

# **Mirror, Mirror, on the Wall ...**

## **Is the West the Fairest of Them All?**

### **Czechoslovak Normalization and Its (Dis)Contents**

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Against the backdrop of Stalinist show trials, intellectual censorship, and sealed-off borders, Czechs and Slovaks during the 1950s watched as the “West” was transformed from the once familiar to the imagined. This shift was a particularly heavy blow for the Czechs who, until then, had considered themselves to sit squarely within the tradition of West European culture and thought, sharing in the positive attributes that came with it. Yet Western Europe and its concomitant values had seemingly slipped from their hands and moved irreversibly to the other side of the Iron Curtain. When they looked into their collective mirror, it was the “East” and the Soviet bloc that they now saw. But the Soviet Union, embraced immediately after World War II when it was briefly seen as a centrifuge of progress and political liberation, was increasingly viewed by many in Czechoslovakia as a non-European, and indeed decidedly alien, political and social entity. If asked, most Czechs no longer considered the Soviet Union and Stalin to be “the fairest of them all.”

Differences between East and West, both imagined and real, were emphatically symbolized by the existence and impermeability of the Iron Curtain. Not only did citizens assign symbolic significance to this “other Europe,” now out of their reach, but so too did the newly installed communist governments anxious to deflect sympathies for the West. Within the state media, the West sometimes became imagined in the most vivid sense, as, for example, in the early 1950s when a genuine agricultural crisis coincided with the Slánský Stalinist show trial. In the press, the presumed guilt of the trial’s defendants was reified as potato beetle plagues let loose on the Eastern bloc by the West. These ruinous “American beetles,” as they were known, were said to have been swept in with the “help of the clouds and winds of the Western

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imperialists, as well as with the help of their terrorist agents sent over.”<sup>1</sup> More commonly, any knowledge of the West was simply expunged from everyday life. As Heda Kovály writes in her memoir: “Once I was listening to the news on the radio and caught the word ‘Netherlands.’ I pricked up my ears but the news item was only that the Soviet Folk Dance Collective had enjoyed a great success in Amsterdam. That was the only bit of news from the West that we had had for months.”<sup>2</sup>

Both the silence and the caricatures began to dissolve in the 1960s as the West was permitted finally to permeate the Iron Curtain. Simultaneously, intense feelings emerged over what that Cold War barrier—both its physical incarnation and its intellectual, political, and economic fallout—had meant to postwar Czechoslovakia. Famously, at the 1967 Writers’ Congress in a castle outside Prague, Czechoslovakia’s best-known writers and intellectuals publicly expressed for the first time their deep disappointment over postwar socialism and bore witness to this collective bitterness over Czechoslovakia’s ejection from the “West.” Here the writer Ludvík Vaculík took to the podium to lament: “in 20 years not one social question [*lidská otázka*] has been solved—from people’s primary needs ... to more subtle needs.... And I fear that neither did we rise on the world scene; I feel that our republic has lost its good name.”<sup>3</sup> What he meant was that the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic had lost its place in the West—both geographically and culturally. As political and social liberalization now crept into Czechoslovakia, culminating in the Prague Spring, the “West,” like a long-censured monument to the dear and departed, was slowly unveiled again and opened to the viewing public.



My purpose here is to trace how the “West,” once resuscitated from the censure of the Stalinist 1950s, was re-imagined in various forms and incorporated into the project of communism in quite surprising ways.<sup>4</sup> My focus is

<sup>1</sup> As quoted in Vladimír Macura, “Mandelinka bramborová,” *Šťastný věk: Symboly, emblémy a mýty 1948–1989* (Prague: Pražská imaginace, 1992), 29.

<sup>2</sup> Heda Margolius Kovály, *Under a Cruel Star: A Life in Prague*, trans. Franci Epstein and Helen Epstein (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1997), 94.

<sup>3</sup> All translations from Czech and Slovak are mine unless noted otherwise. “IV. Sjezd československých spisovatelů: Historická událost,” *Svědectví* [Paris] 8, 32 (Fall 1967): 530. Ludvík Vaculík’s speech has also been translated into English: “Document No. 1: Proceedings of the Fourth Czechoslovak Writers’ Congress, 27–29 June 1967, and a Follow-Up Resolution by the CPCz CC Plenum, September 1967 (Excerpts),” in *The Prague Spring 1968: A National Security Archive Documents Reader*, ed. Jaromír Navrátil (Budapest: Central European University Press, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> As loaded as the term “communism” may be, I still prefer it over “socialism.” To use the word socialism to describe Czechoslovakia’s political system in the two decades after the Prague Spring would do a great disservice to West European socialisms and socialists during

on two periods; first, the 1960s and the Prague Spring; and second, the 1970s and 1980s, known as *normalization*. During the Prague Spring, it was both the Communist Party and the public who manipulated images of the West for their own purposes of political, economic, and social reform. In contrast, during normalization, the state was primarily in charge of re-imagining the West; the public, however, reworked the state-procured images for its own uses. The thread that brings these often quite disjointed interpretations of the West together—the West itself was (and is) an allusive term, perpetually shifting between concrete and abstract definitions—is travel.<sup>5</sup> Throughout this period, socialist citizens' snapshots of the West were facilitated through travel; in the 1960s, it was their own firsthand travel experiences, whereas in the 1970s and 1980s, second- and thirdhand experiences dominated. In particular, for the normalization period, I pay attention to the public accounts of so-called "returnees"—post-1968 émigrés who, of their own accord, made their way back home to communist Czechoslovakia.

My focus on travel to the West (and the return home, to the East) is coupled with an emphasis not on consumerism *per se* but on something larger but also less definable—namely, lifestyle. What tourists, travelers, and, later, short-term émigrés to the West were best able to pick up on was the differences in living standards between East and West. Needless to say, the West was always suggestive of political freedoms not available in the Eastern bloc, but consumer freedoms were gaining precedence as a potent measuring stick. This was all the more true for the late communist period when bare necessities were generally available to all citizens in Europe, East and West, and thus increasingly taken for granted.<sup>6</sup> Subsequently, consumer freedoms were conflated with or even superseded political freedoms.

This emphasis on lifestyle is directly related to my focus on the scarcely studied period of post-1968. It remains astonishing that almost 20 years after the end of communism in Eastern Europe, most historians continue to write about the postwar period as if it had ended in the 1960s. This has led to a

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the same period. For more, see the well-argued call for retaining the term "communism" in Andrew Roberts, "The State of Socialism: A Note on Terminology," *Slavic Review* 63, 2 (2004): 349–66. Moreover, in Czechoslovakia, the party in power from 1948 to 1989 *was* the Czechoslovak Communist Party.

<sup>5</sup> For more on this issue of the West as a shifting cultural symbol, see Paulina Bren, "Looking West: Popular Culture and the Generation Gap in Communist Czechoslovakia, 1969–1989," in *Representations and Cultural Exchanges across the Atlantic: Europe and the United States, 1800–2000*, ed. Luisa Passerini (Brussels: PIE-Peter Lang, 2000), 295–322.

<sup>6</sup> David Crew, writing about East Germany, similarly points out: "For most of the period from 1949 to 1989, the standard by which East Germans judged their material existence was not their own previous deprivation in 1945 or 1946 but the real and imagined quality of life across the border in West Germany" ("Consuming Germany in the Cold War: Consumption and National Identity in East and West Germany, 1949–1989. An Introduction," in *Consuming Germany in the Cold War*, ed. Crew [New York: Berg, 2003], 3).

continued lack of serious differentiation between early postwar communism and late communism, thereby unwittingly feeding into a discredited Cold War view that insisted on the “totality” of the communist experience. The primacy of lifestyle was apparent in the West by the 1970s and 1980s;<sup>7</sup> and as this article seeks to show, it also became a convenient viewpoint for the Czechoslovak normalization leadership, and indeed for late communist governments throughout the Eastern bloc, to embrace. Public discussion in the 1960s began by pointing to living standards East and West (a game that the Soviet bloc could hardly win); in the 1970s this state-endorsed dialogue began to shift its emphasis to lifestyle, which eventually morphed into an insistence on the socialist way of life as offering not a better living standard but a superior lifestyle. Lifestyle choice—as opposed specifically to either consumer or political choice—offered the Husák-led normalization government the chance to insist, quite persuasively at times, that they could be “the fairest of them all.”

### Traveling West

It was Czechoslovakia’s economic decline that first provoked the critical voices within the ranks of the Czechoslovak Communist Party itself, leading to a reform movement that eventually transmuted into the all-embracing Prague Spring. These early 1960s critiques frequently took the form of internally circulated memos (marked “secret” but numerous enough to attract the attention of most apparatchiks) that sought to compare the socialist East with the capitalist West. Contrary to what had been the earlier norm, the purpose of these memorandums was not to cheerlead communism’s economic leaps and bounds. Rather, these comparisons were intended as wake-up calls. Here were the first numbers explicitly showing that Czechoslovakia was lagging economically behind all Western countries. Then, as the press became more daring as of the mid-1960s, these previously restricted revelations began also to appear in the media with increasing frequency. By 1967, the still state-controlled media regularly sounded the alarm about Czechoslovakia’s declining economic status, a status that was never compared to other countries of the Soviet bloc but rather to European nations on the other side of the Iron Curtain and to the United States, the ultimate “West” in matters economic.

By the time the cat was out of the bag about Czechoslovakia’s dire economic situation, it was also generally understood that this failure to develop side-by-side with the postwar West had begun with the 1948 Communist

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<sup>7</sup> The German historian Erica Carter, in her important work on gender, sees the late 1950s as the period in West Germany when the struggle for the attainment of basic goods transformed into an environment ripe for the realization of a consumerist lifestyle (*How German Is She? Postwar West German Reconstruction and the Consuming Woman* [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997], 65). My sense is that the term “lifestyle” came into popular usage in the United States with the arrival of the immensely successful and tacky television show, *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, first broadcast in 1984.

Party takeover and had not ceased since. The media illustrated this postwar downward slope through an obsessive counting, accounting, and recounting of per capita ownership. The items of ownership most often used as examples were the sort of luxuries that had become *de rigueur* in any better-off postwar home: television sets, washing machines, refrigerators, automobiles, and the like. The countries most often used in these ever more popular comparisons were neighboring Austria (seen by some as Czechoslovakia's far luckier *doppelgänger*) and West Germany. Anxiety, both personal and governmental, was central to these comparisons: in August 1967, the Czech newspapers *Rudé právo* and *Lidová demokracie*, as well as radio station *Rádio Praha*, ran related articles and broadcasts that compared Austria with Czechoslovakia in terms of what basic items an average consumer in each country was able to purchase. The unfavorable conclusions clearly demonstrated that Czechoslovakia was severely lagging behind Austria. Since in 1967 the media were not yet independent enough to explore serious reasons for these economic differences, the deficiencies were attributed not to the country's lower quality of technological equipment and materials or its faulty distributive system, let alone to its political system, but instead to the Czechoslovak people themselves—their laziness, negligence, and low quality of work.<sup>8</sup>

The growing obsession with comparison-making, popularized by newspaper editorials and radio and television discussions, was bolstered above all by an experience that before the 1960s had been barred to most citizens—the opportunity to travel abroad. In 1965, Czechoslovak citizens were legally permitted to apply for and receive a passport for travel outside the Soviet bloc for purposes other than specially approved work assignments or conferences. While some travel restrictions continued, and hard currency for travel remained difficult to come by, the chance to travel was largely available and those who could grasp the opportunity did so. Thus, as the Iron Curtain became more permeable, for the first time since 1948, Czechs and Slovaks were offered the chance to see the West for themselves.

Interestingly, it was not Alexander Dubček's Prague Spring government but the conservative pre-1968 government of Antonín Novotný that permitted these unprecedented levels of travel to the previously unseen and only imagined countries outside the Soviet bloc. Many of his fellow party apparatchiks at the time warned of the potential political fallout from this state-endorsed traveling fever to the West. At a 1965 meeting of the Central Committee's Ideological Commission, one member worried: "As the numbers show, visits by our citizens to capitalist states are greatly expanding, and not only visits to relatives and friends but straightforward tourist trips whether in a group tour or as an individual traveler ... as a result of the fact

<sup>8</sup> Open Society Archives, Budapest (OSA): Radio Prague Domestic, 25 August 1967, 09:00 hrs.

that our citizens spend a relatively short time in capitalist countries (two to three weeks), it might well lead to distorted impressions about life in these states.”<sup>9</sup> This concern extended to secondhand interactions as well, the worry being that “since people see the best Western films, the best literature, they have an image of Western culture that is a little askew.”<sup>10</sup>

Askew or not, these vacationing hordes of ordinary citizens were fast gaining firsthand knowledge of capitalism, information that was not only spread in private conversation but which some used strategically within the expanding public dialogue against the government itself. In 1967, for example, one angry reader of the newspaper *Lidová demokracie*, who signed himself as František Novák, countered an economist’s typically bogus explanations of the faltering national economy by leaning on his recent experiences abroad: “Today every fox terrier can see that our standard of living is decreasing rapidly.” He added that, having visited the West, he also knew “how everything is moving forward there in great strides.” The communist economist, apparently untrained for this sort of combat, responded by devoting an entire newspaper article to “Mr. Novák” and his letter of complaint. The economist’s counterattack was focused almost exclusively on Mr. Novák, who, he said, claimed to be a construction worker even though his letter was entirely without grammar mistakes. This proved, argued the economist, that Mr. Novák was undoubtedly a member of the intelligentsia out to provoke him.<sup>11</sup> But regardless of whether Mr. Novák was indeed what he claimed to be, ordinary citizens were finally getting an unfettered glimpse of the “West,” which bore little resemblance to the propagandistic version on which a postwar generation had been weaned.

## Going West

The period when Czechs and Slovaks were able to gain firsthand experience of the West proved to be brief: in August 1968, the Prague Spring was brought to an abrupt end with the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia. With it went not only the political and social reforms that had been planned by the Dubček-led government, but also direct access to life on the other side of the Iron Curtain. The next 20 years, bracketed on one end by the 1968 Soviet invasion and on the other by the 1989 Velvet Revolution, were referred to both officially and unofficially as “normalization” (*normalizace*), denoting the Communist Party’s intention to return Czechoslovakia to “normality” following the “abnormality” of the Prague Spring. But although the door

<sup>9</sup> National Archives of the Czech Republic [NÁČR], Prague: ÚV KSČ (Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party fond) fond 10/5, sv. 16, aj. 70, 100–5, “Soudobé proudy antikomunismu a náš ideový postup [Příloha IV],” 33rd Meeting of the Central Committee’s Ideological Commission on 24 September 1965.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> OSA, Budapest: *Lidová demokracie*, 24 August 1967 [RFE press clipping].

to the West was now shut, normalization's ideological frontman, Central Committee Secretary Jan Fojtík, was right to worry (as early as 1970) about the effects of the "imagined West." "It was decidedly unpleasant for me," he announced to his colleagues,

when it was brought to my attention recently that in our universities our students look upon Vietnamese students somewhat disparagingly, whereas everything that comes from the West, and all the more whatever comes from America, they admire. At the same time, we face a problem about which we cannot keep silent. Many of our people stayed abroad in the West, and a great number who will graduate from university here long to work in the West. They connect their dreams of making a name for themselves with assumptions about the structures of Western society.<sup>12</sup>

Fojtík's concern that the fascination with the West was unlikely to end was well-founded. As he himself stated, "[m]any of our people stayed abroad in the West." These citizens—most of them in their 20s—were spending the summer of 1968 traveling in Western Europe or the United States. Others were taking advantage of the numerous academic exchanges that were on offer to them that year. When Czechoslovakia was suddenly invaded on 21 August, many decided to stay where they were rather than return.

But Fojtík was being disingenuous when he spoke only of those who had "stayed abroad." There were also those, far more of those in fact, who had decided to go abroad in the aftermath of the invasion. Faced with the bleakness of Soviet occupation, Czechoslovakia witnessed an exodus captured in the film version of Milan Kundera's novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. There is a scene when the two protagonists, the innocent Tereza and her philandering husband, Tomas, traumatized by the invasion, make their way with thousands of others across the border into the West. They sit patiently as a convoy of cars, loaded down with possessions, winds its way past passport control. When their turn comes, the border guard perfunctorily glances at their documents and waves them on their way, wishing them well in their future lives.<sup>13</sup> In this, the film is correct: Czechoslovakia's borders remained unofficially open for 13 months after the invasion as part of an unspoken yet state-endorsed escape route.<sup>14</sup> Two-thirds of the exodus was made up of

<sup>12</sup> NAČR: ÚV KSČ, fond 10/10, sv. 1, a.j. 2, bod 0: "Záznam pro 2. schůzi ideologické komise ÚV KSČ" (17 June 1970) [Fojtík].

<sup>13</sup> *Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1988), dir. Philip Kaufman.

<sup>14</sup> Police records show that from August 1968 until 1987, 136,876 people left Czechoslovakia; and whereas police records end in 1987, illegal emigration continued up to the Velvet Revolution in November 1989. (See Jiří Pernes, *Takoví nám vládli: Komunističtí prezidenti Československa a doba, v níž žili* [Prague: Nakladatelství Brána, 2003], 292.) Another number cited elsewhere is 106,837 citizens who left Czechoslovakia between 1968 and 1989.

people between the ages of 20 and 40 who, typically, were not blue-collar workers but employed in white-collar professions such as academia, engineering, medicine, and the media.<sup>15</sup> In other words, this was also a brain drain, which the regime must well have realized. But even as early as 1968–69, the new normalization leadership was already willing to sacrifice practical necessities for social consensus.

Once the borders were sealed again, every adult who had left the country was tried in *absentia* for the “abandonment of the republic,”<sup>16</sup> a romantic-sounding misnomer of a crime that had been made into law in October 1948, a few months after the postwar Communist Party takeover. More colloquially, but with the same undertow of patriotism used in the service of communism, these people were referred to as “runaways.” Although they had been provided with opportunities to make their exit, their disappearance made for bad publicity. The regime thus struck a contradictory pose: on the one hand, for those first 13 months following the invasion, it kept borders relatively permeable to allow people determined enough to leave to do so; on the other hand, the government made repeated efforts to coax back those now abroad, even offering loans for airplane tickets home to Czechoslovakia.<sup>17</sup> As early as 29 August 1968, just a week after the invasion, Czechoslovak state agencies abroad were being instructed to make contact with fellow citizens there and pave the way for their legal return home, often by extending their travel permit documents so as to ensure a smooth and unfettered return. This mild-mannered tactic changed abruptly in January 1969 when the same Czechoslovak agencies were advised to use assorted means of pressure for reluctant returnees, including threats of judicial prosecution and the seizure of their property.<sup>18</sup> With approximately 70,000 Czechoslovak citizens abroad, in May 1969, the government declared an amnesty for everyone who would return by 15 September, promising to waive their potential prison sentences.<sup>19</sup> Altogether, from 1 January 1969 to 31 December 1970, 3,723

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This number seems to be derived from how many people were tried in *absentia* for doing so (Jaroslav Cuhra, *Trestní represe odpůrců režimu v letech 1969–1972* [Prague: ÚSD, 1997], 26).

<sup>15</sup> Jiří Kocian, Jiří Pernes, Oldřich Tůma et al., *České průšvihy aneb Prohry, krize, skandály a aféry českých dějin let 1848–1989* (Prague: Barrister & Principal, 2004), 296.

<sup>16</sup> Identifying emigration with betrayal was helped by the patriotic term “abandonment of the *republic*,” with the word “republic” more suggestive of the fledgling Czechoslovak Republic of the interwar years than of the postwar Czechoslovak Socialist Republic.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, OSA: Reuters, 19 February 1969 [RFE press clipping]. The same was freely admitted in the Czech press since it was considered to be good publicity for the generosity of the new normalization leadership.

<sup>18</sup> Kocian, Pernes, Tůma et al., *České průšvihy*, 298.

<sup>19</sup> Cuhra, *Trestní represe odpůrců režimu v letech 1969–1972*, 27.



persons returned.<sup>20</sup> A second amnesty was declared in February 1973.<sup>21</sup> For the first few years following General Secretary Gustav Husák's assumption of power, the regime kept open the possibility of a presidential pardon for those who were considering making their way back home to the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic.

Both the act of fleeing and the act of returning were rarely discussed in the media in political terms, for that would invoke too many discomfiting memories of the recent Prague Spring. Instead, emigration to the West was officially cast as an economically driven betrayal of socialism and one's fellow citizens who had remained to fight the good fight; a returnee's re-emigration "home" to Czechoslovakia was described as the emotionally loaded recognition that not all was as it had first appeared on the other side of the Iron Curtain. Not uncommon was the sort of propaganda published in 1971 in *Rudé právo*, which claimed to excerpt recent "overheard" statements made by émigrés at the going-away party of another émigré who had decided to return home to Czechoslovakia. The emphasis was on the returnee's deeply emotional nostalgia for 'home', and his now cool-headed regret for having fallen sway to Prague Spring's mass hysteria. His friends, gathered around him at the party, begin to fall apart as the evening progresses:

*K. Vaník* ... find out back at home if I too could return. I didn't kill anyone; I only went a little crazy in 1968...

*A. Nosková* ... I ask you to please send me a letter about conditions back home, I'd like to see my grandchildren before I die...

*J. Švenlák* ... I left a girl behind in Prague, I didn't even say good-bye to her. If only I knew if she's still single....

*H. Klauser* ... when I recall the volleyball pitch in the forest, the campground, the lads in the weekend cottages ... then I'd just like to throw in the towel.<sup>22</sup>

Such emotionally laden and indeed fear-inducing scenarios presented by the official media for loyal citizens' consumption further served the purpose of shifting the compass of common sense: such excerpted conversations suggested that these émigrés' flights from Czechoslovakia were the act of madmen, whereas a regime that had ceased to allow its citizens to travel back and forth across the border between East and West represented level-headedness.

The campaign against emigration continued throughout normalization because emigration continued throughout the 1970s and 1980s. In a

<sup>20</sup> Kocian, Pernes, Tůma et al., *České průšvihy*, 299.

<sup>21</sup> Marcus Ferrar, "Modest Success Claimed for CSSR Amnesty," Reuters, 8 July 1973.

<sup>22</sup> Miroslav Hájek, "Devět dopisů," *Rudé právo*, 24 July 1971: 3. Only seldom did the legitimate question of human rights and sealed borders officially come up.

1985 outline of Czechoslovak Television's contributions to this campaign (the report was comprehensively titled "The Contribution of Czechoslovak Television in the Fight against Emigration and for the Development of Socialist Patriotism"), negative images of émigrés and emigration were described as being most effective when inserted within seemingly unrelated programs: "to make the reality of life in capitalist countries familiar means incontrovertibly to correct misconceptions and illusions that still linger."<sup>23</sup> Sometimes, however, such propaganda proved counterproductive: amusingly, a Czech journalist admitted in an article in *Tvorba* that he had been asked countless times why, if conditions were so bad in the West, workers did not emigrate to Czechoslovakia just as some Czechs had emigrated to the West. The journalist explained that these class-conscious workers chose to stay in the West in order to work on turning their own societies into communist ones.<sup>24</sup>

In terms of content, the regime's campaign against émigrés generally worked on two levels. On the one hand, the association of exile with loneliness, fear, disorientation, and rejection was evoked frequently to deter others from attempting such an escape themselves. The alarming consequences of an emigrant's inability to orient himself within a new environment consisting of a foreign language and unfamiliar cultural cues were, for example, clearly laid out in a novel entitled "If You Abandon Me," advertised as a narrative "about the fate of those who had tasted the life of an emigrant"; it was later turned into a radio play and a television drama.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, the regime actively linked émigrés' motivations for leaving Czechoslovakia with avarice; the claim was made that, once abroad, an émigré was rewarded handsomely for "declaring that he doesn't agree with the political development of his own motherland, that he distances himself from all honest fellow citizens in the republic."<sup>26</sup> Thus, "abandonment of the republic" came to mean not just a punishable criminal act but, more significantly still, the abandonment of a socialist and collective way of life in favor of personal desires and garish riches. In the course of the 1970s and 1980s, this became a powerfully embedded image by which, consciously and subconsciously,

<sup>23</sup> ČT APF (Czech Television Archives—Written Materials), Prague: Ve-2 fond, k# 143, ev.j. 979: Jiří Fér, "Podíl Čs. televize na boji proti emigraci a při rozvíjení socialistického vlastnictví," 7 March 1985. The report further noted that "in the emphasis of this theme, television programs for children and youth are particularly important..." because "[t]elevision broadcasts are as a whole conceptualized so as to create an atmosphere that will influence viewers at home parallel to the principles of Marxist-Leninist instruction and the values of real socialism."

<sup>24</sup> Jiří Bagar in *Tvorba*, no. 47 (21 November 1984): 5.

<sup>25</sup> OSA: Radio Play, "Opustíš-li mě," by Lubomír Tachovský, Radio Prague, June 1970. The novel was by Zdeněk Pluhař and the television drama by D. Štursová. See *Rudé právo*, 6 March 1979: 5.

<sup>26</sup> "Proč se Zlatníkoví vrátili z australského ráje: Klokani skok," *Rudé právo*, 27 April 1971: 3.

citizens remaining in Czechoslovakia often defined themselves as well, seeing themselves as “honest ... citizens” for having remained.<sup>27</sup>

This paradigm of abandonment—of good, salt-of-the-earth socialist citizens being forsaken by their dollar-seeking brethren—was also tied in with recent historical calamities and the consequent victimization of Czechoslovak citizens. Another “overheard conversation,” this one published in *Tribuna*, took place between two women sitting on Prague’s number 14 tram. One of the two women expressed disapproval and incomprehension over an acquaintance’s decision to divorce her husband rather than join him in West Germany (where he had fled after the invasion); the other made clear her approval of the woman’s decision to remain behind in socialist Czechoslovakia, explaining:

I too wouldn’t go to him there ... What kind of fortune would I be in search of there? What are we missing here ... versus there? What, so I could spend my time visiting meetings of the Sudeten Germans and applauding them ... for having killed my dad in 1938? ... Or so I should live among the Czech *crème de la crème* who ran away in 1948 or, worse, among those who in 1968 confused ordinary people who then had to pay for their mistakes while they themselves are sitting in warmth, cozily counting out their money?

The woman beside her, until then a seeming champion of emigration and life in the West, pauses and then says: “and you know what, you’re right.”<sup>28</sup>

## Returning East

Although not everyone was quite so easy to convince as this woman on Tram 14, the Czechoslovak government *did* manage to persuade some of its citizens who had emigrated or else stayed abroad in the aftermath of the invasion to return under the auspices of the amnesties. Not surprisingly, those who took up the offer were automatically incorporated into the state-sponsored campaign against emigration. Less expected was the way in which their narratives of life in the West were used to help define the script for life in socialist Czechoslovakia during normalization. These “returnees” or “re-emigrants,” as they have been referred to, obviously returned to socialist Czechoslovakia for a variety of reasons. Emigration never failed to test both people and their relationships more severely than expected, and reasons for the return could be as much psychological as economic. The earlier mentioned film version of *Unbearable Lightness of Being* bears witness to this phenomenon too: Tereza and Tomas, despite their

<sup>27</sup> One can read this in countless articles, interviews, and remembrances produced in the early 1990s.

<sup>28</sup> “Kolo dějin nezastaví,” *Tribuna*, no. 16 (14 April 1976): 9.

having established successful new lives in Geneva, return to communist Czechoslovakia.<sup>29</sup>

Many of these returnees were interviewed as they debarked planes at Prague's Ruzyně Airport and later, once they had had a chance to unpack, on radio programs and television shows. They most often described their return to socialist Czechoslovakia as based on a newfound, firsthand knowledge of the capitalist West and the concomitant collapse of previously held illusions. As one young male returnee instructively told *Rádio Hvězda*, "Well, these were [our] illusions about the West. It was being said in our country that in the West there were better working conditions, that the standard of living was higher than ours; so we thought that we would go and seek that better prosperity."<sup>30</sup> His experiences, of course, did not match his expectations.

Predictably, the lack of job security and a sufficient social welfare system in the West was emphasized in the returnees' often media-savvy or else officially shaped confessions. As one man who had spent five years in Canada explained in answer to a reporter's question about what it took for a worker to be fired in Canada: "It's enough, for example, when you tell him [your boss], I can't keep up or I'm not feeling well ... that could not happen here at home." He then described his own experience of receiving a pink slip: "So I open it [the envelope], and there is the pink slip with a note that says, basically, that at the moment there isn't much work, that when there's more work, they'll call me. And what does that mean but, basically, not to rely on that they call you but to start looking for other work!"<sup>31</sup> Similarly, stories about the lack of unemployment benefits and the absence of a national health insurance scheme were frequently related to the public through these returnees' accounts of everyday life in the West.

Břetislav and Ludmila Janoušek and their two children, for instance, went as far as to return to Czechoslovakia without being sure of the government's current position toward returnees. Thus they calculated into their plans the possibility that they might actually have to serve the prison term to which all emigrants had been sentenced. But to them the gamble had still seemed worth it: Mr. Janoušek explained to television viewers, "we were telling ourselves that even if worst came to worst, if we had to serve the sentence, it still cannot be equal to staying for one's whole life in such conditions and

<sup>29</sup> Moreover, it was often frustrating for émigrés from Eastern Europe to communicate their unique experiences of communism to politically left-oriented friends in the West. For a sense of these miscommunications, see my essay on Czech students' attempts during 1968 to find a middle ground with student activists in the West: Paulina Bren, "1968 East and West: Visions of Change in France, Germany, and Italy, as seen from Prague," in *Transnational Moments of Change in Postwar Europe*, ed. Padraic Kenney and Gerhard-Rainer Horn (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), 119–35.

<sup>30</sup> OSA: Rádio Hvězda, 17 September 1970, 21:00 hrs. (translation by RFE).

<sup>31</sup> OSA: "Politická Aktualita"—Jarmila Stejskalová Speaks with Returnee Josef Čermák, Rádio Hvězda, 28 August 1973, 15:30 hrs.

society as we learned to know [in the United States].”<sup>32</sup> For the Janoušek family, it was the conditions of life in America—rather than the now tightly sealed borders of post-1968 Czechoslovakia—that functioned as a prison from which one longed to escape. In contrast, the social benefits available in Czechoslovakia pointed to security and, therefore, freedom.

Another frequently publicized returnees’ refrain focused on the excessive work tempo forced upon them in capitalism, which as socialist citizens they were neither prepared for nor willing to accept. A woman, a nurse by training, took work at a factory in Austria making artificial flowers and was struck by the owner’s (an earlier Czech émigré himself) instructions to one of her colleagues: “Faster, faster, you have to work faster.” Another returnee was quizzed by Czech radio about the “work morale” in Austrian factories. The young man replied: “There one regularly begins at 6:30 AM and works until 5:00 PM. You have to be at your station about 5–10 minutes [beforehand], dressed, waiting by the machine and as soon as the horn goes off, it’s as if a command to attack is sounded, all the machines start all at once and off we go. There you really have to work.” The young man concluded his account with a frank statement that played directly counter to images of communist industriousness ingrained in the political consciousness during the 1950s and 1960s: when asked the leading question, “Was it [this tempo] a little unfamiliar after the way you worked here?” the young man replies: “It was, because it’s a fact—let’s face it—that here I made enough money and I practically didn’t do any work.”<sup>33</sup> Similarly, a cook from Pardubice, although he successfully had found work as a cook in a hotel in Innsbruck, returned to Czechoslovakia and “what brought him home was the unbelievably high work tempo that—as is well known—we are not accustomed to in the ČSSR.”<sup>34</sup> What stands out in such statements is the alacrity with which the regime admitted to accepting low work discipline as a pillar of normalized Czechoslovakia.

As new experts on comparative lifestyles, as bearers of an authority that had been acquired through real experience, these returnees were presented to the public as well-suited to describe the advantages of communism and to explain indirectly why normalization was preferable to what was on offer further west. A young Slovak man, who had experienced the “unpleasant looks of those Austrians,” summarized the great advantages of life in normalized socialist Czechoslovakia: he was now happy at home because “we need not fear that we will be sacked from work. We can go peacefully to bed in the

<sup>32</sup> OSA: Czechoslovak Television, 24 July 1972, 19:30–20:00 hrs. (translation by RFE).

<sup>33</sup> OSA: “Draze zaplacené zkušenosti”—Karel Kvalip Talks to Returnee Zdeněk Lédli, Rádio Praha, 10 April 1970, 20:30 hrs.

<sup>34</sup> Jaroslav Horák, “Vrátili se z ‘ráje,’” *Tribuna*, no. 38 (1 October 1969): 16.

evening, (since we know) that in the morning we will still have this job, that nobody can take it away from us.”<sup>35</sup>

Altogether, the returnees’ narrations implied that a much slower pace of work combined with a higher level of job security embodied socialism’s continued promise. Although such statements certainly played on the old, familiar themes of capitalism versus communism—of greedy factory bosses urging workers to work beyond their capacity while refusing to share in the resulting financial bounties—a new element was now introduced: the notion of a calm and quiet life, removed from the tumultuousness of both 1968 politics and late 20th-century capitalism. The message was that a “socialist way of life” was potentially able to challenge and even surpass capitalism *not* by offering the same or better material commodities (for it could not) but by offering an unmatched “quality of life.” This less quantifiable measurement of living standards frequently cropped up in the returnees’ public memories of roughing it in the West, implying that life in the Soviet bloc was more than the sum of work performed for the state and the monetary remuneration received for it.

### Quality over Quantity

Speaking to reporters on the tarmac of Prague’s airport, one woman who had just returned from the United States explained that although in America clothes might be available and cheap, they were in fact shoddy: “My husband and I always said: at home things are relatively expensive, but genuinely of good quality.”<sup>36</sup> The implication was that “good quality” stretched beyond seams and hemlines. The woman who had found clothes to be lacking “quality” in the United States had also found life outside the workplace to be lacking quality. As she confessed, in America she had never visited a cinema because over there “a person must give up all sorts of amusements and everything else that costs money.”<sup>37</sup> Another returnee who was met by a reporter at the airport had the following exchange about the experience of everyday life in the United States:

*Returnee:* “On the materialistic side—well, experiences vary. For example, if you were to wish to live the same way as you lived in Czechoslovakia, going to the theater, the cinema, out to dinner once in a while, or to some club—clubs, by the way, are a very expensive affair—then you’ll practically have to hand over your whole salary. I’ll give you one example. Let’s take the example of the Podolí swimming pool here in Prague. There you can go—I don’t know how much it costs now, but five years ago it was, I believe, 4 crowns....”

*Reporter:* “Yes, it still costs 4 crowns!”

<sup>35</sup> OSA: Rádio Hvězda in Slovak; 17 September 1970, 21:03 hrs. (translation by RFE).

<sup>36</sup> OSA: Rádio Hvězda, 24 November 1971, 17:30 hrs.

<sup>37</sup> OSA: Rádio Hvězda, 24 November 1971, 17:30 hrs.

*Returnee*: "It still costs that, great! Thanks for the info, I'll go there straight away tomorrow. Because I'll tell you what, back there [in America] I hardly had any chance to go to any swimming pool, because there public pools don't exist!"<sup>38</sup>

Another émigré, a talented bicyclist who had left for Sweden, "[f]ound out abroad that because of his life's mistake [of emigrating], he had simply closed off the path to being an active athlete."<sup>39</sup> Having to work around the clock at his job, there was no time or money for training. As a reporter prompted yet another returnee: "But a person is nourished not only by his work?"<sup>40</sup> Quality of life, in other words, counted. Another returnee pointed out that the "relations between people in America are on an incredibly low level," the dynamic development of society and people that he had expected to find there was entirely lacking, and "on the contrary, in America one can say that their circumstances have worsened more so in the last 30 years than they have here at home."<sup>41</sup> Thus he had decided to "return at whatever cost," firmly believing that the normalization regime would understand his mistake, because Czechoslovakia was after all a "more spiritually mature nation than America."<sup>42</sup>

This last comment, in addition to playing up old European prejudices in the service of communist propaganda, summed up the ways in which Czechoslovakia's leadership wished to have normalization viewed by its citizens. The returnee, presumably flattering the regime in return for amnesty, pointed to its "spiritual," rather than its economic, superiority over the United States. This remark was in line with the script that the normalizers gradually drew up for post-1968 communism. This script was not entirely rooted in a new form of socialist consumerism, as is often thought. Certainly, the promise of subsidized basic foodstuffs and the brief but visible influx of previously unseen products during the early 1970s did much to appease the average citizen. But normalization could not have existed and, one might argue, even thrived on this alone; Czechoslovakia's relative prosperity was just that—a prosperity about which one could become enthralled only when contrasted with the meager consumer opportunities available in the less industrialized and less economically developed countries of the Soviet bloc. But the Czechs had never compared themselves to their neighbors east and were not about to start doing so now; at the same time, levels of consumption

<sup>38</sup> OSA: "Richard Podhorský Speaks with Returnee Milan Matulík," *Rádio Praha*, 17 February 1974, 22:00 hrs.

<sup>39</sup> Horák, "Vrátili se z 'ráje,'" 16.

<sup>40</sup> OSA: Budapest, "Jarmila Stejskalová Speaks with Father and Son Barták," *Rádio Hvězda*, 25 December 1971, 19:30 hrs.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pt. 1.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, pt. 2.

in Czechoslovakia would never be able to match those in the West. Thus the key supplement to this meager socialist consumerism would need to be something of which there was an ever-dwindling supply under capitalism.

### Living in the East

The opportunity to live a life not merely—in fact, not at all—defined by work became a common trope of normalization. The 1985 report on television's role in the anti-emigration campaign, discussed above, spelled it out clearly: "In terms of television's overall influence, when it comes to asserting socialist patriotism, the center of gravity is rooted in the systematic presentation of the priorities of 'real socialism' ... Television does not describe our reality in terms of a society of plenty but first and foremost as a system in which a person can fully realize his human essence."<sup>43</sup> During normalization, realizing one's "human essence" was to take priority over more concrete economic concerns. The terms "self-actualization" (*sebeaktualizace*) and "self-realization" (*seberealizace*) became favorite catchwords of the regime; both indicated a person's chance to develop his or her best self, and to indulge in whatever activities that would require. It was the counterpoint to the sort of life lived on the other side of the Iron Curtain and described most vividly by Czechoslovakia's returnees.

"Self-actualization" and "self-realization" as key aspects of everyday life in late communism were especially prominent in the sphere of work and economic output in Czechoslovakia during the 1970s and 1980s. The Czech economist Otakar Turek argues that an entirely new principle steered economic decisions during this period, a principle that he refers to as "social comfort" (*sociální pohodlí*). According to Turek, "social comfort" and "social calm" were the two main concerns of the normalization regime, so much so that they directly determined economic decisions. As a result, economic enterprises during normalization did not act as profit-seeking companies but as social institutions.<sup>44</sup> As social institutions they tolerated work habits that would have been unacceptable to an economically geared institution:

It was estimated that in each workplace 20 percent of employees were "unemployed" and simply collected a salary; during work hours it was permissible both to take care of other business and to partake of celebratory office parties; and if the management was clever, it even negotiated decent wages. Fears that these practices might threaten the enterprise's competitive skills and perhaps even its existence never entered anyone's mind. Economic damage produced by a system based on social comfort did not fall on the doorsteps of the originators but

<sup>43</sup> ČT APF: Ve-2 fond, k# 143, ev.j. 979.

<sup>44</sup> Otakar Turek, *Podíl ekonomiky na pádu komunismu v Československu* (Prague: ÚSD, 1995), 67–71.



instead was collectivized and affected everyone. The credo of an average person was, on the one hand, “work as in socialism and live as in capitalism,” but because he understood that the two don’t go together, he was thankful even for the first half [of this formula].<sup>45</sup>

As Turek concludes, “[i]n the workplace it was possible to live well.”<sup>46</sup>

The Czech sociologist Lenka Kalinová, who also investigated the conditions of the workplace during normalization, adopted a similar notion of social comfort as a way to explain how the limited possibilities to purchase consumer goods widely available in “developed countries” was “partially compensated for by certain social comforts in other areas.” These social comforts included “full employment, a tolerance for a low output and quality of work, cheap housing and cheap services, such as health care, transportation, public canteens, cultural services, and so on.” As a result, salaries were not a transparent indicator of wealth during normalization: “[Salaries] made up only a part of a family’s income. A large part was also made up of social revenues: pensions and other monetary benefits, free-of-charge services, different forms of appropriation and tax relief.... Rewards for work often satisfied social criteria, enterprises provided some social services, such as recreation, cheap meals and even housing, and so on.” As Kalinová points out, “[d]uring the ’70s and ’80s, the sources for satisfying the needs of citizens changed.”<sup>47</sup>

So what was behind this array of socialist perquisites by which the 1970s and 1980s became defined, and not only in Czechoslovakia but elsewhere in communist Eastern Europe? At a practical level, it meant that when specific goods and products could not be offered, then services and bonuses of a different kind were deployed. But at a more ideological level, Husák’s regime was attempting something far greater: to redefine the meaning of the economic ideal, to persuade Czechoslovakia’s citizens that, in the late 20th century, surrounded by the cacophony of not just capitalism’s rewards but also its tireless demands, Snow White (as well as her untainted innocence) was embodied in the “East” and not the “West.” It was an ambitious viewpoint, but hatched from necessity rather than political commitment to a set of socialist-inspired ideals.

### Living It Up in the East

Not surprisingly, Czechs and Slovaks, faced with the drabness of normalization, were all too willing to embrace their newly articulated right as socialist

<sup>45</sup> Otakar Turek, “Plánované hospodářství,” in *Proč jsme v listopadu vyšli do ulic*, ed. Jiří Vančura (Brno: Doplněk, 1999), 74.

<sup>46</sup> See Turek, *Podíl ekonomiky*, 75–76; and Turek, “Plánované hospodářství,” 74. He further argues, as have other economists, that in fact Czechoslovakia’s economy was not nearly in as bad a shape as many had thought.

<sup>47</sup> Lenka Kalinová, *Sociální vývoj Československa 1969–1989* (Prague: ÚSD AV ČR, 1998), 71, 33, 20.

citizens to “self-realize” as well as the concomitant state-endorsed workplace inefficiency that would allow for their self-realization. The problem—whether simply unanticipated by the leadership or else considered worthwhile for the sake of political consensus—was that although they did not belong to a capitalist system, a large number of Czech and Slovak citizens now chose to self-realize as consumers.

As early as 1972, a television exposé revealed that several dozen families had responded to an advertisement offering a car in exchange for a child. In a radio program that followed up on this story, the radio commentator made the point to his listeners that although it was not unusual for a young couple to wait some time before starting a family, “[i]t is no longer in order if the birth, and the very need to have children, comes last, which means for many people it is first important to obtain an apartment, to furnish it with the best possible comforts, to get a car, to build a country getaway, and only then to consider perhaps having a child.”<sup>48</sup> A month later, in February, General Secretary Husák saw fit to address the public on the radio to criticize the “indolence” that “makes them [young couples] attach greater importance to a car than to a child.”<sup>49</sup>

The conservative secretary of ideology Vasil Bil’ak, not one to be swayed by the whim of the people, admitted in 1971, just prior to the pivotal 14th Party Congress that would set out the program of normalization, that second- and third-generation socialist citizens had different expectations from the postwar generation, expectations that the Communist Party would now have to confront:

[In 1948] we had posters in the shop windows about how socialism is going to look, and people were receptive to it. That was a different kind of excitement and a different historical time, and today we can’t put up posters about how socialism is going to look, but today shop windows have to be full of goods so that we can document that we are moving toward socialism [sic!] and that we have socialism here.<sup>50</sup>

In many ways, the Party was attempting to tackle this issue by introducing “self-realization” and “self-actualization” into the lexicon of everyday life and thereby insisting that this spiritual exercise was fundamental to what was more generally called the “socialist way of life.”

<sup>48</sup> OSA: Rádio Praha & Rádio Hvězda, 6 January 1972, 19:00 and 19:30 hrs. (translation by RFE).

<sup>49</sup> Broadcast on Rádio Praha, 26 February 1972: quoted in Radio Free Europe Situation Report; Czechoslovakia/2 (10 January, 1973); “Czechoslovakia Tackles the Birth Rate Problem.”

<sup>50</sup> NAČR: ÚV KSČ, fond 10/10, sv. 1; a.j. 3, bod 0: “Záznam: pro 3. schůzi ideologické komise ÚV KSČ” (19 October 1970) [Bil’ak].

But as self-realization was sought by an increasing number of citizens through consumption, the distinctions between the “socialist way of life” and the frequently mocked “capitalist way of life” became more and more difficult to identify. In a 1976 letter to *Rudé právo*, a reader from the town of Liberec made this observation:

You write about a socialist way of life as if it were somehow different from life in capitalist countries. I see no substantial difference in the two. There, just as here, people chase after things, and everyone wants a car, a country cottage, and to live well.... I often read about consumer society in the West. Is it that here it's called a “socialist way of life” and in capitalist countries it's called a consumer society?<sup>51</sup>

The official reply was that while the normalization regime wished to ensure that people “can buy themselves a country cottage, a car, a washing machine, and a refrigerator,” in a “socialist way of life” these material objects function to improve the *quality* of one's life. In contrast, in a capitalist consumer society, material objects define life.<sup>52</sup> In other words, as another *Rudé právo* article titled “To Be Does Not Only Mean to Have” explained, in socialist society material objects are intended as a means for one's “self-actualization,” and not an end unto themselves.<sup>53</sup> It was a subtle difference that, much to the chagrin of the Party, was lost on many a citizen.

If anything, the state-sponsored program of self-realization, coupled with consumer opportunities both within and off the official grid, created a beast unique to late communism. A 1985 Czechoslovak government assessment of normalization titled, rather ethereally, “The Status and Tendencies Present in the Development of Socialist Society's Consciousness,” and written specifically for the Central Committee, attempted to alert the leadership to this beast. The report outlined how *socialist* petit-bourgeois mentalities were colliding with “incorrect opinions from the crisis years [1968] and from the period of the bourgeois republic [the interwar years],” both of which still “linger in the consciousness of certain people.”<sup>54</sup> Normalization, the authors of the report admitted, had exacerbated these already ingrained tendencies toward petit-bourgeois behavior, so that they were not only surviving but in fact were being “reproduced in new forms.” The ripple effect was yet more nefarious:

<sup>51</sup> Jiří Svoboda, “Rozhovor se čtenářem: Jaký způsob života?” *Rudé právo (příloha)*, 30 October 1976, 2.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> See, for example, Miloslav Chlupáč, “Být neznamená jen mít,” *Rudé právo*, 21 April 1978, 4–5.

<sup>54</sup> NAČR: ÚV KSČ, uncatalogued (pre-1989 catalogue number: IK–63/24), “6. schůze ideologické komise ÚV KSČ; 15 October 1985”; “Stav a tendence rozvoje socialistického společenského vědomí,” *Materiály pro ideologickou komisi ÚV KS* [put forward by L. Novotný]: 6.

A high standard of living brought features of a consumerist way of life, which generates specific petit-bourgeois thinking in some layers of our society.... The thinking of these people in turn produces individualism and weakens the ability of the Party to strengthen the efficacy of communal work. Along with this there coexists a tendency to admire the capitalist way of life, which itself is linked with the assumption that only private property opens up the space for human endeavor.... These negative phenomena in the consciousness of a part of our people are accompanied by their efforts to disturb the socialist way of life, socialist law, and to become rich through extra-curricular non-workplace methods, etc.<sup>55</sup>

Offered the chance to self-realize under late communism, too many socialist citizens had decided that consumer goods would be the most pleasurable means of identity formation. The result was a socialist East that differed quantitatively but not so much qualitatively from the capitalist West.

While the report referred to the perpetrators as a “part of our people,” it then went on to confess that not only were white-collar workers (the intelligentsia) guilty of these attitudes, but so were the very backbone of communist society—the workers. What the report omitted, of course, was the yet more incendiary admission that Czechoslovakia’s leaders could be accused of the very same; and that in this, and only this, regard were they “of the people.” Their own blatant consumerist desires and capitalist copycat practices were frequently whispered about. Anonymous letters of complaint sent during the 1980s to Czechoslovak Television headquarters in Prague (a popular recipient of citizens’ gripes) reveals public knowledge of the party leaders’ lifestyles.<sup>56</sup> One anonymous letter (thought by the Department of Correspondence to have been penned by a senior citizen, and a member of the Party no less) complained about the private property of the ruling circle and specifically pointed to Secretary of Ideology Bil’ak’s then current project to adapt a small castle in the town of Lnář.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, Bil’ak’s castle was merely a larger and more elaborate version of the average Czech’s own preoccupations with his weekend country cottage, known as the *chata*. This ubiquitous phenomenon, referred to as “*chata* mania” by the authorities, functioned as a unique outlet for the “second economy” and for more advanced consumerist fantasy. It was the epitome of self-realization run amok in late communism.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>55</sup> NAČR: ÚV KSČ; uncatalogued (pre-1989 catalogue number: IK–63/24): 6–7.

<sup>56</sup> ČT APF: uncatalogued (xerox of document in author’s possession); Report from the Department of Correspondence on viewers’ letters to Prague’s Czechoslovak Television Headquarters, 1977–82: “Viewers are in the habit of turning to Czechoslovak Television when they do not know where else to turn (the earlier tradition was to send all such questions to the President’s Office)” (18).

<sup>57</sup> ČT APF, Prague, k# 214, e.j. 1279: “Rozbor anonymních dopisů došlých do OD ČST Praha v srpnu 1983.”

<sup>58</sup> For more on the country cottage trend in communist Czechoslovakia, see Paulina Bren, “Weekend Get-Aways: The *Tramp*, the *Chata*, and the Politics of Private Life after the Prague

## Resisting Temptation

Those who resisted normalization and called on others to do the same thus also dealt in the currency of consumption and its false value as an identity creator. Milan Kundera, belligerent toward emigration in the immediate aftermath of the invasion, eventually moved to Paris. According to his own admissions, he would often find himself at dinner parties among his French intellectual peers, listening in as they discussed their favorite television shows. It must have been in these moments that he wistfully recalled his Central Europe, where culture still mattered; or so he wished to believe.<sup>59</sup> Václav Havel, with whom he had once had the bitter debate about emigration (Kundera had sniggered at the defeatism of those who were leaving Czechoslovakia soon after the invasion), had remained in Prague. In normalization's Prague, Havel had come to see that the East-Central Europe of which Kundera dreamed was gone, gutted by communist rule, and had taken on the feel of any other late 20th-century Western society. He thus referred to normalization as "post-totalitarianism" and described it as the "*historical coming together of a dictatorship and a consumer society*."<sup>60</sup> To some extent, Havel's claim suggests, the pursuit of comparable lifestyles had erased differences between "East" and "West."

If this was so, then resistance to normalization's *status quo* was not only about protesting political censorship. Indeed, in the 1980s, a layer of Czechoslovak youth who were not aligned with organized dissent but who lived in opposition to the state-endorsed ethos came into sharper focus. The samizdat journal *Vokno* (Window) was the setting for a debate about the failure of the cultural underground to embrace these youth who were increasingly tiring of normalization's consumerist definitions of self-realization. One anonymous contributor argued that there were many youth who, although not outright dissidents, nevertheless resisted joining the camp of those who were "totally idiotic consumers, so-called discothèque cretins, unable to think of anything other than the latest hairdo, and who suit the authorities perfectly, because they are satisfied with getting hold of some knock-off of Western culture in the form of discothèques or Adidas."<sup>61</sup> These young people resisted the cultural *status quo* by identifying themselves with a low-

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Spring," in *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc*, ed. David Crowley and Susan E. Reid (Oxford: Berg, 2002), 123–40.

<sup>59</sup> Milan Kundera, "The Tragedy of Central Europe (April 26, 1984)," in *From Stalinism to Pluralism: A Documentary History of Eastern Europe since 1945*, ed. Gale Stokes (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 222.

<sup>60</sup> Václav Havel, "Moc bezmocných," in *O lidskou identitu: Úvahy, fejetony, protesty, polemiky, prohlášení a rozhovory z let 1969–1979*, ed. Vilém Prečan and Alexander Tomský (London: Rozmluvy, 1984), 71. The italics are Havel's.

<sup>61</sup> Libri Prohibiti Archive, Prague [LPA]: Y. P., "Po nás potopa?" *Vokno*, no. 14 (1988).

key, unambitious, and anti-consumerist existence. A popular song among them went as follows:

*Let Me Live*<sup>62</sup>

What have I done to you? / Why do I have to live with you? / I do not feel like staining my hands / With the dust of stinking idle days. / I do not feel like stealing / Just to make a silly dream come true.<sup>63</sup> / I am happy with a tiny shelter / And a large beer for dinner / (No one believes I own no car) / I do not want to hear a crooner<sup>64</sup> / Or to wax lyrical over TV commercials / Or to spend 300 on shoes. / In short, I want to be fit to live / Get stuffed with your Tuzex woolens,<sup>65</sup> / Japanese radios and jogging shoes. / Keep your color tellies / And the girls with bras called Nellie's. / By the way, just try to understand / That life should not be daft / Kindness that must be paid for.<sup>66</sup> / Bones that get crushed, / People toppling over dumbly, / How can I stay calm? / I find no pleasure in your sex games, / Your polished Chryslers and your harlots.<sup>67</sup> / Incidentally, I can make love better than you, / And I am sick all over just living in this stew. / To brag about who knows better.... / I have no interest in your arguments / Or in quarterly bonuses and a castle on the lake. / I am content with what I can earn myself / And would like to tell you this: / Life is more than prattle / And life is not bread alone / So what's the matter with you?

It was these same youth who, quite famously, and without any seeming organization behind them, began to congregate during the last year of communism beside the John Lennon mural wall on Kampa Island in Prague's Little Quarter, and who became central to the Velvet Revolution that soon followed.

<sup>62</sup> This song, archived at the Open Society Archives in Budapest, is available only in English, having been translated by Radio Free Europe. The title of the song, however, would most likely make better sense as: "Let Me Be."

<sup>63</sup> A reference to the common practice of stealing bricks and other building materials from building sites to construct a private weekend cottage.

<sup>64</sup> Most likely a reference to the Czech crooner Karel Gott, also beloved by Germans, East and West, and dubbed the "Idiot of Music" by Milan Kundera in his novel, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*.

<sup>65</sup> *Tuzex* was a special chain of stores where one could buy Western goods for Western currency. Since it was illegal to possess Western currency, technically one could only shop at Tuzex if one had relatives abroad who sent Western currency directly to Tuzex, which transferred the money into special vouchers and passed them on to the relatives. Of course, there was a widespread black market for these vouchers, which were sold directly on the street at the entrance of the stores, thus allowing anyone with money to have access to the Tuzex goods. Items for sale through Tuzex even included new houses and cars. Prostitutes were often referred to in the press as "Tuzex-ladies."

<sup>66</sup> Refers to the common practice of bribery for any small service, especially doctors' visits and medical care.

<sup>67</sup> Refers to the flashy lifestyles of black-marketeers and party bosses.

## Conclusion

When one considers which country of the Eastern bloc had the most visible “mirror, mirror, on the wall,” the German Democratic Republic comes to mind. After all, it had both the mirror (namely, West Germany) and the wall; and one was intimately tied to the other. Indeed, this relationship between mirror and wall, so to say, has spurred a body of excellent scholarship in the past decade by German historians of both East and West. For those wishing to participate in the necessary rethinking of the Cold War, particularly as seen from the vantage point of the Eastern bloc, their work is vital. The common denominator in this new historiography is the emphasis on consumerism, and the sense (if not always the conclusion), summarized early on by Katherine Verdery, that these countries and their communist governments ultimately could not sustain the tempo of their citizens’ consumerist desires.<sup>68</sup>

This emphasis on consumerism, and the paradigm it has forged, can, however, also impede investigations into the experience of communism in Eastern bloc countries other than the GDR. For elsewhere, as this paper has shown, although there was a “mirror” through which images of the West were projected, the mirror itself and the view it offered was far more limited than the one afforded to citizens of East Germany who, after all, were regular consumers of West German television programming, radio broadcasts, and more. In addition, their wall was not built until 1961 whereas, in the case of Czechoslovakia (as well as Poland and Hungary), a “wall” had been erected long before, in 1948. Thus, although questions of consumerism are doubtless central to understanding the postwar communist period in Eastern Europe, there are multiple variations on the theme, so much so that the very meaning of communist consumerism must come under scrutiny. As Svetlana Boym wrote quite a number of years ago now, Lefebvrian critiques of consumption and of middle-class fixations on commodities and the collection of goods, associated with the “West,” cannot readily be transferred onto Soviet Russia. In pointing to her Aunt Liuba’s china cupboard in Leningrad, filled with incongruous, often kitschy collections of bits and pieces, Boym insists that they represented not commodities but artifacts, and “an aesthetic need, a desire for beauty met with minimal available means, or the aesthetic ‘domestication’ of the hostile outside world.”<sup>69</sup>

This is not to say that citizens of communist Eastern Europe did not want to consume like their brethren on the other side of the Iron Curtain. If there was one practice that truly linked these often disparate communisms, it was their citizens’ eagerness to display the red and white can of Coca-Cola

<sup>68</sup> Katherine Verdery, *What Was Socialism and What Comes Next* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 28.

<sup>69</sup> Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 159.

or the empty bottle of Johnny Walker scotch on top of the television console. As Judd Stitzel, writing on East German fashion shows, rightly notes, “the unique consumer culture that had become established in the GDR by the early 1970s was a contradictory and tension-filled amalgam of ‘capitalist’ and ‘socialist’ images, promises, values, and practices.” This capitalist–socialist mosaic was a recognizable feature across the region. But Stitzel, in asking “why East German citizens judged their standard of living using the ‘capitalist’ criteria of individual consumption while taking for granted subsidized social consumption,” concludes that they did so because their regime insisted on competing “with the West on capitalism’s own terms.”<sup>70</sup> He is right—for the case of East Germany. But as I have shown here, Czechoslovakia’s post-1968 leadership recognized early on that while it should compete with Western consumption, it could not. In its place, albeit in a piecemeal fashion, it constructed the idea of a socialist lifestyle (referred to as a “socialist way of life”) that, in theory, was supposed to provide things that the West could not; the most important of these was the opportunity to “self-realize” outside (and within) the workplace.

Even if the leaders’ efforts ultimately failed, they should not and cannot be discounted. Normalization’s leadership may not have succeeded in downgrading the pre-eminence of consumerism in the late 20th century, but that does not mean it failed to imprint new and competing priorities on late communist culture. Certainly, the majority of citizens grabbed the wrong end of the officially sanctioned stick and proceeded to link their much touted self-realization with the much maligned Western-style consumption. But in so doing, they were still participating in a new model of socialism. They came to understand their rights (and obligations) as citizens as existing not within a political collective but within individualized spaces of self-realization. Moreover, these were spaces that transcended early communist notions of public and private. The result was an entirely new experience of communism in the 1970s and 1980s, the impact of which is still felt today. Thus, when this particular Snow White was awakened in 1989—many would say by the amorous advances of the West—hers was not the unadulterated “happily ever after” that so many had been led to believe.

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<sup>70</sup> Judd Stitzel, “On the Seam between Socialism and Capitalism: East German Fashion Shows,” in *Consuming German in the Cold War*, ed. David F. Crew (New York: Berg, 2003), 76.