

# Jan Čulík, Mádl's Waves

The Waves of Mádl

1. 7. 2024 / Jan Čulík

Today, 15 August, Jiří Mádl's film *Waves* is released. Let's recall Jan Čulík's review from 1 July 2024, from the Karlovy Vary festival. It's a very well written, acted and directed film, but in certain aspects it is deceptive. It hits the stereotypical anti-communism and Mr. Mádl has no personal experience of 1967.

Surprise: the actor Jiří Mádl wrote and directed an excellent film about famous Prague radio workers, Milan Weiner, Jiří Dienstbier, Věra Št'ováčková, and others, between approximately September 1967 and September 1968.

What a waste of fame. That period around the Prague Spring is an absolutely defining historical milestone for all Czechs and Slovaks, regardless of the fact that some may never have experienced it, that period and the subsequent invasion have influenced their lives to this day, even if they were born after 2000. So - it's a very good film and even though Mr. Mádl didn't experience that period, he studied it very carefully. Of course, the film is based on a fictional story that could have happened, but didn't. However, the behaviour and famous radio appearances of people such as the celebrity Vera Št'ováčková, the editor who broadcast in the days around 21 August 1968, are completely authentic. The broadcast of Wednesday, August 21, 1968, as it appears in this film, is recorded almost 100% accurately according to reality. I still have the recordings that I made from the radio at that time and I know them well. I was really moved by these scenes in the film.

<https://kviff.tv/embed/video/3451-vlny-trailer/cs>

I would, however, view with some reserve Mr. Madl's portrayal of the communist regime of the time - as the enemy, represented first and foremost by the menacing StB, and then by the elderly President Novotny, who comes out in the film with hateful ideological drivel almost like Husák in the 1970s, before resigning at the end of March 1968. The sixties could not have been so liberal if Novotný had performed like Husák later. Rather, my impression is that his regime was rather passive.

Since the Communist Party is actually the enemy in Mádľ's film, the film does not explain in any detail how it could have happened that Alexander Dubček became the first secretary of the Communist Party in January 1968. How could this have happened when, according to Mádľ, the Communist Party was the enemy against which the intrepid editors of Czechoslovak Radio were forced to fight? But how could those courageous radio journalists have gotten into Czechoslovak Radio under the Communist terror? In the film, Milan Weiner is often reprimanded by the radio director for his very fearless performances, but surprisingly, no one fires him. How can that be when the StB was in charge everywhere?

Blisty share

Mádľ's film opens with a famous incident in September 1967, when students at Strahov were preparing for exams, but there were constant power cuts, so they took the candles they had been using to light their dorm and walked down Nerudovka Street to the Vltava River, chanting "We want light". They wanted electricity, but the Prague police interpreted this philosophically as wanting "enlightenment" and so they brutally beat them. Also because the students were heading towards the building by the Vltava River on the other side of the river, where the Communist Party leadership was meeting - so the police were afraid. But the students didn't know that.

Mádľ's film interprets the whole incident almost as if it had happened in the 1950s. Radio was supposedly supposed to broadcast an official statement that the students were rioting and damaging property; Weiner refused to do so, despite the fact that this state statement was printed in all the press. I don't know, except that I know very well that the beating of the students caused a huge outrage in the Communist Party Central Committee itself, where especially the women officials protested that "it is impossible for someone to beat our children like that." Because the members of the Central Committee of the Communist Party were not very bright, there were far-flung, unfocused debates about it, until just before Christmas 1967, when the comrades in the Central Committee of the Communist Party began to protest that they had to go bake Christmas cakes, forcing the party leadership to postpone the meeting until January 5, 1968, when Alexander Dubček was elected head of the party. So Dubček was actually elected as the party's reaction to the beating of the Strahov students. That's not what Mádľ has in the film, nor the protests of the comrades during the autumn.

The main characters in Mádľ's film are two fictional young men, a technician named Tomáš and his younger underage (sixteen/seventeen) brother Pavel, whom Tomáš takes care of after their parents die in a car accident. The young Pavel wants to audition for Weiner's team on the radio, Tomáš is horrified that this is politically dangerous, he tries to prevent it, but it leads to a coincidence that Weiner chooses Tomáš in the audition. Tomáš refuses, but is persuaded to accept the radio job by the Communist Minister of Communications, Karel Hoffmann, the very man who would later shut down the radio transmitters on the night of 21 August 1968 - albeit unsuccessfully. There, he grooms Tomáš as a future informer for the StB, which results in the fact that when the Aesthebans want to get something on the radio editors, they start blackmailing Tomáš, saying that if he doesn't supply them with information from the radio, they will beat his beloved younger brother or send

him to prison, or have his care taken away and send him to an orphanage. Tomáš briefly gives in and becomes an informer for the StB for a period of time because he is afraid for his brother.

I'm not sure that the picture of communist oppression in the autumn of 1967 and such strong StB activity still in that liberal era is convincing. Of course, I can hardly testify to that, I was fifteen, but I had three victims of the communist regime of the 1950s in my family, the family was non-communist, and they didn't seem afraid to express their views publicly from the mid-1960s on. Just think of the number of anti-communist films that have been made in Czechoslovakia since 1963 or so.

I'm also not entirely sure it's true that Czechoslovak Radio was only allowed to use news from CTK and Moscow's TASS, and that it was only Dubček who allowed it to use Western news sources - as Mádl's film says.

Certainly Czechoslovak Radio and CTK used Moscow's TASS as their only source in the 1970s, when they stopped doing news at 11pm because TASS finished at 1am and the time difference between Prague and Moscow was two hours. But even here there were exceptions: when, as an English student in the mid-1970s, I did some broadcasting in the English desk of Prague radio, we were given an erary tape recorder and permission to record and steal news from the BBC's English broadcasts, because the radio management recognized that it would be counterproductive to broadcast Russian ideological drivel in English to the world.

And more on the censorship measures at Czechoslovak Radio before 1968: at a conference I once spoke to Jiri Dienstbier senior (who also features in Madl's film) and complimented him on his excellent 1960s programme Songs with a Telephone, which was broadcast every Tuesday and Friday from 8pm to 11pm. On the show, editors phoned politicians' homes and interviewed them hard. And Mr Dienstbier told me that the programme had been broadcast five years before the Prague Spring, so it was not a product of the Prague Spring.

And he also told me an episode that testified to the enormous degree of solidarity in Prague radio. It happened, Dienstbier said, that there was a power outage in Prague and a minister couldn't play his big old tube radio tuned to the Prague station because the power was out. So he turned on the transistor in the kitchen, which was tuned to the then new VHF radio station, and happened to listen to Milan Weiner's excellent news programme The World Tonight. And Henry Kissinger was interviewed on the program, and the minister was upset that the interview was completely Western. The next day he called the radio station and asked for a transcript of the program and a recording, saying he would "draw the consequences." So what to do. Mr. Dienstbier asked his secretary to transcribe the program on a typewriter, then cut out all the subversive sentences from the transcript and asked the technicians to edit the broadcast recording accordingly, rewind the recording to a clean tape, and send the tape and transcript to the ministry with a shortened version of the transcript.

Silence followed, "the Minister seems to have made a mistake". According to Mr Dienstbier, such a degree of cooperation and solidarity has never been seen in radio again.

All right, but if they were interviewing Kissinger, is the statement in Mádl's film true that they were only allowed to use TASS news until 5 January 1968?

One more important thing. Unlike the Red Army's military intervention in Hungary in 1956, which massacred thousands of people there, Russian soldiers arrived in Czechoslovakia with strict orders not to shoot at the civilian population. This was documented by the American political scientist Fred Eidlin in his work *The Logic of Normalisation*. He found that during the Prague Spring, the staff of the Russian embassy in Prague were afraid to inform Moscow that a huge democratic revolution was raging in Czechoslovakia. They told Moscow that it was just a conspiracy of a few tens of thousands of intellectuals and journalists and that the nation continued to love the Soviet Union. Therefore, the Russian soldiers were ordered not to shoot, just to liquidate those intellectuals, and those people who were killed in August 1968 were overwhelmingly the result of accidents.

Of course, it was not possible to liquidate those intellectuals because the army and the Russian leadership in Moscow was completely taken by surprise by the huge anti-Soviet public reaction. It was the only thing that saved the lives of Dubček and the other members of the Communist Party leadership who were taken to Moscow: Brezhnev thought it would be more tactful to let Dubček go back to Prague, force him to surrender in a compromise, leave him in power for a few months until things calmed down, and then liquidate him in a dry way, which is what happened.

I find the scene in Mádl's film when the Russian soldiers shoot up the car with the students delivering leaflets and kill them unconvincing, because during that week in August all the daily and weekly newspapers came out several times a day, often with only a few black and white pages, and the vans from the printing houses delivered it around the city and distributed it to passers-by. I still have the paper at home. I also doubt that Moscow referred to the Prague Spring as fascism, I think it was inspired by what Putin is now saying about Ukraine. But of course they didn't like the Prague Spring reforms.

Despite these few present-day ideological panders to anti-communism, and probably some distortions (at one point, a citizen is said to have been listening to Prague radio in August 1968 on a small transistor radio, which I am almost 100% convinced did not start being imported from the Baltic countries until sometime around 1975, I bought one myself and listened to Free Europe and the BBC on it - the production of these small radios with very detailed shortwave was a kind of revenge of the Baltic countries on Moscow) and despite the fictional line of two brothers, Tomas and Pavel, Madl's portrait of Czechoslovak Radio in 1968 is an excellent tribute to the heroic editors whose names should be much more in the public consciousness today.

Comments

Pavel Urban 18 Aug 09:14 0

A few hours after I saw this film in the cinema, I dare to write the following:

It is indeed a very well written, acted and directed film. At least for today's times. I agree with Mr. Čulík on that. It is a film that can bring the years 1967-68 closer to those who know about as much about them as my generation knows about the Estates Uprising. (It happened centuries ago and ended in defeat at White Mountain. The more informed will still remember the defenestration, the Habsburgs and the Old Town Execution.) The price for this accessibility is the restriction to Prague Radio and its role in 1967-68. And especially during the week of resistance after the occupation. This is not a film about the Prague Spring. And certainly not about the Communist Party. The key position of General Secretary of the Communist Party is not mentioned at all in the film. This led the filmmakers to make Novotny persona number 1 even when he was already effectively a political corpse. For more attentive viewers, this may also cause some confusion; what was Dubček when Ludvík Svoboda became president? (Fortunately, that's mentioned in the film.) But maybe it's better that way. The duality of the positions of President and General Secretary would be hard enough to explain in the film. And any sense of ambiguity may lead to a quest for more information.

Even more so, the entire power struggle in the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in the last months of 1967 that led to Novotny's downfall is omitted.

On Mr Čulík's reservations. Antonín Novotný as President is undeniably an interesting and today unjustly overlooked personality. He was a man personally close to Khrushchev, yet, or perhaps precisely because, they were completely different personalities. Khrushchev pushed through his election as President of the Czechoslovakia and Novotny remained loyal to him for a few years beyond the political grave. (In his telegram to Moscow he hinted at doubts about the correctness of Khrushchev's removal. That was a lot for a Soviet satrap.) He therefore continued to loosen up politically for the next few years. By 1967, however, he was already putting the brakes on. At the end of the year, when he felt that the CPSU Central Committee wanted to dismiss him, he even plotted a coup with the help of the army. (This was foiled by the Soviet leader Brezhnev, who had not forgotten his doubts after his (Brezhnev's) election, and was not happy with his (Novotny's) current contacts in the Kremlin.) So Novotny could have easily uttered the ideological gibberish in the film at the time depicted in the film. Whether he was given the space to do so in January-March 1968 is another question.

The StB did not rule everywhere. And the film doesn't claim that either. Stalin and his disciples were well aware that this good servant could easily become an evil master. In 1967, the StB's options were limited compared to the 1950s. It was still true, however, that if the StB acted according to instructions from above, then it had quite a lot of freedom of action, including, to put it mildly, a very loose interpretation of the formally applicable laws.

How it was then with the takeover of agency intelligence, I don't know. But the interview with Kissinger taken by his own editor was not taken over. So it did not violate any prohibition against taking news from agencies other than TASS and CTK.

If tanks or cars of the occupiers ran over anyone on 21 August and the following days, it could have been an accident. But those shot who actually existed can hardly be described as an accident. It is true that the occupation soldiers were ordered not to shoot. But it is also true that no one had prepared them for the situation they encountered in Czechoslovakia. Their task of securing the situation could have easily come into conflict with the prohibition to shoot. And if a Soviet soldier had allowed himself to be disarmed, God forbid (all it took was a feeling that something like that was imminent), then it probably wouldn't have helped him much later to invoke the no-fire order. In the film, the car with the students is shot up after it tries to escape the Soviet soldiers who try to intercept it. I don't know if this event actually took place, but it is not inconsistent with the described atmosphere of generally unhindered distribution of leaflets and newspapers.

Wenzel Lischka 16 Aug. 18:15 0

The article is too long for me, I am not able to read it carefully. Comments also long - they are for separate articles. I don't know, but in 1968 it was possible to buy a transistor in Tuzex. Then during the normalisation period the best radio for receiving foreign broadcasts was communicated in the USSR. Until August 21, 1968 we loved the USSR. We saw the occupation as a betrayal by a friend...

Miloslav Zima 1. čvc. 18:07 1

I understood from the article that the film, as is common in the Czech Republic, is not a documentary, but art. And basically anything can be sold as art. This perhaps explains some of the situations and circumstances described, which somewhat contradict experience. These are mainly the following:

-- The real cause of the Prague Spring was the economic situation of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic and the proposal for a solution as elaborated by Ota Šik. Since the proposed measures threatened the position of the nomenklatura, they were unacceptable to it.

-- If the students had an influence on events, it was probably not with the summer demonstration, but when it came to the Christmas of '67. It was freezing cold and the boiler room was completely spit out. The students responded with spirals of irons, cookers,... ..and from the Myslicks they strung up in their rooms. It was dangerous, effective and spectacular, the windows emitting a red glow, promising the young men not only warmth but the pleasures of the decadent West. Since the wiring didn't allow for such a load, the power went out frequently. This was to be remedied by a rather long trench running around the premises. Presumably because there were clusters of students arriving by buses at that trench, SNB forces were stationed there, perhaps to keep anyone from getting run over. And yet, somehow, one overzealous SNB got too involved, and fell into the trench, losing his hat, baton, and a few other utensils in the process. The cap was used to play football on campus, and the depiction of events between the SNB and the students was diametrically opposed. After this extempore, the SNB did not come again, but the next evening, 603 arrived. A small, inconspicuous guy with a chauffeur. When they recognized Tonda, a crowd gathered around him. There was discussion, but nothing was heard. A couple of handsome guys discovered a fireman's ladder, which they directed and inserted into the crowd so that it was over Tonda. They climbed it briskly, so it tilted, allowing it to rush back up. Those at the top panicked and some jumped into the crowd so it could come back and jam. During the discussion, the area between the tracks in the background was illuminated. This went out after a transformer exploded about 10m from Tondy. Whereupon Tonda exclaimed, "Someone designed this too, comrades". Maybe it was too romantic for Tonda, so he promised to come back and left. But that would have been pointless.

-- The division between progressive and conservative was not only in the Central Committee, but also in the media, which editor was on duty on which day...

-- The conservatives were burdened by various affairs (Gen Janko, Gen Šejna, Barák, .....), which cast various suspicions and shadows on the regime.

-- Whether willingly or unwillingly, it has succeeded in involving reasonable people in social life by removing the importance of belonging to a special caste and by recognising the principle of performance. Neither the normalisers nor today's so-called democrats prefer to even attempt both because they see in it a right personal threat. Nor do the solid people develop any ambition to go among what today's elites represent.

Josef Poláček 1. čvc. 11:52 1

I haven't seen the film myself, so I can't comment competently on its quality and persuasiveness. I can only say in general that films made in the post-Soviet era about the times of "totalitarianism" usually look more or less the same as the regime's ideological films, only with the opposite sign. These anti-communist films are characterized by the same ideological schematism, the same bias, the same spasmodic expression. But as I said, this statement is not a statement about this particular film.

If I am not familiar with this film myself, on the other hand, I have a lifelong and intense interest in the reformist Prague Spring of the time, its course and what preceded it. Here it really must be stated: in the period before the reform process began, both Czechoslovak society and the party itself (including its leadership) were deeply divided. The Communist Party at that time was not a unified ideological monoblock. Yes, there was a conservative, dogmatic leadership around A. Novotny; but on the other hand, it must be remembered that there were still very many people in the party itself (i.e., at its base) who sincerely believed in the humanist mission of socialism. And these sincere socialists (or communists) began to voice their demands for the revival of the party whenever they felt the opportunity. It was after the year fifty-six that the crimes of Stalin first came to light. This was also the case during the 1960s, when it became increasingly clear that the Stalinist regime was, above all economically, going downhill - and that fundamental reforms were therefore absolutely inevitable.

So there were tensions virtually all the time between the membership (but also some high officials) on the one hand, and the Novotny leadership on the other. It was only towards the end of 1967 that an escalation finally took place (the student protests mentioned by Mr Čulík played only a minor role). The decisive factors were probably different: firstly, the uproar of the Slovaks, whom Novotný had severely offended during his visit to Bratislava. And secondly, it was revealed that Novotný used his presidential funds to corrupt leading party officials in order to maintain their loyalty. And as one of the memoirs (Mlynář? Havlíček?) sarcastically noted, the indignation of the other members of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, rather than the act of corruption itself, was aroused primarily by the fact that they themselves (mostly) were not among the chosen ones who would benefit from Novotny's "attentions".

By the way, as for the story reported by Mr Čulík that the key December meeting of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia was interrupted by the comrades present on the grounds that they "needed time to bake Christmas pastries" - yes, this story was circulated for years, but just recently I read that the whole thing was somewhat different, namely that this interruption was staged by Novotny himself, who must have feared that if there was any resolution it would be directed against him. In the time gained, according to this account, he was planning - a military coup! (This interpretation is by no means out of place, indeed there were at that time very suspicious movements of military forces on the territory of Prague.)

Once again, then, in conclusion: if this film presents the communist regime of the time as uniformly dogmatic and anti-democratic, then it is indeed a very simplistic, if not downright untrue, picture, to say the least. There were many among the membership of the Communist Party, as well as in its leadership itself, who were pro-reform and therefore pro-democracy. (Indeed, there was an absolutely exact parity in this respect in the Party's highest organ of power, its Central Committee. - Which was, of course, in a way, the stumbling block: while on the one hand it was possible to overthrow Novotny, on the other hand Dubček still had no convincing majority for his reforms and therefore had to constantly vacillate between the two camps.)



P.S. A small note: I would be rather sceptical of Mr Čulík's claim that the Czechoslovak people "saved the lives" of the Czechoslovak delegates at the Moscow talks by their determined resistance to the occupation. Brezhnev may have been a dogmatist, but it was not Stalin who simply had his opponents shot. It is a fact that in the extremely tense situation of the time, the Czechoslovak leaders (with the exception of President Svoboda, forcibly taken to Moscow) could subjectively have feared the worst; but realistically they were hardly threatened with anything more than a few years in internment at most.