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Heroes of Our Time? Depictions of Dissent ex post

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Dissent Then and Now

Dissent was an important social phenomenon in the Eastern European states in the period after the Second World War, which to some extent also contributed to the collapse of the power structure at the end of the 1980s.¹ Although it peaked in the 1970s and 1980s, it is not a thing of the past – some of its protagonists are still alive, and their stories and experiences are being shared with younger generations. Given the troubled political circumstances in some Eastern European countries in the new century, the legacy of twentieth century dissent is central to cultural memory after the collapse of state socialism more than thirty years ago. The political systems in countries such as Russia and Belarus have become increasingly authoritarian, and people living under these regimes now experience political conditions similar to those of the late Soviet period. For many of them, dissent is not a thing of the past, but an existential issue in everyday life, albeit with significantly altered means of communication and organisation.² As a thematic issue of the journal *Osteuropa* aptly

1 The relevance of dissent for this breakdown is still a matter of discussion – see the reactions on Kotkin/Gross 2009 who downplayed the role of dissidents and human rights activists against the idea that the implosion was caused by structural and economic faults in the communist regimes.

2 Whereas the typewriter and the telephone-booth were the most important communication-devices for “classical” dissent, they have been replaced by digital communication-media in Russia (Gabowitsch 2013: 12) or Belarus (Kirschbaum 2022: 49–53).

noted in 2010, looking back at dissent is, to some extent, looking forward to the present and the future.³

With regard to Kacper Szulecki's recent discussion of the notions *dissent*, *dissidents* and *dissidentism*, one is prompted to provide a shorthand definition of dissent as the public expression of disagreement with those in power in a general atmosphere of repression and in the name of a common good or political idea.⁴ These definitions are also useful for examining dissent in its aftermath – when it has become a phenomenon of a culture's past. The representation and memory of historical dissent after the collapse of state socialism raise new questions:

- Is dissent only represented in retrospect, or are there signs of generalisation or actualisation?
- How are the powers represented? Are there only the negative antagonists and targets of dissident protest or are they represented in a more subtle way? Are only the dissidents in the right or are the authorities given a voice to articulate their positions and justify repression?
- Are there also other positions, namely the position of people in the grey zone⁵ who do not belong to either the authorities or to the usually rather small social group of dissident protesters?
- How nuanced and subtle are the representations of dissident practices and lives? What issues are obviously relevant to the representations?

The memory of dissident culture and political practice in the new political and technological conditions of the post 1989-years is not only a reference to the socialist era but is also significantly influenced by the political and social circumstances that have evolved over the last thirty-five years. This becomes particularly clear when comparing the post-Soviet states on the one hand and Eastern Central Europe on the other. The integration of Poland, the Czech

3 The Russian protesters against the restrictions of public demonstrations around 2010 consciously reverted to dissent but failed to mobilize a larger part of concerned citizens – cf. Horvath 2015.

4 For Szulecki, *dissent* and *dissidentism* means more or less the same, but *dissidence* shall denote more precisely the repression of dissent from the side of the authorities (and *dissidentism* the international perception of dissidence) – cf. Szulecki 2019: 28–34.

5 For a good historical discussion of the notion “grey zone” see Burget 2021.

Republic, Slovakia and other Eastern European countries into the European Union in 2004 has modulated the cultural memory of the socialist past. Apart from the canonisation of prominent leaders such as Václav Havel and Lech Wałęsa, doubts have been raised about the significance of dissent in the dissolution of the socialist system. Meanwhile, dissidents were accused of promoting oppositional positions from a rather elitist position that was unlikely to be shared by the majority of the population (cf. Maryl et al. 2019: 149–158).

Claiming and Disclaiming Dissent – Russia since 1992

In Russia, the situation was different: during the transformation period of the 1990s, the intelligentsia – which had been familiar with and sympathetic to issues of dissent – experienced marginalisation (see Salmin 1998). The new elite was not interested in the past, and none of the former dissidents played a significant role in Russian politics during the Yeltsin era or under Putin. Yet Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the most prominent of all Soviet dissidents, was not only revered by “independent” film-makers such as Aleksandr Sokurov but also embraced by Putin’s new ideology of “United Russia” (*Edinaia Rossiia*) and quickly integrated into the neo-Slavophile programme of Russia’s exemption from the “liberal” West (see Horvath 2011). Similarly, a closer look at the activities surrounding the commemoration of Andrei Sakharov on the occasion of his 100th birthday in 2021 raises doubts about a clear distinction between official and unofficial cultural memory. In addition to “civic” activities to commemorate Sakharov, it seems that state-sponsored institutions have also been heavily involved in preserving the memory of this famous dissident.

Under Putin, a constant and sharply focused protest against the new power structure was articulated in radical political art. Its protagonists – Pussy Riot, Voina, and others – were often perceived (especially by Western media) as dissident; but they also referred to dissident practices themselves. For example, in January 2012, Pussy Riot performed a song, “Bunt v Rossii, Putin zasal” (“Riots in Russia, Putin has pissed himself”), on Moscow’s Lobnoe Mesto at Red Square, where in August 1968 a group of seven dissidents protested against the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia (see Meindl 2018: 18of).

Sakharov and Solzhenitsyn are thus contended figures: while the authorities seek to enshrine them as historical figures and avoid any updating of their position, the protest-movements in politicised art and popular culture

outline the historical roots of protest by alluding to dissidents. In a similar vein, Liudmila Ulitskaia has published a biographical book on Natal'ia Gorbanevskaia, the most prominent female dissident in the Soviet Union, and a fictional novel – *Zelënyi Shatër* (*The Big Green Tent*) – set in the dissident milieu. This milieu is portrayed in a complex way reminiscent of Solzhenitsyn's great novels set in the late Stalinist period – *V krughe pervom* (*The First Circle*) and *Rakovyi korpus* (*Cancer Ward*). Many protagonists are portrayed in their personal relationships with each other and with regard to their social background. The portraits of people living in the dissident milieu are generally very positive: they try to help each other in difficult situations, and their aims and problems are understandable and appealing – producing samizdat, teaching music, helping handicapped children, providing Western media with photo-material from the Soviet Union, and so on.

In Putin's Russia, dissidents are exceptional figures – important figures in Russian history (presented by state-sponsored institutions), or positive figures of courage and protest against unfavourable political conditions that can be identified within the given political circumstances.

Dissidents and Popular Dissent in Czech Culture

In contrast to the countries that emerged from the collapsed Soviet Union, where former Soviet dissidents did not occupy important positions in state or private institutions, the situation in Czechoslovakia (1989–1992) and its two successor states shows a variety of careers for former dissidents and a lively public interest in the most prominent ones. Although not all dissidents became representatives of the state – such as Václav Havel, Jiří Gruša or Milan Uhde – a lively interest in the culture of dissent is manifested in a number of books, films and other media representations of prominent dissidents. To some extent, these representations continue the literary auto-reflections of dissident writers (Václav Havel, Pavel Kohout and Ludvík Vaculík have already depicted the intricacies of dissent) and those of close relatives and friends (e.g. Tereza Boučková, Jiří Kratochvíl), but they add new aspects which are, most likely, related to the distance in time and situation: Michal Viewegh's popular 1992 novel *Báječná léta pod psa* (*Bliss Was It in Bohemia*), which was also successfully adapted to film in 1997, describes the life of a typical middle-class family whose members tried to stay away from politics but

were nevertheless affected by the power structures. The family positions itself in a grey zone, but a brief personal contact with dissident Pavel Kohout, who has a house in the same village, triggers the downfall of the father, a successful economist in a state-owned company. Instead of having the privilege of travelling to Western Europe on business, he is forced to work as a gatekeeper in his company, simply because of his alleged contact with the dissident milieu. Written in the wake of the Velvet Revolution, the novel is not only critical of the socialist regime. Its opponents are also portrayed in a slightly satirical manner: the Czech phrase *pod psa* in the title not only denounces the socialist years as “very bad”, but also alludes to Pavel Kohout’s autofictional novel *Kde je zakopán pes* (“Where the Dog is Buried”), which reflects the private life of a dissident and was officially published shortly before Viewegh’s book. The encounter with Pavel Kohout is a central scene in the book, both because it is crucial to the fate of the family and because it shows the differences between the determined dissidents and the people in the grey zone, who behaved less boldly but were just as affected by the power structures.

The Czech sociologist Veronika Pehe considers Viewegh’s novel – along with many other representations of the socialist past that also belong to the “light” comedy genre – to be a typical production of the 1990s, expressing the striving for “petty heroism” (cf. Pehe 2020: 92). In other words, acts of resistance against the regime were not carried out by dissidents but by ordinary people from the grey zone. Pehe even suggests that the popularity of humorous stories and films about the private lives of individuals under socialism was due to a national desire for exculpation: in order to conceal the lack of broad resistance to the power structure, small, petty acts are presented as if they were also subversive gestures (ibid.: 97). In fact, what is striking about Viewegh’s novel is that the little heroes of the grey zone come to the fore, while the dissidents are schematic figures in the background whose position is clear and determined. Both the novel and the film show how ordinary people worry about their position between the extremes of the power structures on the one hand and the rigid opposition on the other.

A very successful and remarkable counterpart to Michal Viewegh’s novel is the TV-serial *Vyprávěj!* (“Tell!”), which ran on Czech television from 2009 to 2013, comprising five series with a total of 115 episodes, with an average length of around 52 minutes. Its popularity can also be measured by the number of viewers, with each episode attracting more than one million viewers. The series

can best be described as a kind of historical soap opera, depicting the life of a “typical Czech” family, the Dvořáks, against a historical background – covering more than 40 years, from 1964 to 2005. This TV saga of the Dvořák family metonymically represents the Czech nation in the last decades of the twentieth century and at the beginning of a new century. By focusing on the grey area of Czechoslovak society, the production attracts the interest of a large number of people from the former Czechoslovakia.

The historical background is provided by newsreel footage and a voice-over narrating the historical events, while the fictional storyline involving the family members fits neatly into the historical context. The story of the fictional Dvořák family is told by a younger member of the family. This narrator places the characters and their relationships in the historical chronotope. In accordance with the rules of the genre, the complexity of the characters is not very high (so that the viewers do not need to have seen every episode to follow the plot) and the historical circumstances are only roughly outlined. The same applies to the portrayal of milieus and groups – it is easy to determine to which segment of society a character belongs, although, of course, the characters in the genre do not remain static but develop over time (for example, Karel, one of the main characters, who is a qualified engineer for the construction of the Prague metro, usually avoids conflicts with the authorities, but in 1989 he signs the *Několik vět* (“Some Sentences”) petition issued by Charta 77).

One could say that *Vyprávějí*’s general focus is on the large grey zone by showing a wide variety of characters positioned in it, but the series pays tribute to genre conventions and positions the characters rather schematically as black, white and grey: only the latter are indeed diverse and interesting, while the authorities of late socialism are just as schematic as the dissidents.⁶ The slow historical pace and the detailed plot allow for a rather complex picture of life under socialism; the cultural memory produced is diverse and not reduced to stereotypical collective images of Czechoslovakian society. Although the

6 At about the same time, state-sponsored Czech Television produced also another series on Czech and Slovak history during the twentieth century. *České století* (“Our century”) was written by Pavel Kosatík, a successful writer of Czech history for a non-academic audience. The series focuses on the political elite, not on ordinary people. This is particularly evident in the Charta 77 episode, where only the people in power and the other group of opponents – dissidents and the underground – are shown. Ordinary people are staffage, their conflicts or problems are not the subject of this overt representation of politics.

various characters are somehow “typical”, there are so many of them that generalisations are not possible.

The film *Havel* (dir. Slávek Horák, CZ 2020) shows the future president in his dissident years by paralleling his political activities and his private life. The private area serves as a mirror of the political sphere so that problems in the private area have a similar structure to those in the political sphere. The film connects the level of politics with the more concrete levels of private life, or even more directly, with physicality. For example, in a scene set during the Prague Spring, Alexander Dubček is shown urinating in the street after attending a performance of a Havel play because he did not want to queue to go to the toilet. When Havel joins Dubček urinating in the street, he speaks approvingly: “Zrušení cenzury – jaká úleva” (“Censorship is gone, what a relief”), creating a double meaning as the ‘relief’ also refers to urination. The film also works with other parallels, e.g., with the parallel between life and theatre. This parallel leads to direct shifts between life and theatre, in the sense that Havel’s plays for theatre – sometimes labelled as a Czech version of absurd theatre – are firmly grounded in the personal experience of absurd conditions for Czechoslovak citizens. But the parallel between life and art also allows for working with visual leitmotifs and artistic composition (e.g., the recurrence of signatures under petitions, legal appeals and revocations, or the play with structures and patterns in film). Havel is not presented as an extraordinary politician, but on a human level, as a man with doubts and faults, heroic in some situations, pathetic in others. In any case, Havel, as a protagonist, remains an exceptional figure who acts consistently in politics; when he transfers his convictions to everyday life, he does not succeed in the same way.

As a general conclusion from this preliminary analysis of the material, I would like to propose the following thoughts:

1. The representation of socialist dissent is highly susceptible to the social and political circumstances in which the representation is produced: when the political climate is harsh and dissent is a current issue in the present, the representation of historical dissent is carried out with an eye to its relevance to contemporary society. When the expression of political ideas is met with

severe repression, dissent emerges simultaneously with the conditions for heroising political subversion and non-conformism.⁷

2. The broader circumstances that limit the possibilities for heroism therefore allow us to distinguish between heroic and postheroic societies, which seems to coincide largely with the systemic changes in Eastern Europe around 1989.⁸ In post-heroic societies, the representations of heroes are different from those in repressive political conditions where dissent is an important political issue.

3. Representations of dissent – especially of the leading figures – never ignore the social relations of dissent, its difference from the ‘silent’ majority / the grey zone. However, the picture varies: sometimes the dissident is idealised as a hero overcoming serious obstacles; sometimes it is the milieu or even the ‘silent’ majority that is represented with “petty heroism” – small everyday resistance. In Czech culture after 1989, the latter has become popular probably because of the large “grey zone” and the small number of dissidents.

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7 These particular sociopolitical conditions which allow for heroism and heroisation were mentioned by Aleksandr Genis and Boris Paramonov when discussing Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s position before his forced migration to the West – cf. Genis/Paramonov 2018.

8 A plausible distinction of heroic and postheroic societies was drawn by Herwig Münkler in an essay (2007), but without any reference neither to the political context nor to the system change in Eastern Europe towards the end of the twentieth century.

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