

15th Annual J.B. Rudnyckyj Distinguished Lecture
Friday, February 29, 2008
Planetarium Auditorium, Manitoba Museum

Prague Spring in Modern Czech History

By Dr. Jiří Pehe
Director, NYU in Prague
Prague, Czech Republic

The history of the Czech lands is full of vicissitudes of fortune, tragic turns, and, to some degree, absurdities. It is the history of a small nation, which is located geopolitically in one of the most vulnerable spots in the world. As a result, especially in the 20th century, Czechs found themselves on a real rollercoaster of history.

Despite the difficulties of interpreting Czech history as well as with remembering its various turns, there is, some say, an accessible key for unlocking it. Seemingly, all one needs to remember is two things: the word “defenestration” and the fact that almost all really important events of Czech history took place in years ending with the number 8.

Since defenestration means “throwing a person out of a window”, one may wonder why something so bizarre should be such an important notion in any nation’s history. Yet, when we look back, there are indeed three cases of defenestration in Czech history, which signaled the arrival of major upheavals and revolutionary periods.

The first defenestration occurred in 1419, when a crowd of demonstrators demanded that several of Jan Hus’s followers should be released from prison. When the city’s councilors refused to release the prisoners, the crowd burst into the Prague town hall and threw the councilors out of the windows. The councilors who survived the fall were beaten to death.

Hus was a religious reformer and the president of Charles University in Prague. He was burned at the stake in Constance, Germany, in 1415 following a trial in which he was condemned as a heretic by the top officials of the Catholic Church. His immolation sparked the growth of a large

movement of followers who waged a protracted war with the Catholic Church and various armies sent to Bohemia to quell the uprising. The uprising itself, however, was sparked by the first Prague defenestration in 1419.

The second Prague defenestration took place in the year ending with the number 8—in 1618, to be precise. Although the Hussite uprising was eventually defeated, the Hussite movement survived and gave birth to various churches. One hundred years after it erupted, the Czech lands were also influenced by the protestant movement in Germany and elsewhere. The growing conflict between Czech Protestant nobles and the Catholic Hapsburgs, who in the 16th century became Czech kings, was in the background of the second Prague defenestration, during which two Hapsburg governors were thrown out of a window at the Prague Castle. This event started the Thirty Years War, during which the population of the Kingdom of Bohemia dwindled by more than a half.

The year 1618 also marks the real beginning of the Hapsburg dominance of Bohemia, because various Hapsburg emperors before 1618 ruled over Bohemia more or less with the support of the Czech nobility. When the Czech protestant nobles were defeated in 1620 in the Battle of the White Mountain near Prague, the Hapsburgs executed a number of Czech aristocrats and forced many more to leave. The events in 1618, which led to the military defeat in 1620, is thus often cited as the beginning of a three hundred year period during which the Czech lands were deprived of independence and the Czech language was on the brink of extinction.

The Hapsburg rule ended in 1918, when a new country, Czechoslovakia, which consisted of the Czech lands, Slovakia, and Ruthenia, was formed on the ruins of the Austro-Hungarian Empire after World War I. The creation of Czechoslovakia was made possible not only by the new geopolitical situation at the end of World War I but also by the fact that in the 19th century there had been a growing movement for more autonomy of the Czech lands from Vienna, and also a movement to salvage the Czech language and culture.

Symbolically enough, the most important show of opposition to Hapsburg rule before the formation of Czechoslovakia took place in another year ending with the number 8—1848. The Prague revolution in the spring of that year was influenced by similar events in other major Austrian and German

cities. The Czech nationalist movement demanded liberal constitutional reforms and equal educational rights for Czech-speakers and Germans. In March and April of 1848, Czech and German-speaking liberals cooperated on bringing about a constitutional reform, but by mid-May all of the Germans had withdrawn from the National Committee. The historian Frantisek Palacky and other Czech leaders began in late April to organize a Slavic congress to meet in Prague five weeks later.

The liberal efforts to win constitutional reform were ended by a bloody repression by the Habsburg military in June. The army led by Alfred Prince Windischgrätz took control of the city under a state of siege. The bloody suppression of the Prague revolution 1848 did not stop the nationalist movement from growing, but definitely retarded the Czech efforts to win the same kind of status that the Hungarians eventually got from the Hapsburgs when the Austro-Hungarian Empire was formed.

A majority of important historical events in the new country called Czechoslovakia took place in the years ending with the number 8. Czechoslovakia, as mentioned above, was founded in 1918. It maintained a rather successful democracy and was among the richer countries of Europe. It was a state consisting of several major nationalities and a number of smaller ethnic groups.

On the one hand, the multiethnic character of Czechoslovakia was one of its strengths. On the other hand, the inability of the new Czech political elite to accommodate the two largest nationalities—the Slovaks and the Germans—was eventually one of the causes of Czechoslovakia's first demise in the years 1938-1939.

Some three million so-called Sudeten Germans lived in Czechoslovakia. The new Czechoslovak government at first was not very tolerant toward their calls for more autonomy and proportional political representation. And when Czechoslovak leaders finally began to deal with this problem seriously, Germany fell under the spell of Adolf Hitler, whose ascent to power radicalized the German minority in Czechoslovakia.

Leading Czech politicians, including Tomas G. Masaryk, also underestimated the desire of the Slovaks for more autonomy. The ideology of Czechoslovakism, which in essence claimed that both the Czechs and the Slovaks were part of the same Czechoslovak nation, was, of course,

increasingly unpopular in Slovakia, which, after extricating itself from more than one thousand years of Hungarian rule, was experiencing the process of its own national revival. The Czechs, on the one hand, undoubtedly helped with the economic and institutional development of Slovakia, but, on the other hand, the patronizing attitudes of some Czech leaders toward the Slovaks were increasingly counterproductive.

Despite all of this, it is possible to argue that had Hitler not come to power in Germany, most of the problems in relations between the Czechs and the Slovak nation as well as the German minority could have been solved by democratic means. In general, democracy thrived in Czechoslovakia, and, in fact, by the end of the 1930's Czechoslovakia was an island of democracy in Central Europe.

From a geopolitical point of view, the question of how clever it was to create a number of small states in Central Europe after World War I. is still discussed. With the disappearance of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the space between Russia and Germany became politically fragmented and difficult to defend. The first end of Czechoslovakia, which started with the Munich agreement in 1938, under which Czechoslovakia was forced to cede those border areas in which ethnic Germans constituted a majority, was to some extent a consequence of the general weakness of the new Central European states that were created after World War I.

Although Czechoslovakia was a military ally of France, in the end France decided to sacrifice this new Central European state in order to appease Hitler. Great Britain followed the same logic.

This betrayal of Czechoslovakia undoubtedly helped the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, which claimed that Czechoslovakia should have had closer ties with the Soviet Union, rather than "decadent" Western democracies. The fact that most of Czechoslovakia was liberated at the end of World War II by the Soviet Union further strengthened the Communists. The policies of President Edvard Benes after World War II, when he sanctioned the expulsion of Sudeten Germans, helped to ban some political parties, and issued decrees under which some property was nationalized also played into the hands of the Communist Party.

The party won the first free elections in 1946, becoming the strongest government party. Although the communist dominance seemed to be

declining in 1947, the government, under heavy communist pressure, rejected the Marshall Plan, moving Czechoslovakia closer to the Soviet orbit. When the ministers representing non-communist parties resigned in February 1948 and president Benes agreed under pressure from the street (represented especially by workers' militias) to name an entirely Communist government, democracy was dealt a death-blow in Czechoslovakia.

The third Prague defenestration took place shortly after the communist takeover. Under circumstances which are still subject to speculation, Foreign Affairs Minister Jan Masaryk was found dead below the windows of his apartment in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The official version of his death during the communist era was that Masaryk, the son of the first Czechoslovak president, committed suicide. However, there has been much speculation over the years that he was defenestrated by the communist secret police.

Regardless of whether Masaryk's death was a defenestration or self-defenestration, it—just like the previous two defenestrations—was followed by a period of great turmoil. The communist regime quickly consolidated its grip on power by jailing its opponents, staging political trials, shutting down real political competition, and by nationalizing private property.

Until 1953, a harsh Stalinist version of Communism dominated. The first signs of opposition began to appear in the form of worker protests in 1953, which was incidentally also the year of Stalin's death. The Czechoslovak communist leader Klement Gottwald died shortly afterwards.

However, a gradual movement toward liberalization started only in 1956, which was significant for a number of reasons. Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev delivered a secret speech at the 20th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party, in which he condemned Stalin and his crimes. However, the same year the Soviet Union suppressed with the help of brutal force the Hungarian uprising, which had aimed to restore a democratic regime in Hungary.

Czechoslovak writers held an important congress that year, in which, for the first time since 1956, calls for liberalization were made. This was fully in line with earlier traditions, when during the Hapsburg rule cultural figures and intellectuals substituted for politicians in setting the political agenda—

often with the help of calls for more cultural freedom. The liberalization process accelerated in the first half of the 1960s.

Interestingly enough, one of the events that helped this process was the international conference on Franz Kafka in 1963. Kafka had been more or less proscribed by the Communist regime, partly because his books anticipated the totalitarian nightmares of the 20th century. The fact that the regime allowed a conference on Kafka to take place served as a signal for a major cultural and intellectual thaw.

This was a very productive period for Czech and Slovak culture. Creative energy, which had been suppressed since 1948, was released in a short period of time, giving birth to a number of major works of literature, film and theatre. Authors such as Milan Kundera, Vaclav Havel, Josef Skvorecky, Ivan Klima and Dominik Tatarka published their major works during this period. Filmmakers, such as Milos Forman, Jan Passer, Jiri Menzel, Elmar Klos and Jan Kadar made their most important films.

The Congress of Czechoslovak Writers in the fall of 1967 revolted against censorship and demanded even more artistic freedom. The Communist Party responded to this pressure by replacing its leadership at the end of 1967, starting a reform process known as the Prague Spring.

The young Slovak communist leader Alexandr Dubcek became a political symbol of this period. His idea of “socialism with a human face” represented an attempt to humanize the communist system.

Dubcek and his associates in the party leadership did not intend to dismantle one-party rule. They did hope, however, to create an internally pluralistic system within such a one-party rule. Censorship was officially abolished, borders more or less opened, freedom of assembly tolerated. Nascent political movements, which would undoubtedly rival the Communist Party, should the movement continue, were formed.

Czechoslovak leaders were repeatedly warned by Moscow to slow down or to stop the reform process. Most of them, however, believed that the Kremlin did not need to worry and assured the Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev and his deputies that they had things under control. However, the Soviets were of a different opinion, particularly after calls were made by some important figures that Czechoslovakia leave the Warsaw Pact.

Czechoslovakia was invaded by five Soviet-led armies of the Warsaw Pact on 21 August 1968. Czechoslovak leaders were in essence abducted to Moscow where they were forced to sign the so-called Moscow Protocols, under which Soviet troops were allowed to stay in Czechoslovakia as an occupation force.

Various freedoms were gradually suppressed, although the reform process was not entirely dead for about a year. In January 1969, a young student at the School of Philosophy burned himself in protest against both the invasion and the willingness of many people to accept the new reality. His funeral turned into one of the largest demonstrations against the occupation of Czechoslovakia.

Gustav Husak replaced Alexandr Dubcek at the helm of the Communist Party in April 1969, starting a process of replacing the Prague Spring reforms with a neo-Stalinist regime. Large demonstrations against the new regime, which erupted on the first anniversary of the invasion, were suppressed with the help of the army.

In 1970 and 1971, the Communist Party purged some 500,000 reform communists from its ranks, and launched a process called normalization during which the last vestiges of liberal culture were eliminated. All liberal minded magazines, film studios, and theatres were either purged or closed down. A number of cultural figures were blacklisted, included some foreign authors who had protested against the Soviet invasion.

An interesting debate about the true meaning of the Prague Spring took place at the end of 1968 and the beginning of 1969 between the writers Milan Kundera and Vaclav Havel.

Kundera argued that the Czechoslovak experiment, although militarily suppressed, has a great historical meaning, because the Czechs and the Slovaks in fact were trying to create a new social system, which would not be capitalist or communist. This system—which would not be choked by communist oppression and, at the same time, would not suffer under capitalist consumerism and ruthless commercial interests—was, in his opinion, possible partly due to humanistic traditions of the Czechs and the Slovaks. Only a small country, such as Czechoslovakia, could find this third way between communism and capitalism, because only a country that does

not have imperialistic ambitions can give a serious thought to ideas that initially formed the socialist movement.

Havel ridiculed Kundera. He said that there was nothing world-shattering about the Prague Spring. It was an attempt to introduce into an oppressive totalitarian regime basic freedoms, which are common in any standard democracy. The invasion, in essence, destroyed this possibility for a long time, according to Havel.

This intellectual conflict was interesting because both great writers were partly wrong and partly right. The Prague Spring did survive intellectually to some extent, as predicted by Kundera. It influenced communist parties in Western Europe, some of which embarked on internal reforms. And it was very much present in Mikhail Gorbachev "perestroika" and "glasnost", which started in the Soviet Union in 1985. Gorbachev, a roommate during his university studies of one of the leading Czechoslovak reformers, Zdenek Mlynar, believed that he, too, could democratize the communist system and still keep the Communist Party fully in control. Unlike in Czechoslovakia in 1968, there were no tanks of some outside power to save the Soviet Union from this experiment.

Prague Spring ideas also resonate in some theories of the third-way, which argue that real freedom and democracy cannot be realized in an environment of unbound capitalism.

Havel's assertion that the first ultimate goal of the Prague Spring should be a "normal" democracy, with all of its flaws, was in a way confirmed by real developments. When the communist regime collapsed in 1989, most Czechs and Slovaks had no desire to go back to socialism with a human face. They wanted a liberal democracy.

The velvet revolution that started in Czechoslovakia on 17 November 1989, seemingly does not fit into the scheme in which all revolutionary events in Czechoslovakia took place in years ending with the number 8. Still, interestingly enough, one could argue that events leading to the Velvet Revolution started in 1988. On 21 August 1988, the first demonstration against the neo-Stalinist regime since 1969, when it was installed with Soviet help, took place in Prague. Following this demonstration, virtually all important anniversaries served as reasons for new demonstrations.

Not all really important developments in the history of Czechoslovakia and the history of Czech lands before 1918 can be fit into the scheme in which dates ending with the number 8 feature prominently. In the 20th century alone, the end of World War II in 1945 was an important date for Czechoslovakia, as were 1977, in which a group of dissidents launched a human right movement called Charter 77.

The disintegration of Czechoslovakia took place in 1993, and both the Czechs and the Slovaks joined the European Union in 2004.

Nevertheless, the abundance of historical dates of major importance which end with the number 8 is striking. It has been interpreted in a number of ways. The most common interpretation is that while the founding of Czechoslovakia in 1918 was an event caused to a large extent by forces of history over which the Czechs had no control, and mainly due to World War I, important events that followed were due to generational changes, as the period of 20 years is usually described as a time period during after which the previous generation is replaced by a new one.

Such an explanation is not fully satisfactory, however, because only 10 years elapsed between 1938 and 1948. Some historians argue, however, that World War II, a catastrophic event, accelerated history.

At any rate, the 20th century, in particular, found the Czechs and the Slovaks living under several different regimes, in several different countries. They started the 20th century in the Austro-Hungarian Empire—the Czechs ruled from Vienna, the Slovaks ruled from Budapest.

The first Czechoslovak Republic lasted until 1938, when it was replaced for a short period by the second republic, which had lost its Sudeten German territories and some of its sovereignty as well as democracy. Between 1939 and 1945, the Slovaks had their own Slovak State, controlled indirectly and later directly by the Nazi Germany, while the Czech lands became the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, controlled by Germany.

During the years of 1945-1948, both Czechoslovakia and democracy were restored, although the latter was no longer a classical liberal democracy but a so-called people's democracy, in which the political spectrum was forcibly truncated, parts of the economy nationalized, and some three million Germans expelled.

Even the Communist era could be divided into different regimes. The period between 1948 and 1956 can be described as a Stalinist regime, the period between 1956 and 1968 as an increasingly liberal communist regime, and the period between 1969 and 1989 as a neo-Stalinist regime, which the Communists themselves called a “normalization regime”.

Czechoslovakia became a free democratic country in 1989, but Czechoslovakia ceased to exist in 1993.

We could also find other categorizations of Czechoslovak history. The country was fully independent between 1918 and 1938, partly independent from 1938 to 1939, fully occupied from 1939 – 1945, not occupied from 1945 – 1968 and again, occupied from 1968 to 1991, when Soviet troops were stationed in the country.

In the last 390 years, since 1618, the Czech lands enjoyed full independence only for a total of 38 years—the 20 years of the first Czechoslovak Republic and the past 18 years since 1989. Between 1618 and 1918 they were ruled from Vienna, between 1939 and 1945 from Berlin, and between 1948 and 1989 from Moscow. In other words, the Czech lands were in some ways a province of other countries for most of the last almost 400 years.

Czech and Slovak political elites did not have much time to develop in the 20th century. A new political class took over from Vienna in 1918, only to be partly decimated and then replaced entirely in the years 1938 and 1939. Some of the pre-1939 political leaders returned in 1945, but in essence a new political regime, in which new people played an increasingly important role was installed. After the communist takeover, the political elite were replaced altogether.

Another discontinuity in the development of the political class came in 1967 and 1969, and yet another in 1969. Another complete change followed in 1989. And both newly created states—the Czech Republic and Slovakia—to some extent replaced deferral politicians, prominent between 1989 and 1992, by republican politicians in 1993.

After so many changes, in which the dates ending with the number 8, played such important roles, it is no wonder that the Czechs, particular, anticipated the year 2008 with some apprehension. It seems, however, that the Czech

Republic's membership in the European Union and NATO, as well as, in general terms, the existence of an international environment in Europe which is conducive to democracy building, are guarantees that this year will remain only an occasion for commemorating many different anniversaries.