atrocious effects of communism on his mother tongue. His next play, “The Memorandum”, first performed in 1966, dealt with an invented language, *Ptydepe*, designed (like communism) to eliminate ambiguity and promote efficiency, but with little regard for practicality or humanity. Its introduction, in an absurd workplace filled with sinister snoopers, creates chaos and deadlock.

Such mockery of the system was tolerated, even encouraged, before and during the Prague Spring, when reformist communists under Alexander Dubcek abolished censorship and tried to create what they called “socialism with a human face”. But that experiment was intolerable to Leonid Brezhnev's Soviet Union, just as Mr Havel's work was to the grey apparatchiks installed by the Warsaw Pact's tanks. The plays were staged in New York and elsewhere, but their author—like millions of others now a prisoner in his own country—was unable to see them. Banned from working in the theatre, he briefly took a menial job in a brewery; he wrote about that in another play, “Audience”.

Few had the stomach to struggle on against communism after such a comprehensive defeat. Many Czechs and Slovaks glumly resolved to make the best of a bad situation. Not Mr Havel: words were his weapons, and he intended to use them. In early 1975 he wrote a caustic letter to the communist leader Gustav Husak, saying that the “calm” which the authorities regarded as their great achievement was in fact a “musty inertia...like the morgue or a grave.” Under the coffin-lid of communism, the country was rotting: “It is the worst in us which is being systematically activated and enlarged—egotism, hypocrisy, indifference, cowardice, fear, resignation, and the desire to escape every personal responsibility...”

With a handful of allies Mr Havel then collected 242 public supporters for what would be the first open manifestation of dissent inside the Soviet empire: Charter 77, a declaration that highlighted the authorities' breaches of the international human-rights standards to which they had notionally subscribed. The reaction was venomous. Those who refused to denounce the document brought severe punishments on themselves and their families. One of the three founding spokesmen, Jan Patočka, a philosophy professor, died during a gruelling 11-hour interrogation. Mr Havel, another, spent five months behind bars in 1977, with a further three months in 1978.



But the crackdown spurred rather than deterred him. Taking advantage of lax border controls in a national park on the Czechoslovak-Polish border, Mr Havel led a bunch of friends in the summer of 1978 to meet a group headed by Adam Michnik, the brainbox of the Warsaw opposition. Mr Michnik recalls a “magic moment” as Mr Havel (Vasek to his friends) pulled cheese, bread and vodka from a knapsack and they began to “build the foundations of the international anti-Communist community...we had decided to shed our gags and to confront the totalitarian dictatorship face to face.”

The greengrocer's tale

The practical result of the cross-border meeting was a joint collection of essays. One was Mr Havel's: “The Power of the Powerless”, a reflection on the mind of a greengrocer who obediently puts a poster “among the onions and carrots” urging “Workers of the World—Unite!” In gentle, ironic but scathing prose, Mr Havel exposed the lies and cowardice that made possible the communist grip on power. The greengrocer puts up the poster partly out of habit, partly because everyone else does it, and partly out of fear of the consequences if he does not. Just as the “Good Soldier Svejk” encapsulated the cowardly absurdity of life in the Austro-Hungarian army, Mr Havel's greengrocer epitomised the petty humiliations of “normalised” Czechoslovakia.

Yet the greengrocer would balk if he were told to display a poster saying: “I am afraid and therefore unquestioningly obedient.” That was the difference between the terrified conformity of the Stalinist era and the collusive charade between rulers and ruled that prevailed in the 1970s. The people pretended to follow the Party, and the Party pretended to lead. Those shallow foundations were vulnerable to individual acts of disobedience. Just imagine, Mr Havel wrote,

...that one day something in our greengrocer snaps and he stops putting up the slogans merely to ingratiate himself. He stops voting in elections he knows are a farce. He begins to say what he really thinks at political meetings. And he even finds the strength in himself to express solidarity with those whom his conscience commands him to support. In this revolt the greengrocer steps out of living within the lie. He rejects the ritual and breaks the rules of the game. He discovers once more his suppressed identity and dignity. He gives his freedom a concrete significance. His revolt is an attempt to live within the truth ...

That would bring ostracism and punishment, but imposed for compliance's sake, not out of conviction. His real crime was not speaking out, but exposing the sham:

He has shattered the world of appearances, the fundamental pillar of the system...He has demonstrated that living a lie is living a lie. He has broken through the exalted façade...and exposed the real, base foundations of power...He has shown everyone that it is possible to live within the truth. Living within the lie can constitute the system only if it is universal... everyone who steps out of line denies it in principle and threatens it in its entirety ...

The phrase “living in truth” was Mr Havel's hallmark. No single phrase did more to inspire those trying to subvert and overthrow the communist empire in Europe.

In 1979 he received a five-year prison sentence. This was the darkest time of his life. The outside world showed little interest. The dissident movement was shrivelling under the harassment of the StB, the Czechoslovak counterpart of the KGB. In Poland, Solidarity was crushed by martial law. And in prison he could not write, barring a weekly letter to his wife.

The commandant, a Stalinist-era veteran, enjoyed tormenting his top prisoner, confiscating the whole letter if any bit breached prison rules (personal matters only, no foreign words, no underlining, no discussion of philosophy). The result, in elliptical and sometimes baffling prose, was “Letters to Olga”, a book that could be published only abroad. He was released early, with severe pneumonia, in 1983. His health never recovered, and his heavy smoking gave it little chance to.

That gloom proved to be the nadir. Once the enforcer of communist orthodoxy, the Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachev became a spur to change: that shift inspired democrats and sapped their persecutors. In Hungary and Poland the regimes were weakening visibly by the late 1980s, but Czechoslovakia's Communist blockheads continued to beat, bully and jail their opponents. Mr Havel was sentenced to eight months for “hooliganism” in early 1989. But this time his jailing sparked outrage, not apathy. In Poland one of his plays was performed publicly—with the communist prime minister in the audience. Citing his “exemplary behaviour”, the Prague regime in April freed its most famous prisoner early. That evening stokers, street-sweepers and window-washers—in earlier life musicians, philosophers and writers—partied at the former stagehand's home. By the year's end, they would be toasting his presidency.



A moral compass

Appropriate uniforms

Yet Czechoslovakia's dissident movement was still tiny and amateurish, way behind Poland's Solidarity in muscle, or Hungary's activists in sophistication. Mr Havel and his pals were all but unknown in their own country. Change was in the air, but many were uneasy about what it might bring: economic upheaval, American imperialism, the return of vengeful émigrés, German revanchism or Jewish property claims. The authorities tried to tar the dissidents as CIA stooges, and Mr Havel as the scion of a family of Nazi collaborators. But propaganda was no substitute for reform. Though the dissidents were feeble, they were kicking at a rotten door.

Mr Havel was fast becoming a political leader. It was not a role he enjoyed. Foreign visitors queued outside his apartment, cutting into his time for reading, writing, thinking and talking. At times he retreated to his country cottage for peace and quiet. When in Prague he kept his appointments on a small scrap of folded paper in his pocket: he was not a politician and was not going to behave like one. His main defence was a venerable old man called Zdenek Urbanek (author of the country's best translation of "Hamlet", but disgraced after 1968), whose stately good manners and quavering English could deter even the pushiest television crews.

But events brushed diffidence aside. As the Soviet empire crumbled the Communist Party leader, Milos Jakes, in a leaked recording, could be heard complaining to his comrades (in ludicrously ungrammatical Czech) that the country was "the last pole in the fence". Hungarians and Austrians picnicked on what had once been the Iron Curtain's barbed-wire cordon. Even loyal East Germany wobbled and toppled. When the Prague riot police brutally broke up a student demonstration on November 17th 1989, Mr Havel and his colleagues set up the Civic Forum—a determinedly non-partisan group with, at first, no leaders.

Day after day and in ever-increasing numbers the demonstrators of the Velvet Revolution filled Wenceslas Square, chanting "Truth will triumph" and "We've had enough". Intellectuals had played a vital role in fostering Czech and Slovak national feelings during the Habsburg empire and in building pre-war Czechoslovakia. Now they were taking charge again. Behind the scenes (literally) of the Magic Lantern Theatre, where Civic Forum set up its headquarters, Mr Havel's quiet authority and moral compass made him the unquestioned head of the opposition. Others were more forceful, self-important or impetuous. But it was the playwright's voice that counted.

On November 24th, during a press conference, the news came through that the entire leadership of the Communist Party had resigned. Someone produced a bottle of fizzy wine. Mr Havel, next to a beaming Dubcek (hotfoot from his job as a humble forester), declared a toast: "Long live a free Czechoslovakia." The regime had in effect surrendered, and the country's destiny was in the writer's hands. In 24 hours in early December, in what he later said was the most difficult decision of his life, Mr Havel reluctantly agreed to stand for president; posters saying *Havel na Hrad* (Havel to the Castle) already festooned Prague. Duty (and perhaps a sense of mischief) had triumphed over his craving for a return to normal life. He was elected unanimously by the discredited communist-era parliament, and again in June by its freely elected successor.

Many dissidents' political careers flared in 1989 but fizzled thereafter: they were too individualistic, or principled, or eccentric for the demands of public life. Mr Havel was the glorious exception. He confounded those who thought he was too dilettantish and self-effacing to be a proper president. He and his pony-tailed, scooter-riding advisers romped through the corridors of Prague Castle, exorcising the ghosts of the communist usurpers with humanity and humour. He ordered spectacular floodlighting, and gloriously elaborate comic-opera uniforms to replace its guards' grim garb. Almost his first act in office was to invite the rock musician Frank Zappa to a joyful victory concert in Prague.

In what would be a hallmark of his later political life, he made a point of helping beleaguered but like-minded figures. He became a close friend of the Dalai Lama, who was almost the first foreign dignitary he received as president. In 1991 he lobbied for Aung San Suu Kyi's Nobel peace prize, when it could have been his. His last public statements were to support political prisoners in Belarus and the opposition protests in Russia. In return, the Kremlin issued insultingly sparse condolences. But in Moscow on December 24th (see [article](http://www.economist.com/node/21542205) (<http://www.economist.com/node/21542205>)) 80,000 pro-democracy demonstrators held a minute's silence in his memory.

Mr Havel banished many demons. He opened warm diplomatic ties with Israel and befriended Germany, then a bogeyman for many Czechoslovaks. He brought Pope John Paul II to Prague, overcoming a neurotic anti-Catholicism and secularism among some of his compatriots, who harboured lively resentments of the counter-Reformation and priestly privilege.



AP Soul mates

His record at home was more mixed. The parliamentary system gave the president little executive power. With first-hand experience of the flaws in the justice system, he freed many prisoners: some blamed that for a subsequent crime wave.

He disliked the arms industry, and tried to block some important deals. But making weapons was a big source of jobs in Slovakia, long the poorer part of the country, where many felt Mr Havel had a tin ear for their concerns. He was unable to stop the ambitious politicians in Prague and Bratislava who were scheming to dissolve Czechoslovakia. That seemed a big failure at the time. Yet the smooth and peaceful “velvet divorce” of 1992 was a huge achievement. Mr Havel is much mourned in Slovakia; the two countries now get on better than ever.

Laying ghosts

He returned as president of the Czech Republic in 1993 and again in 1998, making the most of his largely symbolic role. The great triumphs were accession to NATO (in 1999) and laying the foundations for European Union membership in 2004. The country could not have had a better ambassador. In 1994 he lured President Bill Clinton into a joyful impromptu saxophone session at a Prague nightclub.

He was profoundly uneasy (rightly, in retrospect) with the shaky moral foundations of post-communist capitalism. The economic reformers understood markets, but not mankind: loose rules and weak institutions created a spivs' paradise, with a malign and lasting legacy of corruption. The StB was disbanded, but with almost no accounting for its crimes. Mr Havel himself reckoned that the biggest failure on his watch was the handling of the secret police files, a toxic mix of guilty secrets and malicious invention that leaked into public view in the 1990s.

Some Czechs disliked him: too preachy, too elitist, they said (too brave and honest for a country prone to moral flexibility, said others). His critics' main charges were that he regained family property (entirely lawfully) and then got bogged down in a squabble about its division (not his fault). After his wife Olga died in 1996, he remarried, just under a year later, a lively and rather younger actress, Dagmar, whom some found vulgar in comparison. (Mr Havel said plaintively: “We are in love and want to be together.”) His plays were overrated (perhaps, but his essays deserved every plaudit). He enjoyed the fruits of commercial success (entirely merited, unlike some of his compatriots' fortunes).

Out of office, Mr Havel's restless Bohemian energy stayed with him even as his physical strength ebbed. He resumed his literary career, fulfilling a lifetime dream of directing a film—about a politician leaving power. An engaging memoir of his time as president captured the atmosphere of Prague Castle in what to his friends were fairytale years.

It was Mr Havel's genius that he not only toppled communism, but offered a way out of its ruins that all could follow: calming nerves, laying ghosts and precluding revenge. He had a better claim to resentment than most. But he showed no sign of being burdened by the past. He was far happier about things that had gone successfully than cross about those that had gone wrong. Although humble enough to know he was not a perfect man, he was confident that his ideas were right. His favourite motto summed it up: “Truth and love must prevail over lies and hate.”

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