



Taylor & Francis
Taylor & Francis Group

Czech Culture in the Cauldron

Author(s): Igor Hajek

Source: *Europe-Asia Studies*, 1994, Vol. 46, No. 1 (1994), pp. 127-142

Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/153034>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Taylor & Francis, Ltd. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Europe-Asia Studies*

JSTOR

Czech Culture in the Cauldron

IGOR HÁJEK

AS IN MOST CENTRAL AND EAST EUROPEAN COUNTRIES, culture had played for centuries a special and important role in the life of the Czech nation. In difficult periods of history, art and artists often emerged as the only spokesmen of a silenced people.

In recent times, it happened during the 'normalisation' that followed the Soviet-led invasion by Warsaw Pact armies in 1968 intended to suppress the Prague Spring. Once the old and discredited political structures were revived, the entire intellectual community was devastated in a purge of gigantic proportions. Writers, who had advocated the reforms most vehemently and resisted recantation longest, were affected worst of all. Hundreds of them were banned and dozens went into exile in the West. Over the next 20 years, nonetheless, they were the most numerous among the few who dared to oppose the oppressive system.

Samizdat inside the country cooperated with unique and well organised Czech publishing houses in the West so that works of the banned Ivan Klíma or Ludvík Vaculík could appear alongside those of the exiled Milan Kundera or Josef Škvorecký. Smuggled back into Czechoslovakia, they contributed to the survival of a parallel, independent culture which stood in contrast to the mostly sterile artistic efforts sustained by the neo-Stalinist authorities. As was the case in the 1960s and earlier, it was difficult to separate art from politics in the work of the dissident and non-conformist artists and writers of the 1970s and 1980s, although any message of a political nature would be expressed only in an indirect, metaphorical way. In a corrupt, unethical environment political meaning could easily be read into a short story which made a strong ethical point.

In such circumstances the beleaguered dissident community, despite its minute size, developed into a centre where social values unaffected by current doctrine were preserved with a view towards future restoration. Culture was its medium and the dissemination and reading of banned books or the performances of banned plays by banned actors in private homes assumed the character of an underground struggle for political liberation the like of which in other parts of the world has often relied on far less peaceful means.

Throughout this period the authorities, well aware of the propaganda value of culture, continued to subsidise a vast range of cultural activities either directly or indirectly (e.g. by maintaining low production costs and prices). They calculated that besides improving their image, such support would stimulate artistic production which would promote the official ideology and enhance its appeal. For the whole of Czechoslovakia the cultural subsidies amounted on average to an extremely generous Kčs 6.5 billion a year and it seems reasonable to presume that at least half that

amount was spent in the Czech part of the country. The volume of the subsidies becomes more apparent if one considers that in a country of 15 million the allotted sum could provide 92 000 people with double the average annual income (Pehe, 1990).

Because so many artists and intellectuals were either banned or had gone into exile, it was predominantly the compliant who benefited from this munificence. Enough was provided to ensure a secure existence—ranging from modest to lavish—to numerous theatres (Prague, a city of just over 1 million, was the home of at least two dozen of them), libraries, museums, orchestras (and ten opera companies) as well as a film industry that produced 20–30 feature films a year without having to worry whether anyone would wish to see them. Plenty was still left for various individual awards and commissions bestowed on obedient and faithful servants of the regime. In fact, the regime's largesse succoured even the fringes of the cultural spectrum, the 'grey zone' where the official and dissident art often overlapped. This permitted the occasional performance of a non-ideological play or the staging of a non-conformist exhibition which was easily decoded as a challenge to the established order by a public that was well equipped to receive hidden messages.

Culture and the economics of culture thus acquired a significance that far exceeded the importance they could ever achieve in a society where social and political activities develop in freedom.

In the end, not even large-scale bribery could save the incompetent rulers of the country. For nearly 20 years only the persecuted dissidents such as the playwright Václav Havel and other members of the Charter 77 movement had dared to raise a critical voice, but Soviet *glasnost* and *perestroika* eventually emboldened the meek and docile majority. Not writers this time but actors were the first to step out of line with their *Několik vět (Just a Few Sentences)* manifesto, which attracted around 30 000 signatures by the time the revolution finally broke out in November 1989. Theatres became platforms of public protest when, during the momentous events, they opened their doors and invited the citizenry in to engage in political discussion. Significantly, the headquarters of the revolution were located in the rooms of the Prague Divadlo za branou (Theatre Beyond the Gate).

For the first few weeks after the revolution no one seems to have had any real sense about the new path on which Czech culture might embark. The first reaction was one of intoxication with freedom and with the chance to see and read all that had been banned for decades. Many hoped that a new golden era of Czech culture would unfold now that the restrictions of a normative communist cultural policy had been swept away.

It was therefore surprising when, in March 1990, with Václav Havel installed as the country's new President, the news came of a Committee for the Defence of Culture being constituted and calls being heard for an urgent meeting with the Minister of Culture. Was there perhaps a threat of censorship being re-introduced? Was it possible that intellectuals were being subjected to a new kind of ideological harassment?

It turned out that the cause of the alarm was much more mundane. What the intellectual community protested against was a plan to introduce a uniform income tax such as is common in most Western countries. It would have replaced the prevailing

tax on literary and artistic activity, with its low rates and other advantages, which had been in operation for 40 years. The idea that writers and sculptors would be liable to the same tax as joiners or car mechanics seemed outrageous. Ironically, opposition to the tax included both those who had enjoyed considerable privileges under the regime just toppled and those who had suffered.

In the event the abolition of the preferential tax treatment for artists was postponed. Although this first conflict with the new authorities ended with a temporary victory for the artistic and intellectual community, few of them were yet aware of its implications. It was the harbinger of a future in which culture would no longer be either subordinated to or privileged by *any* clearly defined central policy. The previous paternalistic protection by the socialist state would be largely abandoned and culture would be left to contend on its own with the hitherto unknown forces of the market. While in the past it had been ruled by politics, from now on Czech culture would be dominated by economics. In fact, a serious crisis induced by this transformation was already looming.

Books galore

The first manifestation of serious trouble occurred in the publishing industry. The collapse of the book market came more quickly than anyone expected, although it could have been foreseen. Books had always played a symbolic role in Czech social life: under the communist regime the publication of a non-conformist novel or an exquisite and unorthodox art book would frequently assume the aspect of a political statement. After 1968 Czech emigrés living in the West, rather than starting any large-scale political initiatives, founded a number of very active publishing houses. When their editions of banned and exiled writers were smuggled back into Czechoslovakia, they circulated there alongside locally produced *samizdat* and were treated almost as a fetish. In fact, this cultural commodity and the effort and ingenuity required to produce it substituted to a large extent for other forms of opposition.

With books and publishing being held in such esteem, it was no surprise that when all barriers were removed many would-be entrepreneurs saw the chance to supply the reading public with long-absent titles as an excellent opportunity to set up a private business. It was also a profession in which no particular qualifications were required. By the end of September 1990 the 36 publishing houses owned by the state or by approved organisations and institutions such as the Academy of Sciences or the Army had been joined by 800 private publishers licensed by the Ministry of Culture. By early 1991 the licensing procedure was replaced simply by registration and the numbers rose to about 1 500.

The consequences were not long in coming, particularly since—besides facing such massive competition—the established publishers had to cope with a sharp increase in printing costs (30% from 1 January 1989 and another 15% from 1 March 1990). While in 1989 it was possible to make a profit on a print run of 25 000 copies, in 1990 it had to be 30 000–50 000, rising to 70 000 in 1991. The problem was compounded by the increase in the price of paper by 50% to 200% from January 1991 (*Nové knihy*, 1990a). The first victims were the best quality publishers. In a drastic move in 1990, Odeon, the state publishing house of belles-lettres and art, reduced its

staff by half, in two stages, cut its production by about a third and abolished many long-running series such as the excellent edition of translated poetry *Plamen*. Even worse affected was the children's books publishing house Albatros, famous for its illustrated books. There, too, some popular series such as the pocket encyclopedia *Okno* had to be discontinued (Petrušek and Kosatík, 1990).

The newly emergent private sector was not burdened to the same extent with these handicaps. With honourable exceptions, editorial and production care was not something that concerned most of the newcomers too greatly. Printing was mostly done on the cheapest paper available and the majority of publications required hardly any editorial work, being reprints of up to 50-year old previous editions or of books originally published abroad by exiled publishers. A typical example of the former was the new edition, in a printing of 87 000 copies, of Kathleen Windsor's *Forever Amber*, which had last appeared in Czechoslovakia in 1947. It was published by the recent communist editor-in-chief of the prestigious publishing house *Československý spisovatel*, turned private entrepreneur after his dismissal.

The enormous growth in book production, with print runs of 90 000 copies or more quite common, rapidly saturated the market. Not only publishers both old and new seemed to be carried away by the advent of press freedom—writers too succumbed to this euphoria. Ivan Klíma, for instance, previously banned, contracted for seven of his books to be published in the space of one year. By the autumn of 1990 the channels of the book trade were hopelessly clogged. The state-owned wholesale distribution company *Kniha*, which already found itself saddled overnight with Kčs 300 million worth of books unsaleable because their contents or authors were linked to the defunct communist regime, could not cope with the deluge. To complicate matters further, sales of books started to drop as the cost of living increased and booksellers fell into debt with the wholesalers, who in turn suffered from problems of liquidity and could not pay publishers for books entrusted to them for distribution. Despite the fact that a private wholesale company (set up with the help of the state wholesalers) started business in 1991, the vicious circle was steadily getting worse and there was no solution in sight at the end of the year.

There were other blows to publishing and the book trade. A storm of indignation broke out when the federal government announced its intention to subject books to a 22% sales tax. International protest and solidarity declared in a letter from the New York-based *Pubwatch* may have helped Czech publishers to avert that threat (*Lidové noviny*, 1990). The wholesalers' own trade journal, *Nové knihy*, went bankrupt and was taken over by a private publisher (its meticulous weekly listing of every single Czech and Slovak title published being now a thing of the past). Some of the smaller regional publishers could no longer survive in the new economic conditions: Ostrava's *Profil*, for instance, closed down in June 1991 after 34 years of existence when the city and regional authorities withdrew their financial support.

An acute problem was also caused by the privatisation of bookshops or the return of the premises on which they were located to their previous owners. In most cases this resulted in a change of the merchandise sold or in the termination of the lease. The number of regular book sale outlets all over the country was reduced from 1 800 to 500–700 (*Literární noviny*, 1991b). Several towns were left without a single bookshop and it was estimated that by the end of 1991 only 20 might remain in

Prague, where there were 374 in 1948. In November 1991 the Czech Community of Writers wrote an urgent letter to the Minister of Culture pointing out that books cleared out from closed shops and valued at about Kčs 20 million had been taken to inadequate storage facilities where they were being destroyed by damp and rot. The letter spoke of 'irreparable damage to our culture' and 'cultural barbarism'. The only measure the ministry managed to come up with was to sell the books at an 80–90% discount to street traders, whose numbers had mushroomed since the revolution and turned parts of Prague into an oriental bazaar.

Monetarism visual and dramatic

The crisis in the Czech book market was only the most publicised and visible case of the effects of instant deregulation. Publishing and bookselling, however, had never enjoyed direct subsidies. Other cultural activities had been almost entirely dependent on them.

The film industry—nationalised in 1945, three years *before* the communist take-over—was severely hit by the squeeze on public funds by the end of 1990. Its subsidy had been slashed by three-quarters and the intention was to phase it out altogether over a period of five years. Work was stopped on all but six films which either had a foreign co-producer or were at a very advanced stage (the previous year 35 were completed in addition to 65 TV films). About two thousand people were dismissed from the Barrandov studios, many of them skilled and experienced technicians and craftsmen the like of whom would be difficult ever to find again.

Hopes for large profits from the use of the Barrandov facilities by foreign film makers did not quite materialise. Samuel Cornfeld, the producer of *Kafka* (starring Jeremy Irons) was reported to have saved \$2 million by filming in Prague (Goldfarb, 1991) but other producers pointed out that the studios were not equipped to world standard. In April 1991 the industry received an emergency subsidy of Kčs 100 million but it took several months to decide how the sum should be allocated. In July 1991, after protracted arguments, it was finally agreed that half of it should be spent on films already started while the other half should go to new projects, in each case in the form of competitive grants. Throughout 1991 discussions took place on the provision of new legislation that would secure a future for the Czech film industry and provide a fund to support domestic production.

However, Bonton, a private company founded by the jazz pianist Martin Krautochvíl, did not wait for new laws to be enacted. The firm decided to breach the state film monopoly and launched a private production of a film based on a novel by the exiled writer Josef Škvorecký. *Tankový prapor* (*The Tank Battalion*), premiered in May 1991, became the first privately produced film since 1945 and although received with critical reservations, it managed a small profit and held its own against the now unrestricted flood into Czech cinemas of Western productions, including some of very doubtful merit.

Considering the vital role that actors and theatres played in the 1989 revolution, they seem to have been particularly harshly treated by later developments. Within a few weeks of their finest hour, they were being deserted *en masse* by their audiences. Attendance figures fell by half. Satirical hints and political *doubles entendres* lost

their attraction overnight as live politicians at loggerheads with each other could daily be watched on television. Subsidies were not entirely withdrawn but were substantially reduced, the plan being that most theatres would ultimately come under the administration of local authorities, from whom they would receive financial assistance.

Personnel changes at the top and the necessity to cut the numbers of both actors and administrative employees brought vitriolic attacks on the newly appointed managers, accompanied by protest campaigns and internal strife. Many people found the abolition of the old system, which guaranteed them jobs for life, disturbing and painful. A particularly bitter affair was connected with the appointment (by Prague City authorities) of Jan Grossman as the new manager of the Divadlo na zábradlí (Theatre on the Balustrades), where in the 1960s he had staged the plays of Václav Havel. He had subsequently spent the 1970s and 1980s under a partial ban, able to work, if at all, only outside Prague. Several members of the company who did not agree with Grossman's declared artistic aims and methods of attaining them, among them the popular actor Jiří Bartoška, left in protest, later to found their own company symbolically called Theatre without Balustrades.

Even fairly successful theatres were not spared severe worries. The Prague Hudební divadlo v Karlíně (Musical Theatre in Karlín)—with 1 330 seats, the largest in Czechoslovakia, two musicals constantly sold out and a subsidy of Kčs 13.5 million—was still 16.5 million Kčs short of what it needed. Other plays in its repertoire had an attendance of less than 30% of house capacity, while the theatre had on its payroll a permanent staff of 350 employees, 190 of them actors and singers (Crha, 1991). In some cases developments were quite traumatic. D34, one of the country's most famous stages—founded in 1934 by E. F. Burian, one of the fathers of modern Czech theatre—closed down in June 1991 at the end of an excellent season of plays which won almost unanimous critical acclaim. Quite a few theatres tried to find a way out of the crisis by relaxing artistic criteria in favour of a commercially more attractive repertoire but even this ploy seldom improved attendance figures. The continued existence of some, such as the Prague Realistické divadlo (Realistic Theatre), was put in doubt by the restoration to private ownership of the buildings in which they were housed.

Unpopular pop

In January and February 1992 the European Cultural Club in Prague (in dispute with the Ministry of Culture, from whose premises it was being evicted) organised a series of weekly discussions. Typically, the subjects for two of them were 'Is Czech Pop Still Alive?' and 'A Serious Situation In Serious Music'.

The entire pop music scene with its faint flavour of protest was deserted by a large part of its fans. Was it perhaps because no artist—with the exception of the folk singer Karel Kryl, a cult figure returned from exile—found enough courage or inspiration to satirise the less attractive aspects of the post-revolutionary turmoil? Some of the previously popular personalities left the stage altogether. Many turned their energy to business and enterprise: the actress and singer Pavlína Filipovská, for instance, became the proud owner and operator of a laundry press. Frequent visits by

Western groups and the availability of their recordings considerably weakened the reputation of home-grown rock music.

Classical music was badly affected by fast increasing costs, reflected in admission prices which only foreign visitors could afford to pay without pain. The appearances after over 40 years in exile of the conductor Rafael Kubelík and the pianist Rudolf Firkušný were the most important events of the first two post-revolutionary concert seasons. Performances of Czech serious contemporary music, however, were nearly brought to a halt by the withdrawal or reduction of subsidies.

The situation in the music and record industry looked only a little less grim. The leading producer, the state-owned company Supraphon, struggled hard to adjust to coexistence with newly emerging private companies but its position was far from secure as it was left largely with the least lucrative areas of the market. With most of the foreign currency restrictions lifted and all of the ideological taboos removed, the new companies concentrated mainly on the import of Western rock music. Some entrepreneurs, moreover, did not pay too much attention to existing copyright regulations. Not all infringements were of domestic provenance, however. In the search for export markets, orders for the pressing of CDs were accepted from Western customers in good faith, which on closer examination proved to be for unlicensed, pirated recordings. One flagrant incident of this kind caused an intervention from the Anti-Pirating Section of the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (Zapletal, 1991).

Plastic arts

Judging by the number of exhibitions of modern art, one of the few bright spots on the cultural scene was contemporary Czech plastic arts. Although painters and sculptors had not been much affected by political regimentation during the previous decade, they nonetheless benefited from the complete removal of all ideological considerations. They also enjoyed a greater opportunity to show their work in the many newly opened galleries. As could be expected, the scramble to emulate the latest Western trends did not always produce work of the best quality. On the other hand, with no limits to experimentation the talent of many younger artists was given a chance to develop freely. The great increase in the cost of living may have diminished the numbers of local buyers of art but an exchange rate favourable to hard currency foreign visitors secured for many artists an alternative clientele.

Lost and found

All areas of national culture were beset with problems, some the result of long years of neglect, others brought about as an unexpected consequence of social and political change. An example of the former was the desperate state of the National Library in Prague, with 10% of its stock lying around in boxes and 1.5 million of its books affected by mould in inadequate depositories outside the city. Apart from a catastrophic lack of space, the library suffered from such a shortfall in funds that for the first time in over 100 years it found itself unable to carry out its statutory duty

regularly to issue a national bibliographical catalogue. An appeal for the rescue of the National Library was launched in August 1991.

An unforeseen and disastrous offshoot of the lifting of all travel restrictions and the removal of barbed wire from the country's borders was an astronomical increase in the theft of works of art from churches, museums and galleries. In regions such as south Bohemia it reached the proportions of large-scale plunder. Many of the robberies were evidently carried out to order from places easily accessible even to unsophisticated burglars as no advanced security systems had been installed. With the German and Austrian frontiers only an hour's drive away, the police were virtually helpless to prevent the disappearance of priceless art treasures.

The overall picture that emerges from this discussion is not too comforting: from whatever angle it was examined, Czech post-revolutionary culture seemed to be in turmoil. Ever more theatre companies were threatened with closure from local authorities, their new paymasters regarding expensive artistic activities as a luxury the community could at present ill afford. Some were more in favour of light entertainment that would cater to the tastes of less demanding foreign tourists. In this way, they hoped, at least some money could be raised to save the theatre buildings, many of which were in desperate need of repair. Cinemas, with their antiquated equipment not much better in this respect, were suffering a 50% drop in attendance, almost as severe as that of the theatres. Publishers were losing the competition for readers to a myriad of newly launched periodicals, both serious and vulgar. In addition, they were groaning under the cost of printing (50–70% of total production costs compared with the 10–20% common in the West) which could not be passed on to the buyer for fear of pricing themselves out of the market altogether. New editions of classics could be brought out only with the help of commercial sponsors, while the market was flooded with trash sold off stalls in the streets. All over the country libraries, galleries, historical buildings and landmarks were in a desolate state and falling to pieces while those still standing were being plundered for their contents. This in outline was the undisputed view of the Czech cultural scene shared by all.

Policy? What policy?

Alongside these momentous developments, a polemic was conducted in the pages of the Czech press about the position of culture in the aftermath of the revolution. It concerned itself largely with practical matters, but there were some ideological overtones. Sometimes it assumed the character of a campaign led by the advocates of a market economy, while their opponents trod very cautiously for fear of being associated with the discredited old system. Most participants still seemed to dread the use of terms such as 'planning', 'concept' or 'idea'. There was, however, a broad consensus that if the whole country was undergoing a transformation, the economics of culture could not escape it either. It was also recognised that culture would no longer be generously rewarded by the state for its political support and that it was facing serious problems in the changed circumstances.

Controversy broke out when it came to prescribing remedies. Some insisted that a degree of state support for culture was essential, others demanded that culture too should be fully exposed to market forces. Differences of opinion often hindered the

acceptance of practical measures. Discord and endless arguments prevented the passing of legislation which would have made it possible to introduce new organisational structures and to define responsibilities.

Not only the squabbling legislative bodies, both federal and republic, were to blame for the absence of new regulatory procedures. The Czech Minister of Culture, Milan Uhde, a former dissident writer, had adopted a very liberal policy with which a substantial part of the intellectual community was not in agreement. Those who did not share his attitude expressed their doubts in a variety of ways. The poetess Jana Štroblová, in an open letter, gently warned against the danger of 'losing the soul' in a renewed onslaught of coarse materialism and the rule of the average, which had also been the attributes of the previous system (*Lidové noviny*, 1990a). She, however, expressed a hope that regardless of the fact that once again some books were suddenly unpublishable, albeit for different reasons, 'culture had the power of asserting itself by its own devices, in spite of time and space, as recent years had shown'. Although her plea was addressed, apart from the government, directly to the President, Václav Havel, in view of his constitutional position, did not on this or any other occasion involve himself in the discussion.

The cultural journalist Josef Chuchma acknowledged that, while nobody knew exactly how much could be set aside for culture, it would certainly be little (*Mladý svět*, 1990). 'It would then be necessary to devise a strategy. Everything second-rate will have to be forsaken and we will have to depend only on ourselves ... The means arrogated from our own poverty will have to be concentrated on the preservation of the cultural heritage. If we do not show an appropriate degree of selflessness in this respect, I doubt that future generations will be magnanimous enough to dismiss it with a shrug and forgive us'.

The critic Vladimír Pistorius wondered about the complacency with which the threats to Czech cultural life were being accepted and about the lack of respect for national culture (*Lidové noviny*, 1991a). 'Now and then we show a little disquiet when we learn that for financial reasons all Czech medical journals are being closed down, that no Czech films are being made, that there is no money to pay for the subscriptions to foreign journals in academic libraries or that one half of all Prague theatres are threatened with liquidation. In the end, however, society seems to be ready to swallow all these bitter pills, even with some sort of satisfaction, because, God knows why, we seem to be proud of the fact that our economic reform does not handle anything in gloves, including culture'. Pistorius further took to task the author of another article who had claimed that art would sell well unless it was 'unsaleable noble boredom'. The success of Miloš Forman's films in America was allegedly the proof that commercialisation was just an empty scare. Pistorius pointed out that today in Prague a young Forman would never find the money to make his first films.

In response to warnings of the dangers to culture left entirely to its own devices in the market place, Uhde expressed his opinion that competition, however chaotic, was preferable to any monopoly. He dismissed the charge that commercialisation was corrupting Czech culture and spoke of the political 'commercialisation' of the communist era. There was no other way but free competition, he asserted, that could effectively replace 'the terrifying commercialisation which we had experienced for forty years and which with the use of prodigious state subsidies made possible both

fictional and non-fictional propaganda of crimes' (*Nové knihy*, 1990). There could be no greater danger to culture, he claimed, than its subjugation to the dead hand of a totalitarian ideology had been.

Uhde rejected calls for a comprehensive plan or guideline for the cultural sphere and pleaded for a system in which the involvement of the state would be minimal. Direct subsidies would be replaced with competitive grants awarded or augmented by newly established foundations and other sources of funding *not* controlled by the state. He admitted, however, that the economy was as yet unable to generate the wealth that would create conditions for adequate private funding (*Literární noviny*, 1991a). One of the first applications of the new grants practice was the entrusting of the emergency allocation of Kčs 100 million designed to save the Czech film industry to an independent committee of critics and theorists who were not directly associated with or involved in film making (*Lidové noviny*, 1992).

In a society which had just emerged from the nightmare of centralisation and state control of virtually every aspect of public life, views such as those of the minister found a lot of supporters. Some claimed that 'commercialisation—or rather a thorough and complete transition to market conditions—... [did not] present a threat to Czech culture and art, but on the contrary, [was] the best possible external guarantee of its development' (Kesner, 1991). The dramatist Karel Steigerwald (*Přítomnost*, 1991) went as far as to argue:

The current disability of state administration appears to be useful in the first round: it seems that theatres are dying spontaneously, of their own, of their own impulse and from lack of interest on the part of their audiences ... Perhaps even the second round will pass well without a centralised state policy: the communities will know how to cope and whichever of them decides to have a theatre, will find a specific purpose and then a mode of existence for it.

Besides running the danger of being branded as leftists, those who called for a measure of subsidies and a central policy in cultural affairs were exposed to ridicule. The philosopher Václav Bělohradský, a staunch promoter of a universal market economy, pointed out (*Mladá fronta dnes*, 1991):

The waiting of post-communist intellectuals for the favours of a good master proves that they find it easier to sell spiritual values to a political power than to the readers. This preference for a dialogue with power over that with consumers is demonstrated in plaintive calls for state subsidies in culture.

Despite the self-assurance of the exponents of *laissez faire*, doubts remained whether the ministry was quite aware of the consequences of what it was doing—or not doing. Daniela Kolářová, actress and deputy in the Czech National Council (parliament), described in an interview how she and a few colleagues spent long hours revising the old Act on the Theatre only to find that the Ministry of Culture did not deem *any* legal provisions in this field necessary (*Scéna*, 1991). The ministry only added to the confusion in the publishing industry when it abolished the system of payments to authors which had been in operation for over forty years and left the question of remuneration to be decided individually between author and publisher. With 90% of the new publishers barely aware (or willing to accept) that it was their legal duty to

reward authors for the use of their work, the removal of established standards of practice proved very risky. As if this was not enough, the Federal Assembly set about revising the law on copyright in a way that would have brought Czechoslovakia immediately in conflict with international agreements signed in the past. It is no surprise that in this climate book piracy, previously a virtually unknown offence, became a common occurrence.

The unclarified situation in Czech post-revolutionary culture was brought into focus in 12 questions publicly addressed to the Ministry of Culture by Vladimír Novotný (*Literární noviny*, 1991c), the newly appointed managing director of the publishing house Mladá fronta. Novotný asked, among other questions, whether the state would continue to own any cultural institutions at all and if so, what was the procedure for the appointment of their directors? What criteria would be applied in dispensing subsidies? How would regional cultural activities be supported? How would the discrimination in the access to culture of socially weak groups be mitigated—a topical question at a time when theatre and concert ticket prices were rising fast while the general standard of living was equally rapidly falling. Novotný also wondered how international cultural exchange could prosper when the abolition of the printed matter postal rate made the cost of mailing books abroad prohibitive. He also wanted to know what immediate future the ministry envisaged for the existing cultural funds and how their position would be affected by the introduction of a single tax system in 1993.

The last question touched a fairly raw nerve as it concerned often abused, disputed and misrepresented institutions the mere mention of which would at any time provoke a controversy. From all royalties and fees paid out in Czechoslovakia a tax of 2% was deducted for cultural funds (literary, musical, etc.), which were comparatively independent organisations supervised by the Ministry of Finance. The money had been used, for instance, to help out aging writers and artists facing difficulties, to provide interest-free loans or direct grants to individuals and to maintain recreational facilities for members of the associations. The wealth of the Literary Fund in particular had always been the cause of envy and accusations of assuring easy living for a select few. However, an earlier ministry proposal to deal with the question of the funds by simply abolishing them was rejected by the majority of Czech artists' associations. Instead, the funds had been increasingly utilised to finance awards, loss-making publishing ventures and other cultural projects deemed worthy of support.

Guessing at the future

For 40 years Czech official culture was subsidised, politically exploited and corrupted by the socialist state. Its manipulation was made easier by the fact that the foundations for such misuse had been laid deep in the past. The central role of culture, in particular literature, in helping to preserve national identity—indeed, the very survival of the nation and its language—was universally recognised. Artists regarded themselves and were viewed by the public as a natural elite who in difficult times were expected to speak on behalf of the nation. Paradoxically, this applied also to the

communist period during which, while enjoying the privileges granted them by the system, they were at times its most vociferous critics.

This position radically changed not long after the November 1989 revolution. Faced with the task of renewing the economy on the basis of private enterprise, the tendency to push culture off its high pedestal prevailed both on the federal and the republic levels. In the words of Václav Klaus, the Federal Finance Minister and chief strategist of the economic reform, 'when the apartment is being redecorated, you move the library out on to the balcony'. Politically it was not an unpopular thing to do: a good deal of the official culture had been compromised and discredited by corruption over the previous twenty years while the dissidents, many of whom now found themselves in positions of power, had been excluded from the enjoyment of any material benefits distributed by the authorities. It therefore seemed only just and logical that the old structures of support and regulation should be dismantled. The process was accelerated with the appointment of Milan Uhde as Minister of Culture in mid-1990. He made it clear that he was hostile to the idea of government intervention and in 1991 demonstrated his political stance by joining Václav Klaus' right-wing Civic Democratic Party (ODS).

Opponents of Uhde's policy could argue, however, that in some instances, at least, the transformation efforts were reminiscent of the attitudes of the Russian revolutionaries, who in 1917 proposed to replace the old bourgeois railway engines with new socialist ones. Changes were sometimes introduced without proper examination of whether or not they were necessary or beneficial. Some of them set off unpredicted chain reactions with which it was subsequently impossible to cope for lack of funds or experience. An example of this was the abolition of a central wholesale book organisation the like of which exists in most Western countries.

The idea of a culture dependent almost exclusively on subsidies from private donations was apparently inspired by practice customary in the United States. It seems, however, to have been rather prematurely promoted in a country where the accumulation of private wealth required for the setting up of foundations could only be expected in the very distant future. The insistence on introducing cuts in public spending on culture, on the supposition that deficiencies would be made up with funding from non-governmental sources, was reminiscent of the Thatcherite ideological reasoning justifying the policy of the British government in the 1980s and it might lead to similarly unwelcome consequences as those faced by cultural establishments in Britain when private money was not forthcoming.

Perhaps the German model, which recognises the necessity, usefulness and long-term profitability of state support, was one that would have been more suitable, albeit on a much more modest scale. There can be no doubt that Czech culture had been grossly overfunded under the communist regime, to the detriment of other areas of social life, but after pruning the wasteful expenditure one would have expected a fair amount to be saved for deserving causes. A closer look at the cuts may reveal that not all of them have been made in the right places.

Questions may also be raised about the wisdom of an almost instant abolition of controls. Institutions which had not been designed to face competition were exposed to it without being given a chance to brace themselves while their position was at the same time undermined by the withdrawal or reduction of support and by various

arbitrarily introduced market measures. That in such circumstances they got into difficulties did not necessarily prove their worthlessness. The state publishing house for children's books, Albatros, for example, was an excellent and much admired institution, yet it was left to founder when confronted with high printing costs and a market suddenly flooded with poorly produced, low-quality books from the new private publishers.

It might have been advisable as well to retain for a time some limited degree of influence over cultural life in general. Decades of communist puritanism did not allow the public at large the opportunity to develop the consumer resistance to debased, commercialised culture that can be commonly detected in most advanced countries of the West. Not having had any occasion to acquire the necessary degree of sophistication or develop the relevant antibodies, sizable groups of the population were thrown to the mercy of unscrupulous marketers selling them large quantities of products, often imported from the West, which in their countries of origin would by most be rejected as garbage. (A series of adventure novels translated from German carry in the original version a warning from the German Federal Ministry of Education that the book must not be included in any school library. The notice is missing from the Czech edition.) Perhaps some of the millions that the undiscerning and inexperienced consumers have been tempted to spend on trash could have been siphoned off in a manner that would have benefited if not culture then at least the endangered national heritage. Admittedly, this solution would probably have met with powerful suspicions in a climate which is strongly ideological and where any attempt at regulation can easily be stigmatised as a vestige of the old communist system.

The public were not the only ones who had to pay for their innocence of the ways of the world at large. Although the Ministry of Culture advocated devolution, on the other hand it interfered in matters which would have been better dealt with by the institutions concerned. This happened, for example, in the case of an apparently disadvantageous contract with a French musical and theatrical entrepreneur which the Ministry signed in 1991 on behalf of the National Theatre, but without telling the theatre's management about it. The affair was brought to light in a detailed investigation by Radio Free Europe (Radio Free Europe, 1992).

The prevailing moderate opinion in Czechoslovakia seemed to be that the current situation was one of transition and that things would in time settle down. The general pattern that life in the country was expected eventually to adopt was modelled on the vision of the first Czechoslovak Republic (1918–38), the last and virtually the only liberal and democratic social formation based on private enterprise in national memory. There was often insufficient awareness that it might prove impossible to revive this pre-war ideal in current conditions and little comprehension that regress may not stop at the point marked by the less prominent role culture is assigned in most Western countries.

At a time of upheaval and uncertainty predictions are hard to make. Some expectations and hopes, however, were not fulfilled, as indicated by the director of the Bochum City Museum in a radio discussion (RFE, 1992):

After the opening of the borders, everybody expected new intellectual impulses to come from Central and Eastern Europe, particularly in the field of culture. It was an enormous

disappointment that no impulses have arrived and we further observe that official policy in these countries, especially in Czechoslovakia, assumes the features of the consumer society which is hostile to culture and to ecology. Enormous disappointment is also caused by the fact that intellectuals in Czechoslovakia are withdrawing from public life and the isolation in which they existed under the communist regime is now being renewed. I feel that this is very ominous.

Leaving aside the dreams of Western intellectuals and the aspirations they had for their colleagues in the East, as well as the implied rejection of the consumer society, it cannot be denied that since the November 1989 revolution Czech culture has not produced any new book, film, play, music or other outstanding work of art capable of attracting universal attention. In this respect it has not differed much from the current position of culture in other countries of the former Eastern Bloc. The question remains whether Czech artists and intellectuals have been temporarily overwhelmed by the sheer impact of the transition from totalitarianism to liberty or whether their relatively diminished role is a permanent mark of their new standing in society.

Postscript

This article described the situation in the economics of Czech culture as it existed before the first free elections in June 1992. The victory of the right-wing coalition led by the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) resulted in the acceleration of reforms and an even faster transition to a market economy. The elections swept away most of the former dissidents and replaced them with new men (and very few women) who, like the majority of the population, had managed to survive the communist era by going through the required motions and not making themselves too conspicuous. Of the prominent dissidents, only two remained in high office: Milan Uhde became the Chairman of the Czech National Council (republic parliament) and Václav Havel had not yet completed his presidential term.

Problems of financing culture were soon overshadowed by the surprisingly quick move to split the country agreed between the leaders of the two strongest Czech and Slovak political parties. Other issues that competed for public interest were the first stage of privatisation and the increasing indebtedness of many enterprises, particularly those still in state ownership.

The latter predicament was one that continued to affect the book trade. Publishers had to pay the printers in advance, but could never be sure that they in turn would receive payment from the now mostly private booksellers. The distribution network having seized up entirely, most publishers relied either on postal services or on their own arrangements. A scandal broke out at the end of 1992 in connection with the privatisation of the troubled wholesale distribution company. It was acquired by the Deputy Prime Minister and chief ideologue of the Civic Democratic Party, Miroslav Macek, in partnership with Jindřich Menzel, a former Communist Party official. There were suspicions of inside information and influence being used in the acquisition and evidence of irregularities and subsequent asset stripping, as a result of which Macek resigned his government post. By mid-1993 the case had still not been fully resolved and new allegations were emerging that Milan Uhde, the former Minister of Culture, was involved in the affair (*Lidové noviny*, 1993a; *Lidové noviny*, 1993b).

Meanwhile, an unexpectedly steep drop in book sales early in 1993 drove the remaining large quality publishing houses such as Odeon or Český spisovatel (the renamed Československý spisovatel) to the wall. 'In publishing, the situation has really reached the point of no return: publishers of our kind have nowhere to retreat any more', the managing director of the latter declared in an interview (*Literární noviny*, 1993a; *Literární noviny*, 1993b).

The grant system assisted the production of about half a dozen Czech films. Although most of them were of some artistic merit, none attracted much attention abroad. The new managing director of the Barrandov film studios, Václav Marhoul, assumed a completely unsentimental attitude to film making. He regarded the studios as merely a production facility and his task as that of finding customers for it. Of the Czech film makers who expected some support for indigenous productions from him he said: 'they had been looking forward to a new kind of socialism and instead capitalism arrived. The regime itself has changed, while they had wished only for a change of conditions.... No one denies that culture used to lead European progress, but the age of enlightenment is simply over' (*Lidové noviny*, 1993c).

Theatres still suffered from the absence of legislation that would clearly define the responsibilities of central, regional and local authorities for their financing. While some Prague theatres such as Divadlo na Vinohradech succeeded in retaining their audiences, thanks to an appealing repertoire, others teetered on the brink of ruin. Realistické divadlo, re-named Labyrint, which had managed to find a much acclaimed new face for itself, encountered pressure at the end of the 1992/93 season to water down its artistic principles from the owners of the building in which it was housed (Vlček, 1993). One of the first victims of the indifference of local authorities was the theatre in Kolín, where the much praised company disbanded and the theatre closed down, the building to be used only occasionally for visiting productions.

In other areas there had been little change. Some public interest was aroused by the embarrassing squabbles connected with the appointment of the director of the modern section of the National Gallery. Months of misinformation, changed decisions and personal abuse delayed the opening of the reconstructed premises. The abolition of the 2% contribution to the Cultural Funds, which left them virtually without any income, passed almost without notice, although it meant, for instance, that they could no longer afford to improve the meagre pensions of some aged writers and artists.

On the whole, the pervading mood was one of resignation and, it seems, of acceptance of the greatly diminished importance of culture in the new circumstances, not least on the part of the Ministry of Culture itself. It may be typical of the sense of frustration felt by many that, in various interviews, when asked how the Ministry of Culture could help, most members of the cultural establishment answered: 'by disappearing from the face of the earth'.

University of Glasgow

References

- Richard Crha, 'Divadla se diví', *Mladý svět*, XXXIII, 29, 1991.
 Michael Goldfarb, 'Czechs Aim To Bounce Back', *The Guardian*, 11 April 1991.
 Ladislav Kesner, 'Ohrožené umění', *Přítomnost*, II, 2, 1991.
Lidové noviny, 'O ztrátě duše', 2 November 1990(a).

- Lidové noviny*, 'Dopis českým a slovenským nakladatelům a knihkupcům', 14 December 1990(b).
- Lidové noviny*, 'Sekera na umění', 10 April 1991(a).
- Lidové noviny*, 'Padesát na padesát', 20 July 1991(b).
- Lidové noviny*, 'Tečka za Knižním velkoobchodem?', 28 January 1993(a).
- Lidové noviny*, 'Příhrávky ministra Uhdeho', 12 July 1993(b).
- Lidové noviny*, 'Doba osvícenectví skončila', 8 July 1993(c).
- Literární noviny*, 'Kultura—neduživé dítě', 28 February 1991(a).
- Literární noviny*, 'Perspektivy knižního velkoobchodu', 29 August 1991(b).
- Literární noviny*, 'Dvanáct otázek kulturní politiky', 12 September 1991(c).
- Literární noviny*, 'Odeon nabírá dech, lapá po dechu, u konce s dechem', 17 June 1993(a).
- Literární noviny*, 'Až se kyvadlo vrátí', 8 July 1993(b).
- Mladá fronta dnes*, 'Trh a duchovní hodnoty', 10 January 1991.
- Mladý svět*, 'Strach o kulturu', 51, 1990.
- Nové knihy*, Statement by the Czech Association of Publishers and Booksellers, 31 October 1990(a).
- Nové knihy*, 'Spisovatelé i čtenáři', 31 October 1990(b).
- Jiří Pehe, 'Culture under New Economic Conditions', *Report on Eastern Europe*, I/36, 7 September 1990.
- Miroslav Petrušek, 'Ohrožené knihy' and Pavel Kosatík, 'Krise nakladatelů', *Tvar*, I, 28, 13 September 1990.
- Přítomnost*, 'Lesk a bída divadla', II, 4, 1991.
- Radio Free Europe, 'Hlasy a ohlasy', 8 January 1992.
- Scéna*, XVI, 19, 12 September 1991.
- Oldřich Vlček, 'Na koho to slovo padne aneb Trocha přemítání o divadle', *Tvar*, IV, 24, 17 June 1993.
- Petar Zapletal, 'Únosci zvuku mezi námi', *Gramorevue*, 27, 9, 1991.