

The Philosopher-King: Vaclav Havel and the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia

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Above all, any existential revolution should provide hope of a moral reconstitution of society... A new experience of being, a renewed rootedness in the universe, a newly grasped sense of 'higher responsibility,' a new-found inner relationship to other people and to the human community...¹

As a playwright, author and political dissident, Vaclav Havel had the largest individual impact on Czechoslovakia's Velvet Revolution of 1989. Through his popular advocacy of human rights, freedom of speech, and freedom of expression, Havel set the stage for what would be one of history's most peaceful revolutions ever. Although Havel was continually at the forefront of the Czech dissident movement throughout the sixties and seventies, he was never considered its "leader" until he was thrust into that role late in 1989. It was then that the people of Czechoslovakia raised their voices in the remarkable, yet still unfamiliar spirit of democracy and freedom, and chose Havel to be their president. They remembered what he had done as a playwright, providing them with thought-provoking plays aimed at awakening their long-oppressed minds. Furthermore, they knew him as the author of countless dissident writings, including the infamous *Charter 77*, one of the first attempts by Czech citizens at having open discussion with the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (CPC).¹ Despite numerous attempts by government officials to stifle Havel's revolutionary inclinations, he eventually emerged as both the voice and the conscience of a new, free Czechoslovakia.

In the decades prior to Havel's rise to national prominence, Czechoslovakia had undergone a number of shifts in the balance of

political power. Beginning in 1918 and until the years preceding World War II, Czechoslovakia would remain a democratic state. However, in 1938 President Emil Hacha acquiesced to the demands of Adolf Hitler and Czechoslovakia became a German Protectorate. The Czechoslovak experience under German rule was that of widespread persecution and stifled speech, conditions eerily similar to what they would undergo under Communist rule. Ultimately, more than fifty thousand Czechoslovaks would die as a result of German occupation. Following Germany's defeat in 1945, Czechoslovakia was to fall into the hands of the U.S.S.R., ushering in a new era of political oppression. Stalinization, the term used to describe Czechoslovakia's forced movement from "bureaucratic centralism" to communism, would remain in effect for two more decades.

Years of economic stagnation and political oppression led to a reform of Stalinistic policies during the 1960s. The program, spearheaded by liberal members of the CPC and with the support of the people, had begun to gain momentum. Alexander Dubcek, a moderate reformist appointed to become the new chair of the CPC in 1968, would push the movement further along by proposing 'a new model of socialism,' profoundly 'democratic' and 'national.'² Eventually, Moscow took the side of the antireformists and in August 1968, Soviet forces entered Prague, effectively ending Dubcek's "Prague Spring."³ Although the movement towards democracy was abruptly put to a halt, the events surrounding Prague in 1968 would be used as a rallying cry for student demonstrators in 1989.

Normalization, the process whereby all reformist elements of the CPC were purged, immediately followed Prague Spring. Dubcek,

along with many other reformist leaders of the CPC, was ousted from his position.⁴ Students demonstrated in opposition to the Soviet presence, and one young man would perform a public suicide to condemn Soviet aggression.⁵ One of the main foundations the new regime rested on was the "strict control over the spread of ideas, involving a purge of all institutions engaged in the dissemination of knowledge and culture."⁶ This new policy would have a debilitating effect on many writers and artists, especially those from the theatre. Many would flee the country in the years following its inception in order to work in "free" countries. Among the more adversely affected was Vaclav Havel, a playwright and political dissident who, during the Prague Spring, had initiated efforts to bring democracy to the Czechoslovak government.⁷ While many of his colleagues were leaving the country in hopes of acquiring their freedom elsewhere, Havel decided to remain in Czechoslovakia and fight on. It would ultimately be his contributions to the dissident movement that would help lay the foundations of the revolution in 1989.

Before he emerged at the forefront of the Czech dissident movement, and throughout his life, Havel was involved in a number of dissident groups. Early on, at the age of fifteen, Havel helped found the "Thirty-sixers," a group of young intellectuals, all born in 1936, that would meet regularly and engage in heated debates over political issues.⁸ Years later, Havel would look back on those meetings and fear what could have happened, "If we'd been five years older, we'd have almost certainly ended up in Mirov [a Stalinistic concentration camp]; in those days, you could easily get twenty years for that kind of thing."⁹ This reluctance to yield to authority would present itself time and again, as Havel would become an active member of the Czech dissident movement.

Havel took his largest step into the movement in 1965 when he became one of the editors of *Tvar*, a literary magazine intended for young people.¹⁰ It was at this time that Havel first considered himself a member of the underground movement. "It was a step that turned out to be far more important in my life than it first appeared to be...it was the beginning of something deeper-my involvement

in cultural and civic politics-and it ultimately led to my becoming a 'dissident.'¹¹ As an editor of *Tvar*, Havel would continually encounter resistance from the government as to what could be published and what couldn't. He would remain a part of the controversial journal until 1969, when it was officially banned by the government.¹²

In addition to his forays into the dissident movement, Havel was also a prominent playwright whose work was considered integral in redefining the citizen's role in society. He began his career at the ABC Theatre in Prague, where he learned just how much power the theatre possessed. Biographer Michael Simmons described Havel's theatrical education this way: "Social and political points, he realised, could be made in an oblique way, even in a surrealist way, using faraway or even non-existent settings for a very apposite argument."¹³ Moreover, Havel realized that he could now give life to what had previously been inanimate thoughts and ideas. Actions on the stage would represent events from real life, thereby offering audience members the chance to view their everyday lives in a stark, new light. Through the theatre, Havel could "strip away illusions, and reveal an authentic, vital 'truth' which, without further meditation, holds equally within and outside the theatre."¹⁴ The enormous production of works that followed would ultimately lay the foundation for an upheaval – the type the world had never seen.

In *The Garden Party*, Havel utilized the themes of repetition and predictability to create an atmosphere similar to what his audience experienced on an everyday basis. After a great deal of practice, the main character, Hugo, discovered a way to control others where they had once controlled him. After this achievement, however, Hugo's life became inundated with predictability and repetition. At the time that *The Garden Party* premiered in 1963, these same themes were prevalent in Czechoslovak society. Thus, audience members were forced to regard their society in terms of its inherently disordered nature. The CPC had repeatedly broken promises to end Stalinization, and the public had grown weary. Havel was merely imitating the government's own ineptitude, and at the same time, offering opposition to it.

Various other absurdist themes presented themselves in Havel's plays that, in turn, represent opposition to the CPC. *The Memorandum*, produced in 1965, was an Orwellian play that focused on the problems that a new, bureaucratic language called Ptydepe introduced to society. The play was meant to mock the government's often-incomprehensible language. In *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration*, produced in 1968, a man is imprisoned by a machine, although in a "quasi-homely setting." Here, Havel compared "the system" to a manipulative machine, and members of society are its victims.¹⁵ Although Havel did not actually attempt to incite rebellion through themes in his plays, he did succeed in forcing audience members to see things as they truly are. Havel himself expressed this desire in *Disturbing the Peace: A Conversation with Karel Hvizdala*:

My ambition is not to soothe the viewer with a merciful lie or cheer him up with a false offer to sort things out for him. I wouldn't be helping him very much if I did. I'm trying to do something else: to propel him, in the most drastic possible way, into the depths of a question he should not, and cannot, avoid asking; to stick his nose into his own misery, into my misery, into our common misery, by way of reminding him that the time has come to do something about it.¹⁶

For years, Havel was able to take advantage of the freedom the theatre gave him. The Prague Spring, however, had frightened the leadership of the CPC enough that they began to crack down with their method of "normalization." In 1971, the government forbade publication and production of any of Havel's plays, and eventually, all his works were prohibited from being accessed.¹⁷ Although the CPC was somewhat successful in stopping the production of his plays, Havel was able to find an alternate medium through which his dissident opinions could be expressed. Havel would go on to produce a number of essays, letters, and writings attacking the absurdity of the Communist system.

This method becomes clear in Havel's *The Power of the Powerless*, written in 1978.¹⁸ The essay itself is a discussion on the merits of the current Communist system and on the concepts

of freedom and power. Havel begins the essay by justifying the then-current dissident movement growing within Czechoslovakia. He writes that, "It [the dissident movement] is a natural and inevitable consequence...of the system," and that the CPC "can no longer base itself on the unadulterated, brutal, and arbitrary application of power."¹⁹ Moreover, Havel provides an all-out attack on the failure of the government to provide truthful information to its citizens:

Because the regime is captive to its own lies, it must falsify everything. It falsifies the past. It falsifies the present, and it falsifies the future. It falsifies statistics. It pretends not to impose an omnipotent and unprincipled police apparatus. It pretends to respect human rights. It pretends to persecute no one. It pretends to fear nothing. It pretends to pretend nothing.²⁰

Further incidents of the CPC unjustly prohibiting the right of free speech and violating other basic human liberties compelled Havel and a small group of dissidents to create *Charter 77*, an attempt to establish open dialogue with the Czechoslovak government.²¹ The incendiary event that caused the creation of the Charter was the trial for the Plastic People of the Universe (PPU), a Czechoslovak rock band. The band had allegedly created "a public disturbance" by offering "coarse indecencies" and was also indicted for "propagating nihilism and decadence."²² Although everyone who was familiar with the band knew that the charges were unsubstantiated, the trial went on. Eventually, the members of the PPU were found guilty and subsequently sentenced to prison terms.

Havel, however, could not sit idly by as fellow artists were persecuted. He began to organize meetings with fellow dissidents immediately following the trial in order to form a consensus on what needed to be done. *Charter 77*, its founders maintained, was not a political organization, nor was it an attempt to overthrow the CPC. It was a "free, informal and open association" and "everyone who accepted its basic ideas, or took part in its work, was a member."²³ It outlined a number of grievances towards the CPC, including examples of human rights violations, as well as infringements upon

various other freedoms.²⁴ Fellow Chartists decided it appropriate to appoint three spokesmen that would help proliferate the document, two of which were Havel and a philosopher named Jan Patočka.²⁵ It was a bold move by both men to accept being spokesmen, considering that incidents of brutality were widespread throughout Czechoslovakia at the time.

Charter 77 created a stir almost immediately upon its formal declaration in January 1977.²⁶ Some disagreed with it while others signed it without a second thought; the CPC, for obvious reasons, condemned it. Signatories were harassed by the police and some even received death threats as a result of their involvement. Havel would fare no better; his house was searched and he was subjected to police questioning on a daily basis. Despite being sixty-nine years old and in the middle of a severe bout of the flu, fellow spokesman Jan Patočka was also thoroughly interrogated. He, however, was not as physically resilient as his colleagues were; Patočka died of a stroke following one of these sessions.²⁷

Although Patočka would be sorely missed, Havel felt that the Charter had ultimately prevailed and would serve a meaningful purpose for years to come. "The moment it emerged, the interplay of different relationships came alive again. A body that had been thought dead suddenly showed signs of life. The future was an open book once more."²⁸ The "body" that Havel describes here was the Czechoslovak civic body, and even more significant, the young people who had the power and the numbers to effect change. The revolution would take twelve years to surface, but its origins were further reinforced with the production of *Charter 77*.

For his involvement in the writing of *Charter 77*, along with other nonconformist activities, Havel was imprisoned on three different occasions from 1977-1983, the longest term lasting from October 1979 until February 1983.²⁹ Whereas the CPC had hoped to stifle thought through imprisonment, it instead allowed Havel to collect his thoughts and hone his writing skills. Between June 1979 and September 1982, Havel managed to send a large number of unedited letters to his wife Olga, which were in turn smuggled out of the country

and published under the name *Letters To Olga*.³⁰ The correspondence revealed a man, who, while under extreme personal duress, could still philosophize on subjects of importance to the world at large. Freedom, truth and democracy were reoccurring themes in these letters, and not once did he mention regret of any sort.

Upon his release from prison in 1983 until the beginning of the revolution in 1989, Havel continued to produce plays and essays meant at keeping discussion alive. *Temptation*, a play that utilized the Faustian theme but was set to the trappings of normalization, was completed in 1985.³¹ In 1989, Havel wrote "Testing Ground," a short essay that comments on the CPC's failed attempts at implementing perestroika and democratization. In the essay, Havel also refers to a petition called "A Few Sentences" which he helped to initiate and which played a role in bringing dissidents and normal citizens together.³² Soon thereafter, Havel's dream of a democratic Czechoslovakia would become reality as artists, students, and citizens united and changed the political system within their country once more.

The months prior to revolution in November 1989 were very tense; and there was a general consensus among many Czechoslovaks that something vast was looming on the horizon. In January of that year, Havel was once again imprisoned, this time for laying flowers at the spot where Jan Palach had performed self-immolation in protest to the Soviet invasion in 1968.³³ Mass demonstrations followed, and the atmosphere began to grow more anxious. After a petition was sent to Havel's captors demanding his release, his sentence was lessened by one month, and on 17 May he was freed.³⁴ "A Few Sentences" was released soon thereafter, and the floodgates were opened. The fall of the Berlin Wall in early November would only add fuel to the fire as Czechoslovakia's dissidents would look to East Germany as a testament to the weakening of Communism's hold in Eastern Europe. On 17 November 1989, close to twenty thousand students marched on Wenceslas Square waving banners and shouting slogans of a "general political nature."³⁵ Protestors met with scattered resistance, and the only bloodshed to come out of the revolution occurred as security

forces intervened with limited displays of violence.

Once the uprising had become official and the older dissidents knew they had the support of the people, steps were taken to ensure that none of it would be in vain. On 18 November, the Civic Forum, made up of varied political groups, was formed.³⁶ Its demands included, "The removal of the architects of the post-1968 normalization, likewise those responsible for ordering the breakup of peaceful demonstrations... and the release of all prisoners of conscience."³⁷ Havel was soon named the leader of the Civic Forum, having been actively involved in events to that point. He would later remark on that moment: "I was on stage for the first time...on the very stage where I used to work as a propman, assistant director, and as a playwright..."³⁸ I was for the first time on a real stage...and that was the beginning of the revolution.³⁹

The Civic Forum inspired the multitudes of Czech citizens that had been static since the Prague Spring to shed their fears and demonstrate on a large scale. As citizens were marching through the streets of Prague, the impact dissidents such as Havel had on current events became quite clear. One slogan used for banners during the revolution demonstrates Havel's influence explicitly: "Havel didn't keep

quiet when we were frightened to speak out. Now it's our turn."⁴⁰ Throughout December, countless CPC officials quit their posts, realizing the imminence of their collapse. And on 10 December, Gustav Husak, the president of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic resigned, paving the way for Havel's ascendancy. On 29 December, with the support of the people, Vaclav Havel became his country's first democratically elected president in decades.⁴¹

Vaclav Havel was able to masterfully link his roles as playwright, author, and political dissident, redefining the relationship between citizen and state. By providing his audiences with commentary on the oppressive world that surrounded them, he was able to keep free thought alive. At the same time, he was actively participating in measures meant to undermine those that would prefer to keep freedom suppressed. Truth was a prevailing force in both his art and his politics, and it was this virtue that contributed to the demise of the Communists in Czechoslovakia. Havel's rise to the presidency was indeed an example of the effect he had on events at the close of 1989. His wisdom lives on: "Let us teach both ourselves and others that politics does not have to be the art of the possible...But it can also be the art of the impossible, that is the art of making both ourselves and the world better."⁴²

Endnotes

¹ Rosalyn Unger, "Historical Setting" in *Czechoslovakia: A Country Study*, ed. Richard F. Nyrop, ch. 1, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1982), 58.

² The events surrounding Czechoslovakia's occupation by German forces can be found in Unger, *Czechoslovakia*, 735-40. Any subsequent information concerning incidents prior to the Prague Spring can be found on pages 41-52 of the same work.

³ Bernard Wheaton and Zdenek Kavan, *The Velvet Revolution: Czechoslovakia, 1988-1991*, (New York: Freedom House, 1991), 8.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 224.

⁸ Eda Kriseova, *Vaclav Havel: The Authorized Biography*, trans. Caleb Crain (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 8.

⁹ Vaclav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace: A Conversation with Karel Hvizdala*, trans. Paul Wilson (London: Faber, 1990), 24.

¹⁰ Kriseova, *Vaclav Havel*, 57-58.

¹¹ Havel, *Disturbing the Peace*, 77.

¹² Kriseova, *Vaclav Havel*, 66.

¹³ Michael Simmons, *The Reluctant President: A Political Life of Vaclav Havel*, (London: Methuen, 1991), 60-61.

¹⁴ Jeremy Adler, "The Role of the Theatre in Czechoslovakia's 'Velvet Revolution'" in *Violence in Drama*, ed. James Redmond (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 295.

¹⁵ Descriptions of the three aforementioned plays appear in Simmons, *The Reluctant President*, 65-68.

¹⁶ Havel, *Disturbing the Peace*, 199.

¹⁷ Wheaton and Kavan, *The Velvet Revolution*, 224.

- ¹⁸ Havel, *Open Letters*, 125.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 127.
- ²⁰ Simmons, *The Reluctant President*, 134.
- ²¹ Unger, *Czechoslovakia*, 58.
- ²² Simmons, *The Reluctant President*, 116-17.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 121.
- ²⁴ The manifesto of Charter 77 can be found in Unger, *Czechoslovakia*, 309-13.
- ²⁵ Simmons, *The Reluctant President*, 120.
- ²⁶ Kriseova, *Vaclav Havel*, 114.
- ²⁷ Details of abuses against Charter 77 signatories come from Simmons, *The Reluctant President*, 123-126.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 123.
- ²⁹ Wheaton and Kavan, *The Velvet Revolution*, 224.
- ³⁰ Simmons, *The Reluctant President*, 142.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 157.
- ³² Havel, *Open Letters*, 373.
- ³³ Kriseova, *Vaclav Havel*, 234-36.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 239.
- ³⁵ Wheaton and Kavan, *The Velvet Revolution*, 42.
- ³⁶ Wheaton and Kavan, *The Velvet Revolution*, 56.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 56.
- ³⁸ The Civic Forum was founded on the stage of the Realistic Theatre in Prague where Havel had worked as a young man.
- ³⁹ Daniel Sargent Moore, *The Artists' Revolution: 40 Days in Prague* (Cinema Guild, 1995), videocassette.
- ⁴⁰ Wheaton and Kavan, *The Velvet Revolution*, 115.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, The final days of the CPC's domination can be traced throughout pages 108-115.
- ⁴² Peter C. Newman, "Saluting the Playwright Who Became President," *Maclean's* 111, no. 33 (1998): 52.

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