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Source: *Europe-Asia Studies*, Dec., 2008, Vol. 60, No. 10, 1948 and 1968: Dramatic Milestones in Czech and Slovak History (Dec., 2008), pp. 1827-1845

Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20451662>

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Criticism and Destiny: Kundera and Havel on the Legacy of 1968

CHARLES SABATOS

THE REFORM MOVEMENT THAT BECAME KNOWN AS THE ‘Prague Spring’, the most radical social experiment in the communist Eastern Bloc during the turbulent events of 1968, brought Czechoslovakia to the centre of world attention. This attempt at ‘socialism with a human face’ evoked different reactions among the Czechs themselves, as did the Soviet-led invasion that ended it that August. The novelist Milan Kundera and the playwright Václav Havel, both of whom had played important roles in the liberalisation of culture during the 1960s that had paved the way for the events of the Prague Spring, took contrasting positions in the period immediately following the invasion. Their personal and artistic backgrounds also differed considerably: Kundera had first gained recognition as a lyric poet with orthodox communist themes, only later gaining prominence for his innovative fiction, while Havel, who was of a slightly younger generation and from a wealthy Prague family, had never joined the Communist Party. Both of them took what they defined as ‘critical’ positions toward the reform movement, but Kundera’s concept of ‘critical thinking’ idealised what he called the Czech national ‘destiny’, while Havel called for the ‘courage’ to look at the difficult issues of the present. At the time, this polemic was seen as representing two camps: reform communists, such as Kundera, and those non-communists more sceptical of the possibility of true reform, including Havel. Over the following two decades, their disagreement over the legacy of the Prague Spring took on greater significance outside Czechoslovakia, as Kundera and Havel became the two best-known Czech writers in the West. Kundera, living in exile in France, became a major figure in contemporary world fiction, while Havel, who remained in Prague and was imprisoned several times for his role in the dissident movement, became a leading voice for human rights.

In 1984, the publication of Kundera’s essay ‘The Tragedy of Central Europe’ became a turning point in Western perceptions of the communist bloc at the height of the Cold War. Kundera’s concept of Central European culture (which he saw as inherently Western and alien to Soviet-style communism) emerged from his earlier claims of a unique ‘Czech destiny’ and expanded to include the other ‘small nations’ of



FIGURE 1. MILAN KUNDERA BY ADOLF HOFFMEISTER. COPYRIGHT PERMISSION MARTIN AND ADAM HOFFMEISTER

the region. At the same time, Kundera's novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (partly set during the events of 1968) became an international bestseller, reviving interest in the Prague Spring. However, Havel took a more sceptical view towards the uniqueness of 'Central Europe' as a cultural identity, as he had towards Kundera's concept of 'destiny' in 1968. Following the so-called Velvet Revolution and the fall of the communist regime in 1989, the paths of Kundera and Havel diverged even more sharply, as Havel became the first post-communist Czechoslovak President and Kundera remained in exile. Yet they remain the two most authoritative and influential figures of Czech culture in the West, and their differing perspectives continue to define the international image of the Czech Republic 40 years after the Prague Spring.

National existence and critical thinking

The decade following the communist seizure of power in February 1948 was a politically and culturally bleak one for Czechoslovakia. Following a very tentative thaw in the late 1950s, the 1960s were a period of gradually increasing openness in film, drama and literature. By 1967, this movement toward greater freedom in Czech culture took on greater momentum.

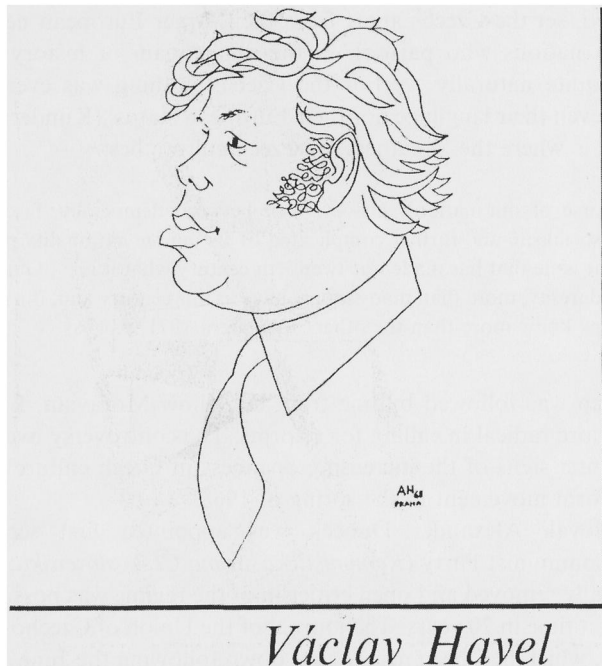


FIGURE 2. VÁCLAV HAVEL BY ADOLF HOFFMEISTER. COPYRIGHT PERMISSION MARTIN AND ADAM HOFFMEISTER

The Fourth Congress of the Czechoslovak Writers' Union in June 1967, particularly the speeches by Milan Kundera and his fellow novelist Ludvík Vaculík, was a major turning point. Josef Korbel has described the speeches of this congress as

fascinating ... The [Czech] language, which had been mutilated by russisms during the Stalinist years, shines in all its richness and beauty; the themes, formulated up to then only in journals in scholarly terms, are expressed in a scintillating variety of literary styles. (Korbel 1977, p. 277)

In contrast to the usual socialist platitudes expressed at such official events, Kundera's address to the Congress turned the question of 'national existence' into something almost metaphysical. In this speech, he suggested that the effort needed to maintain an independent existence gave the Czechs a broader perspective than that of other nations that have played a larger role in European history. Unlike larger nations which consider their existence as 'beyond all question', the 'somewhat cheerless and intermittent history of the Czech nation, which has passed through the very antechamber of death, gives us the strength to resist any such illusion' (Kundera 1971, p. 169). Kundera traced Czech doubts over their independent existence back to the writer Hubert Gordon Schauer, who challenged the National Revival by asking whether Czech culture was worthy of existence in an independent nation. Such doubts,

Kundera claimed, set the Czechs apart from their larger European neighbours: 'For those European nations who partook in the mainstream of history the European context comes quite naturally . . . For the Czechs nothing was ever a self-evident possession: not even their language nor their European status' (Kundera 1971, p. 171). This, he argues, is where the 'greatness' of Czech culture lies:

The whole course of our nation's history, torn between democracy, fascist enslavement, Stalinism and socialism, and further complicated by its unique nationality problem, features every important issue that has made our twentieth century what it is . . . Our nation then has experienced, I daresay, more than many others have in this century and, if its genius has been alert, it will now know more than the others. (Kundera 1971, p. 176)

Kundera's speech was followed by one from his fellow Moravian, Ludvík Vaculík, who was even more radical in calling for reforms. The controversy over the Congress was one of the first signs of the increasing openness in Czech culture that led to the fully-fledged reform movement in the spring of 1968.

After the Slovak Alexander Dubček was appointed first secretary of the Czechoslovak Communist Party (*Komunistická strana Československa*, KSC), censorship was essentially removed and open criticism of the regime was possible in the mass media for the first time in 20 years. The journal of the Union of Czechoslovak Writers, *Literární noviny*, which had been nearly shut down following the June 1967 Congress, was renamed *Literární listy* and 'became an arts periodical with a circulation of 300,000, the largest in Europe' (Holý 2008, p. 119). In the 4 April 1968 issue of *Literární listy*, Václav Havel published the essay 'On the Theme of an Opposition', which called for a genuine opposition party to the all-powerful Communist Party. Havel who, unlike many of the leading proponents of reform, had never belonged to the Communist Party, evoked 'the strong and specific Czechoslovak democratic and humanistic tradition', and suggested that the new opposition party 'could be a democratic party drawing on this tradition of democracy and humanism'. Even in this bold proposal, however, he urged caution:

Of course, this does not mean that the party would arrogate to itself the right to be the only legitimate representative of democracy, just as the Communist Party cannot arrogate to itself the claim to be the only genuine force of socialism. (Reprinted in Havel 1992, pp. 30–31)

In calling for a genuine choice in politics, Havel not only challenged the 20-year communist dominance of Czechoslovak politics, but insisted that the communists take responsibility for their past mistakes (and crimes): 'the fact that many non-communists saw communist error for what it was at a time when communists did not have the slightest idea they were wrong, needs to be acknowledged in retrospect, however unpleasant this may be' (Havel 1992, p. 33).

By pushing the meaning of the Prague Spring beyond an internal affair between reformist and more orthodox communists to include the large, mostly silent non-communist segment of society, Havel was advocating the same 'power of the powerless' that would later become the main theme of his well-known essay of that title. In contrast with Kundera's abstract concepts of history and national existence,

Havel called for simple (but radical) political action, simply by criticising the existing state of affairs. ‘Self-criticism’, in which Party members who were seen to have deviated from orthodox ideology were forced to apologise for their ‘mistakes’, was a common method of social control under the communists. Havel took this concept further, suggesting that the Communist Party needed to undertake the process of self-criticism as a whole. [In fact, Kundera’s first novel *The Joke* (*Žert*) which had been published in 1967, was one of the earliest attempts to subject the Party to self-criticism from within, by ruthlessly exposing the ideological excesses of the brutally humourless Stalinist years.]

In August 1968, the sweeping social changes in Czechoslovakia were halted by the invasion of Soviet and other Warsaw Pact troops. Dubček and other Czechoslovak leaders were forcibly taken to Moscow, and upon their return, all hopes of continuing reform were shattered. However, a feeling of popular resistance persisted among the Czechs and Slovaks well into the following year and reached its pinnacle in the self-immolation of Jan Palach in January 1969. In the uncertain period following the invasion, before full press censorship had been reimposed, *Literární listy* reappeared for a brief time under the shortened title *Listy*, and in December 1968, Milan Kundera published an essay in *Listy* under the title ‘*Český úděl*’ (‘The Czech Destiny’).¹ Returning to his ideas from the congress of the previous year, he argued that in contrast to ‘great nations’ whose sheer size guarantees their existence, small nations must constantly ‘create values’ that give them the right to exist. Again he rhetorically cited Schauer’s scepticism: ‘Was it really worth it to set our small nation back up in the middle of Europe? What values does it bring or intend to bring to humanity?’ He suggested that with the Prague Spring, the Czechs and Slovaks ‘had directed their challenge at the world’. However, ‘this challenge was not based on the Czechoslovaks wanting to replace the present socialist model with another one, just as authoritarian and suitable for export’. (Kundera makes a notable shift here from ‘Czechs and Slovaks’ to the more unified ‘Czechoslovaks’ within the space of two sentences.)

The meaning of the Czechoslovak challenge was something else: to show what limitless democratic possibilities had been lying fallow till then in the socialist social project, and to show that these possibilities can only develop when an individual nation’s political identity is fully set free. (Kundera 1968, p. 3)

Counting on unified public support for the goals of the Prague Spring, he also attested to his ‘enormous hope for the future’ (Kundera 1968, p. 3). In his conclusion, Kundera praised Czech patriotism for being based not on ‘fanaticism’ but on ‘critical thinking’.² He warned, however, against the ‘critical stance of the weak’ that becomes pessimistic

¹The translations of Kundera’s ‘Czech Destiny’ essay and Havel’s response are those of the present author (the title has been translated elsewhere as ‘The Czech Fate’ and ‘The Czech Lot’). The full debate was recently published in English for the first time; see Baer (2006, pp. 140–63). The original Czech texts were reprinted in *Literární noviny*, 52, 2007, pp. 18–20, and are available on the journal’s web archive at www.literarky.cz, accessed July 2008.

²In Czech, he used the rather theoretical term *kriticismus* rather than the more common ‘criticism’ or *kritika*.

and ‘creates the ideal climate for defeat’ (Kundera 1968, p. 5). For him, there was a second, positive form of:

critical thinking ... which is capable of unmasking illusions and presumed certainties, but is itself full of self-confidence ... This critical thinking, which caused the whole Czechoslovak Spring and held out against the attacks of lies and irrationality in the autumn, does not belong just to some elite, but as we have seen, it is the greatest virtue of the entire nation. (Kundera 1968, p. 5)

Kundera’s assertion that Czech culture’s unique ‘genius’ allowed it to ‘resist illusion’, from the 1967 Fourth Congress speech, was echoed in his claims for a uniquely Czech form of critical thinking that could preserve the spirit of reform even in the face of a military occupation.

The same term ‘critical thinking’ played an important part in Václav Havel’s response to Kundera’s essay, published in the journal *Tvár* in January 1969. Havel’s scepticism was apparent from his title, which simply added a question mark to Kundera’s ‘The Czech Destiny?’ As Kieran Williams has explained, Havel ‘mourned [Kundera’s] article as an example of typical Czech myopia (celebrating past glories rather than addressing present needs) and passive patriotism (rationalising a disaster as a moral victory)’ (Williams 1997, p. 183). Just as Kundera used the term of ‘Czech patriot’ to indirectly praise his own critical stance, Havel (1968/1969, p. 5) used it to indirectly criticise Kundera: ‘Whenever the Czech patriot does not have enough courage (without which, of course, real criticism is unthinkable) to look the cruel but *open* present in the face, he turns to the better but *closed* past when everyone was united’. This position, Havel charges, was ‘dangerous’ because it drew one’s attention away from ‘the tense questions of today ... Let it flaunt the words “traditional Czech critical thinking” (*tradičním českým kriticismem*) a hundred times, this attitude is not critical in the least: it flees from *criticism* (*kritika*) into *illusion*’ (Havel 1968/1969, p. 5). Havel made a subtle but key semantic shift here from Kundera’s term ‘critical thinking’ (with an intellectual, even literary connotation) to the more general *kritika* or ‘criticism’, a highly politicised term in the socialist context. The gap between these two terms illustrates the difference between these two key figures of 1968: for Kundera, literature and culture lay at the heart of Czech survival, while for Havel, true criticism called for concrete acts of resistance.

The end of Central Europe: a new beginning

Kundera’s early optimism about the lasting effects of the Prague Spring soon proved to be unrealistic. The ‘Czech Destiny’ polemic was among the last writing that either Kundera or Havel were permitted to publish in Czechoslovakia until the fall of communism 20 years later.³ By late 1969, Dubček had been forced entirely from power, and thousands of writers, intellectuals and academics who had publicly supported the reforms were gradually removed from their jobs and pushed into

³See Matějka (1990) for an overview of this polemic and its repercussions in the Czech intellectual community.

manual labour; a widespread cultural purge that was officially known as Normalisation. During this period, Havel followed his earlier commitment to political engagement, which brought him continuous difficulties with the regime. In his open letter of April 1975 to President Gustav Husák, Havel returned to the importance of culture for a nation's existence:

It is culture that enables a society to enlarge its liberty and to discover truth—so what appeal can it have for the authorities who are basically concerned with suppressing such values? There is only one kind of truth they recognize: the kind they need at the given moment. (Havel 1986, p. 16)

Jan Vladislav has described this letter as 'an undoubted milestone in the history of the Czech spiritual resistance of the seventies' (Havel 1986, p. xv). Havel further developed the question of truth in his famous call for 'living in truth' in his 1978 essay, 'The Power of the Powerless'. A decade after the Prague Spring, he reflected on its legacy for the current struggle between the regime and the small but growing opposition:

The Prague Spring is usually understood as a clash between two groups on the level of real power: those who wanted to maintain the system as it was and those who wanted to reform it. It is frequently forgotten, however, that this encounter was merely the final act and the inevitable consequence of a long drama originally played out chiefly in the theatre of the spirit and the conscience of society. And that somewhere in the beginning of this drama, there were individuals who were willing to live within the truth, even when things were at their worst . . . One thing, however, seems clear: the attempt at political reform was not the cause of society's reawakening, but rather the final outcome of that reawakening. (Havel 1986, p. 60)

This essay was widely reprinted in English and became Havel's most influential piece among Western readers. He became even better known, however, due to his role as a leading spokesperson for Charter 77, an attempt by a small group of 'dissidents' (although Havel himself distanced himself from that term) to 'live in truth' under a regime that had attempted to crush all forms of independent thought.

Kundera emigrated to France in 1975, and four years later his first novel to be written in exile, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (*Kniha smíchu a zapomnění*), was published in French translation.⁴ This novel begins with one of the most famous images in his work:

In February 1948, Communist leader Klement Gottwald stepped onto the balcony of a Baroque palace in Prague to address the hundreds of thousands of his fellow citizens packed into Old Town Square. It was a crucial moment in Czech history—a fateful moment of the kind that occurs once or twice in a millennium. (Kundera 1980, p. 3)

⁴The Czech original appeared two years later, published by the exile press 68 Publishers in Toronto.

This description of the communist takeover of Czechoslovakia focuses on the Slovak communist Vlado Clementis, who was later executed in the infamous show trials of 1953. According to the narrator, Clementis was standing next to Gottwald and gave him his fur cap, but after his execution, he was airbrushed out of all the photographs of this famous event, leaving only his cap behind. Thus he becomes a symbol for one of Kundera's central themes: 'the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting'. The passage is notable for its reference to the 'fateful moment' that turned Czech history from its millennium of Western orientation toward the East, which alludes both to the 'Czech destiny', and the sense of tragedy that he would develop in his subsequent essays. However, this description, which seems to a Western reader to bear the authority of historical truth, is an example of the unreliability of Kundera's narrative voice. Petr Bílek, for example, points out that the 'Baroque palace' in Old Town Prague is actually Rococo (Bílek 2000, p. 42); Kundera was surely aware of this, but presumably changed it because the latter architectural style has less literary resonance. Such changes, whether minor or major, show the liberties that Kundera was willing to take with historical facts in his novels. Cut off by censorship from the Czech reading public, he was now writing almost entirely for Western readers, leading him to simplify some details of the Czech cultural and historical context for a version of 'truth' that he saw as more aesthetically and philosophically effective outside of that context.

At roughly the same time, Kundera also began to write a series of cultural and political essays in French that increased his prominence as a leading figure of Central European culture—a term he himself reclaimed from disuse after four decades. Philip Roth (1980) published an interview with him in *The New York Times Book Review* in November 1980, which was reprinted as an afterword in early English-language editions of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*.⁵ In response to Roth's suggestion that the 'fates of Eastern Europe and Western Europe' were 'radically different matters', Kundera (1980, p. 10) explicitly compared the Czech destiny to the similar fates of other 'small nations' of the region: 'Bohemia, Poland, Hungary, just like Austria, have never been part of Eastern Europe . . . It was here, in Central Europe, that modern culture found its greatest impulse'. He continued with his insistence on 'Russian civilization' as entirely opposed to 'Western culture', and with the insinuation (highly provocative at that time of high tension between the two superpowers) that what happened to much of Central Europe could happen to Western Europe as well:

The post-war annexation of Central Europe (or at least its major part) by Russian civilization caused Western culture to lose its vital centre of gravity. It is the most significant event in the history of the West in our country, and we cannot dismiss the possibility that the end of Central Europe marked the beginning of the end for Europe as a whole. (Kundera 1980, p. 10)

Compared to his writings in 1967–1968, he made two important shifts in his argument, turning his focus from 'Czech destiny' to the broader fate of Europe, and suggesting

⁵Roth had visited Prague several times in the 1970s and was one of Kundera's earliest and strongest supporters in American literary circles.

that the post-1968 ‘tragedy’ in Prague foreshadowed the future fall of Western culture itself.

‘The Tragedy of Central Europe’, published in 1984, challenged the Western reader’s assumptions about the immutable division of Europe into East and West. ‘There are no longer any illusions about the regimes of Russia’s satellite countries’, he argued. ‘But what we forget is their essential tragedy: these countries have vanished from the map of the West’ (Kundera 1984a, p. 103). Although the boundaries of his Central Europe are roughly those of the former Austro–Hungarian Empire, he insisted, ‘Central Europe is not a state: it’s a culture or a fate. Its borders are imaginary and must be drawn and redrawn with each new historical situation’ (Kundera 1984a, p. 106). He described this fate as the ‘great *common situations* that reassemble peoples, regroup them in ever new ways along the imaginary and ever-changing boundaries that mark a realm inhabited by the same memories, the same problems and conflicts, the same common tradition’ (Kundera 1984a, p. 107, emphasis in original). Kundera accused the Soviet Union of suppressing the national aspirations of its subject states, but Western Europe was also to blame for forgetting its common history; and he warned that this might be a fatal mistake: ‘in our modern world where power has a tendency to become more and more concentrated in the hands of a few big countries, *all* European nations run the risk of becoming small nations and of sharing their fate’ (Kundera 1984a, p. 109, emphasis in original). One of the essay’s notable claims referred to the Jews not only as ‘the principal cosmopolitan, integrating element in Central Europe’ but also as the ‘small nation par excellence’, moving Kundera’s ‘realm’ further away from existing political borders and toward a cultural identity (Kundera 1984a, pp. 107–08).

While this passionate attack on the Russian domination of the Eastern bloc moved away from Kundera’s earlier emphasis on Czech culture, it borrowed elements from his previous essays. Drawing on the issue of ‘national existence’ from his 1967 speech, Kundera defined a small nation as ‘one whose very existence may be put in question at any moment; a small nation can disappear and it knows it’ (Kundera 1984a, p. 108). In his attack on the Russian domination of the ‘small nations’ of Central Europe, Kundera suggested that this ‘family of small nations has its own vision of the world, a vision based on a deep distrust of History . . . The people of Central Europe . . . represent the wrong side of this History: its victims and outsiders’ (Kundera 1984a, p. 108). From ‘The Czech Destiny’, Kundera recycled the idea of ‘fate’, simply applying it to the region as a whole. His prediction of ‘the beginning of the end for Europe’ in the Roth interview was echoed in his statement in the later essay: ‘Thus it was in this region of small nations who have “not yet perished” that Europe’s vulnerability, all of Europe’s vulnerability, was more clearly visible before anywhere else’ (Kundera 1984a, p. 109). Kundera’s message that much of the communist bloc was inherently and immutably West European in its traditions was welcomed by its Western readers at the height of Cold War tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States, and his essay became widely cited in political contexts far removed from the circles of literary scholarship.

Efforts to develop a critique of the East–West division of Europe (and to break down Western indifference to the fate of Eastern Europe) date back to the earliest years of the Cold War, most notably in Czesław Miłosz’s book *The Captive Mind* (1955). However, the use of the term ‘Central Europe’ to imply that part of Europe’s

Western culture had been lost to communist rule only became widely accepted after Kundera's 'Tragedy of Central Europe', which became a starting point for an international discussion that focused on the connections between the Central European cultures. This debate, which included the Hungarian writer György (Georg) Konrád and the Yugoslav novelist Danilo Kiš, promoted the concept of a transnational and multicultural 'Central European' identity. Seen from the perspective of the 1980s, the relatively benign autocracy of the Austro-Hungarian Empire seemed to be a lost golden age. According to Vladimír Macura, Kundera used the theme of Central Europe as a 'theoretical expansion of the [themes] he had discussed earlier, without realising that he had not left the language of the National Revival myth' (Macura 1999, p. 74). At the same time, as Macura points out, Czech writers such as Kundera did not draw on the concepts of Central Europe from the early twentieth century by such Austrian and German writers as Friedrich Naumann. Rather, it was as if the theme had been 'born anew' as a 'personal reaction to the trauma of the defeat of the Prague Spring in 1968' (Macura 1999, p. 71). Thus the chief aim of the debate over 'Central Europe' was not pure nostalgia, but an attempt to surmount the existing clash between political ideologies by forming a new sense of interconnected cultural identity. It drew on the humanistic traditions of German and Jewish culture lost during the Nazi and communist periods, and created a new image for the region even before the revolutions of 1989.⁶

Václav Havel's 1985 essay 'An Anatomy of Reticence' implicitly disagrees with Kundera's privileging of Central Europe as a prophetic region, much as he rejected the idea of a uniquely critical Czech spirit in 1968:

I believe that a distinctly central European skepticism is inescapably a part of the spiritual, cultural, and intellectual phenomenon that is central Europe as it has been formed and is being formed by certain specific historical experiences ... [It is] occasionally somewhat incomprehensible in its ... ability to turn a provincial phenomenon into a global anticipation of things to come. At times it gives the impression that people here are endowed with some inner radar capable of recognizing an approaching danger long before it becomes visible and recognizable as a danger. (Havel 1986, p. 175)

Havel himself seemed sceptical of this 'impression', but Kundera remained a key point of reference for his essay. Later in the essay, Havel suggested,

one of the traditions of the central European climate of which I have been speaking is ... an intense fear of exaggerating our own dignity unintentionally to a comic degree, a fear of pathos and sentimentality, of overstatement and what Kundera calls the lyric relation to the world. (Havel 1986, p. 180)

⁶One useful overview of the 'Central European' question as it stood on the verge of the 1989 changes can be found in the edited collection by George Schöpflin and Nancy Wood, *In Search of Central Europe* (1989). The editors note that Kundera refused to allow 'The Tragedy of Central Europe' to be reprinted in this volume, although the majority of the articles are direct reactions to his argument.

He contrasted the self-deprecating irony of the Czech dissidents with the 'earnest, perhaps even somewhat pathetic' outlook of Western peace activists, who do not face serious punishment for their political engagement: 'Since we pay a somewhat higher price for our interest in the destiny of the world, we may also have a stronger need to make light of ourselves, to desecrate the altar, as so aptly described by [Mikhail] Bakhtin' (Havel 1986, p. 183). Havel's ironic sympathy toward these Western activists gives way to sharp criticism: how can they ignore 'the fact that one important European country attacked a small neutral neighbour five years ago, and since that time has been conducting on its territory a war of extermination which has already claimed a million dead and three million refugees?' This indifference toward the 1980 Soviet occupation of Afghanistan fills him with 'total disgust and a sense of limitless hopelessness', heightened by the fact that in 1968 he had shared the Afghans' 'specific historical experience' of Soviet tanks rolling into his homeland (Havel 1986, p. 184). Like Kundera, Havel draws on national and regional history, but he emphasises the common experiences of small, vulnerable nations around the world rather than laying claim to a unique destiny (whether Czech or Central European).

The lightness of history in Kundera's fiction

The same questions of history and nation that underlie Kundera's definition of Czech identity emerged in his best-known novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (*Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí*) (2006a). Its plot follows the interwoven destiny of two couples over a period of nearly 20 years, from the early 1960s to the early 1980s. Tomáš is a surgeon whose years of womanising come to a temporary end when he meets and marries Tereza. After a brief attempt at exile in Switzerland following the Prague Spring, they return to Czechoslovakia, where Tomáš is forced to leave his job and becomes a window-washer. Nonetheless, this gives him the opportunity to resume his sexual conquests, which provokes Tereza's helpless jealousy.

Kundera described the Czech 'euphoria' after the Soviet invasion as a 'drunken carnival of hate', which ended with the return of Alexander Dubček from Moscow, and his speech over the radio, gasping for breath, that made the situation clear to the Czechs: 'the country would have to bow to the conqueror. For ever and ever, it will stutter, stammer, gasp for air like Alexander Dubček' (Kundera 1984c, p. 26). In his essay collection *The Art of the Novel*, Kundera interpreted this passage for his readers: 'Not only must historical circumstance create a new existential situation for a character in a novel, but History *itself* must be understood and analyzed as an existential situation'. He then connected the 'public domain' of the Czech destiny with the private one of Tereza's sexual insecurity: 'in the face of Tomáš's infidelities, she is like Dubček faced with Brezhnev: defenseless and weak' (Kundera 1988, p. 38, emphasis in original). As Helena Kosková has suggested, 'the tragic fate of Tomáš and Tereza has its parallel in the fate of the whole nation, which is itself only a reminder of the mortal danger facing all of European culture' (Kosková 1996, p. 107). While he does not directly refer to the Central European question in this interpretation, Kundera's definition in 'The Tragedy of Central Europe' of the Central Europeans as the 'victims and outsiders' of history seems to have an echo here in Tomáš's 'victimisation' of the faithful but defenceless Tereza.

The narrative voice of Kundera's novels often reflected some of the observations that he made in his politically oriented writings from the same time period. However, a distinction must be made between the point of view in Kundera's essays, which could be taken as a relatively close approximation of the author's views, and the narrative voice in the novels, which often seems deceptively 'essayistic', but should be approached with more caution. Kundera's novels do reflect some of the same concerns as his essays, but as Jan Čulík has explained, 'the narrator's emphatic pronouncements are to be taken as only one of many polyphonic voices and as an invitation to critical thinking' (Čulík 1999, p. 220).

In Part Five of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera introduced his most extensive 'essayistic' observations in the novel:

Anyone who thinks that the Communist regimes of Central Europe are exclusively the work of criminals is overlooking a basic truth: the criminal regimes were made not by criminals but by enthusiasts convinced they had discovered the only road to paradise. (Kundera 1984c, p. 176)

The question of whether the communists were responsible for their party's murderous activity reminds Tomáš of the tale of Oedipus, who put out his own eyes when he realised his acts, even though he had committed them unintentionally. When he hears communists 'shouting in defence of their inner purity' Tomáš thinks, 'as a result of your "not knowing", this country has lost its freedom, lost it for centuries, perhaps, and you shout that you feel no guilt?' (Kundera 1984c, p. 177).

He read the same question of guilt discussed in 'a weekly newspaper published in three hundred thousand copies by the Union of Czech Writers. It was a paper that had achieved considerable autonomy within the regime and dealt with issues forbidden to others' (Kundera 1984c, p. 178). Dissatisfied with the paper's coverage of the issue, Tomáš writes his own essay on the subject, which is printed in this widely circulated newspaper; his refusal to repudiate it after the invasion costs him his job. This weekly is obviously *Literární noviny*, which Kundera described in similar terms, but by name, in 'The Tragedy of Central Europe'. In the essay, Kundera has the following footnote:

The weekly publication, *Literární noviny* (*Literary Journal*), which published 300,000 copies (in a land of ten million people) was produced by the Czech Writers' Union. It was this publication that over the years led the way to the Prague Spring and was afterwards a platform for it . . . The articles devoted to history, sociology and politics were not written by journalists but by writers, historians and philosophers . . . I don't know of a single European weekly in our century that has played as important a historical role nor played it so well. (Kundera 1984b, p. 117)

With its strikingly similar phrasing, this is perhaps the most direct textual link between Kundera's two most influential works; the 'important historical role' that *Literární noviny* played in the Prague Spring was also tied to one of the central moral struggles of the novel.

Later in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, the narrator connects Tomáš's personal dilemma of whether to sign a petition supporting political prisoners to the larger

question of Czech history, comparing the courage of the Czechs in 1618 (which led to their destruction after the Thirty Years War) and their caution in 1938, when

their capitulation led to the Second World War, which in turn led to the forfeit of their nation's freedom for many decades or even centuries . . . If Czech history could be repeated, we should of course find it desirable to test the other possibility each time and compare the results. (Kundera 1984c, p. 223)

This, of course, is impossible:

The history of the Czechs will not be repeated, nor will the history of Europe . . . History is as light as individual human life, unbearably light, light as a feather, as dust swirling into the air, as whatever will no longer exist tomorrow. (Kundera 1984c, p. 223)

Within the space of a few pages, Kundera moves from the active role carried out by *Literární noviny*, a key case of the importance of culture in 'The Tragedy of Central Europe', to a more fatalistic viewpoint echoing his reflections on national 'destiny' from 1968.

The Unbearable Lightness of Being has probably defined the 'Prague Spring' for international readers more than any other novel (and even inspired a film that dramatised the invasion). However, some Czech critics felt that it distorted aspects of their experience. For example, Milan Jungmann (the former Editor-in-Chief of *Literární noviny*) judged Kundera's work in terms of historical accuracy, rather than acknowledging his inaccurate representations as reflecting the limitations of any fictional narrator. Jungmann pointed out how Kundera had erased his own communist past by dismissing his writings from the period before the Prague Spring as 'kitsch' that should be forgotten:

Kundera rejects everything that made him a collaborator in the creation of socialist culture . . . He wants to push into oblivion everything he wrote in its context, everything that indicates his attempt through criticism to find the buried paths leading out of the mess made of Marx's original ideas.

Jungmann (who himself worked as a window-cleaner in the 1970s) took issue with such details as Tomáš being forced to leave his skilled job for menial labour: 'During normalization people from many professions became window-cleaners—journalists, lawyers, priests, historians, diplomats, technicians, etc., but not a single doctor . . . In reality [the police] would have forced him to return [to the hospital]. Here the facts of life are turned upside down' (Jungmann 1988, p. 243).⁷ As Hana Pichová has pointed out, 'Jungmann openly reproaches Western criticism for lack of rigor, scepticism, and questioning in regards to Kundera. All of these qualities, one is led to assume by Jungmann, are inherently and evidently present in the readership behind the iron curtain' (Pichová 2002, p. 106). Twenty years later, when *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* was finally published in the Czech Republic for the first time, Jungmann

⁷For a translation into English, see Goetz-Stankiewicz (1992).

defended his earlier essay from the 'negative response' it had received and accused his critics of not admitting 'any attempt at critical thinking' (Jungmann 2006, p. 11). While Jungmann represents one extreme in the Czech reception of Kundera's work, his scepticism toward Kundera's reinterpretation of the Prague Spring was shared by other Czech writers, including Václav Havel.

In an interview with Karel Hvižd'ala in 1986, Havel returned to the debate over the Czech destiny, placing some of the fictional events of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* in perspective. In response to Hvižd'ala's comparison of Kundera's international success with the 'harsh criticism' his work faced in Prague, Havel asked: 'isn't this continuing fear of being out of step with the rest of the world a clear sign of provincialism?' (Havel 1990, p. 171). Regarding the issues that had emerged in his polemic with Kundera in 1969, he stated: 'I am quite familiar with Kundera's *a priori* scepticism regarding civic actions that have no immediate hope of being effective . . . and I do not share that scepticism'. Discussing the actual writers' petition circulated soon after the beginning of Normalisation, Havel described it as deeply significant, not only from his own experience as a political prisoner drawing support from the solidarity of others, but because 'after fifteen years of antlike work that often seemed Don Quixote-ish', the Czechoslovak government could no longer expect 'that no one will dare criticize it' (Havel 1990, p. 175). Then he turned to Kundera's concept of Central Europe, towards which he was as sceptical as he was toward the idea of 'Czech destiny':

I can't avoid feeling that his notion of a Europe pillaged by Asia, his image of the spiritual graveyard, his idea that amnesia rules history and that history is an inexhaustible source of cruel jokes, all this lends support to the notion that nothing has changed in Czechoslovakia since the beginning of the 1970s, that all those petitions are as hopeless and absurd as they ever were, that they are even more clearly the desperate acts of lost souls who are trying to draw attention to themselves in a way that is tragically empty of meaning. (Havel 1990, p. 176)

Havel suggested that Kundera 'may be something of a prisoner of his own scepticism' because his 'terror of appearing ridiculous . . . prevents him from perceiving the mysterious ambiguity of human behaviour in totalitarian conditions' (Havel 1990, p. 177). This comment reflected (although in more generous terms) Jungmann's accusations of Kundera's simplistic portrayal of events. Finally, alluding specifically to the 'Czech destiny' debate, Hvižd'ala asked Havel about the issue of national identity, as reflected in Gordon Hubert Schauer's question on the need for a Czech nation. Once again, Havel suggested that 'if our national fate depends on anything, then it depends chiefly on how we acquit ourselves in our human tasks' (Havel 1990, p. 180). He explains that he was 'bothered' by Kundera's attempt to explain the Soviet invasion as a fulfilment of 'the ancient Czech destiny . . . What was really a consequence of these events—Czech destiny or fate—was presented as their cause'. Tracing the 'historical alibi' in Kundera's writings (from the 'Czech Destiny' to *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*), Havel found his 'dehumanization of history' as 'an excessive extrapolation of his own disillusionment'. History is not 'elsewhere', he concluded in an apparent allusion to Kundera's novel *Life is Elsewhere*; 'we all

contribute to making it . . . Life does not take place outside history, and history is not outside of life' (Havel 1990, p. 180). In this return to his polemic of nearly 20 years earlier, Havel related Kundera's influential essay 'Tragedy of Central Europe' to his bestselling novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* more directly than have most Western critics. The weakness of the small nations before history, like Dubček before Brezhnev, was not merely the absurd tragedy that Kundera claimed it to be; Havel pointed out once again that resistance to political forces is largely a matter of perspective.

Although Kundera had attempted to move away from the constraints of national identity over the course of the 1980s, by first broadening his concept of 'Czech destiny' to other nations and then turning away from it altogether, his popular appeal, critical success, and moral authority in the West remained closely tied to his Czech background. In a 1989 essay, 'The Rediscovery of Central Europe', Tony Judt alluded to Kundera's 'peculiarly Czech vision', which he described as 'gloomy, sceptical, suspicious, self-critical, and insecure', and continued with the more general observations:

[It] is the Czechs, more than most, who have opened up for debate the original wisdom of destroying the multinational [Habsburg] state, and their sense certainly is that it is Czechoslovakia, as the most western of the lost lands of Europe, that has suffered the most from events since 1918. Between this and the often-noted analogy with the Jewish experience (the Czechs frequently detecting an affinity in the situation and a precariousness about the two peoples), it is not surprising that the Czech understanding of what is at stake in Central Europe, and what has been lost, has been most influential in forming Western opinion. (Judt 1991, pp. 32, 47)

By the end of that year, much of Eastern Europe had been freed from communist rule, but it was the dramatic yet relatively peaceful 'Velvet Revolution' in Czechoslovakia that became (perhaps only second to the opening of the Berlin Wall) a symbol of hope for a better future in the region. While Kundera did not participate in the revolution itself, his writings from the 1980s had laid the foundation for its appropriation by the West as a 'rediscovery' of a forgotten land. However, the events of 1989, which brought Havel to power as the first post-communist (and ultimately last) President of Czechoslovakia, seemed to validate his views over Kundera's on the true legacy of 1968: as a call to civic resistance.

Conclusion

Since the end of communism the differing perspectives of these two key figures have continued to shape the way the Czech nation is perceived in the West. However both Kundera and Havel had a mixed connection with the Czech nation following the end of communism. After Havel's first year or two in power, the reality of politics soured his relationship with the Czechoslovak public, particularly the Slovaks. He was unable to prevent the split of Czechoslovakia into two separate republics, and in 1993, he became the first President of the new Czech Republic. In November of that year, Kundera and Havel were both planning to attend the Prague premiere of the former's

play *Jacques and His Master*, which according to Louis Charbonneau (1993, p. 3B) in a contemporary report, 'would have represented the reconciliation of Czech literature's prodigal son with the father of Czech dissidence under Communism'. In the end, however, Kundera chose not to come. As Charbonneau speculated (reflecting Czech opinions at the time), 'perhaps Kundera's refusal to appear at this event demonstrated not only his notorious contempt for journalists and the media in general, but also that he is still unable to swallow the fact that history proved Havel right and him wrong' (Charbonneau 1993, p. 3B).

Havel remained in power for another decade before finally retiring from politics in 2003. In a speech at Columbia University in 2002, on his last official visit to the United States as Czech President, he observed: 'I am just beginning to understand how everything has, in fact, been a diabolical trap set for me by destiny'. He gently mocked his own reputation in the West as a 'fairy tale hero' insisting, 'there is no more relying on the accidents of history that lift poets into places where empires and military alliances are brought down'. While there was no direct reference to the legacy of the Prague Spring in this speech, Havel referred to his 'opportunity to take part in truly world-changing historical events' which 'has been worth all the traps that lay hidden within it'. He concluded with three 'old certainties', one of which is, 'evil must be confronted in its womb and, if there is no other way to do it, then it has to be dealt with by the use of force' (Havel 2002, p. 4). When he retired from office, he was still revered worldwide as a spokesman for human rights, but some Czechs criticised one of his final decisions as president: adding his official support (now as leader of a NATO member state) to the US-led invasion of Iraq.⁸ In his recent return to his earlier career as a playwright, however, he has met with critical success; his new play *Odcházení* (*Leaving*), that premiered in May 2008 (exactly four decades after the peak of the Prague Spring), was praised by Czech and Slovak critics.⁹

Kundera, by contrast, did not return to Czechoslovakia except for brief visits, and moved away from his native language by beginning to write his novels entirely in French. He did not translate these new books into Czech, yet refused to allow them to be translated by anyone else, thus cutting Czech readers off from most of his work since 1989. While some of these novels are set in France and may be seen as aimed largely at Western readers, even his last novel *Ignorance*,¹⁰ which treats the theme of exiles returning to post-communist Prague, is still not available in Czech. He has republished some of his earlier Czech-language books in the Czech Republic, but has declined to republish others. Oddly, this self-censorship of his own past work parallels the way that his work was cut off from Czech readers by the Czechoslovak regime. In 1991, Kundera's first novel *The Joke* was republished in Czechoslovakia. In the afterword to this edition, he rejects his 'politico-cultural writings from the sixties' as well as 'all those essays meant to explain to the foreign public the essence of the Czech situation' with the exception of the essays

⁸Steiner (2005) examines the moral ambiguity of Havel's initial support for the invasion.

⁹See, for example Uličianska (2008).

¹⁰This was published in French in 2000 and in English translation in 2002.

he included in *The Art of the Novel*.¹¹ He explained that he had written these essays

more to serve my countrymen's cause than to discover and say anything new; with those essays, I did not wish to join in the Czech literary debate and therefore I do not intend to translate them into Czech or republish them. (Misurella 1993, pp. 163–64)¹²

Thus the original edition of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* could scarcely be obtained by Czech readers for over 20 years. Its first publication in the Czech Republic, in 2006, generated intense interest from critics and the reading public, showing his continued importance for Czech culture despite the distance he has maintained from post-communist Czech society (Trávníček 2007).

In his latest collection of essays, *The Curtain*,¹³ Milan Kundera revisited some of the literary and political themes that had preoccupied him 20 years earlier. Despite the vast political changes since that time, he insisted that the cultural distinction between 'large' and 'small nations' has remained the same, and thus his ideal of Europe as 'maximum diversity in minimum space . . . is even more imperilled now' (Kundera 2006b, p. 31). The only way to fully understand literary works, Kundera suggested, is to see them not only in terms of their 'small' national context, and the 'large' world context, but most importantly, in the 'median' regional context. For Czech literature, of course, the 'median' context is Central Europe, and Kundera even mentions his most famous essay on the theme, 'A Kidnapped West, or The Tragedy of Central Europe' (Kundera 2006b, p. 45). Once again he returns to the idea of destiny: 'Is it true that the borders of Central Europe are impossible to trace in any exact, lasting way? It is indeed! Those nations have never been masters of either their own destinies or their borders . . . Their unity was *unintentional*' (Kundera 2006b, p. 46, emphasis in original). Most importantly, however, he makes two different observations, first that his use of 'Central Europe' was inspired by the Prague Spring, the Soviet occupation, and Normalisation, and secondly, that he later used the term for non-political purposes. 'In fact' he asks rhetorically, 'would I myself ever have made use of [the] notion [of Central Europe] if I had not been rocked by the political drama of my native land? . . . There are words drowsing in the mist that, at the right moment, rush to our aid' (Kundera 2006b, p. 46). In the final section of *The Curtain*, Kundera reflected upon 'the Czech writers and artists of the nineteenth century who, within a miraculously brief span of time, had awakened a dormant nation' (Kundera 2006b, p. 155).

During the period following the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, when the very existence of Czech culture seemed to be under threat, he thought of the National Revival: 'A unique situation: the Czechs, all of them bilingual, thus had the chance to choose: to be born or not to be born; to be or not to be'. In this context, Kundera returned to Hubert Gordon Schauer, whose speculations on 'national existence' had

¹¹Even 'The Tragedy of Central Europe' was left out.

¹²The online archive of *The New York Review of Books* lists 'The Tragedy of Central Europe' and other essays by Kundera, but 'at the author's request' these texts are no longer available (accessed May 2008). The *New York Review of Books* online archive is available at: <http://www.nybooks.com/archives/>.

¹³The French original was published in 2005, and an English translation in 2006.

strongly influenced his own thoughts on Czech destiny during this period. He evoked the ‘courage’ of Schauer, who asked: ‘Would we not be more useful to humanity if we joined our spiritual energy to the culture of a larger nation that is already at a far higher level than the nascent Czech culture?’ In the end, Kundera was ‘unable to put myself in my ancestors’ skin’ and understand their motivations; why did they decide ‘to create not merely a poem, a theatre, a political party, but a whole nation, even with its half-lost language?’ (2006b, p. 156). In the final pages of what may be his last work, he concludes not with the accomplishments of Czech literature, but its shortcomings:

Perhaps a novel, a great novel, could have made me understand how the Czechs of that time had experienced their decision. Well, such a novel has not been written. There are cases where nothing can make up for the absence of a great novel. (Kundera 2006b, p. 157)

Kundera’s outlook here is surprisingly pessimistic, dwelling on the historic weakness of Czech culture, rather than the unique ‘vision of history’ of the small nations—perhaps because his nation’s destiny, after the fall of communism, no longer seems in doubt.

The fall of communism and the eastward expansion of the European Union to the shores of the Black Sea has left Kundera’s ‘Tragedy of Central Europe’ so dated that today its lament for Western civilisation appears almost quaint. And yet many of Kundera’s and Havel’s concerns regarding the historical role of ‘small nations’ are still as valid as they were in 1984 or even 1968. Tom Stoppard’s play *Rock ‘n’ Roll* presents a cross-cultural dialogue between British and Czech intellectuals on the meaning of the Prague Spring.¹⁴ The main character Jan (a Czech student at Cambridge who returns to Prague after the Soviet occupation) argues with his friend Ferdinand over the question of national destiny and resistance. In his introduction to the play, Stoppard credits the essays by Kundera and Havel for inspiring this section (Stoppard 2006, p. 4). Forty years after the Prague Spring, its legacy continues to be defined in the West by their debate over the Czech destiny and the need for ‘criticism’ in situations of political crisis.

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¹⁴The play premiered in London in 2006, and was also performed on Broadway and at the Czech National Theatre in 2007.

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