

Prague's Second Spring

After the GDR, Czechoslovakia. The Prague Spring may finally be coming to fruition. **Jon Bloomfield** in Prague assesses the character of the popular revolution



The Prague November commemorated the 200th anniversary of the French Revolution in the best possible way. In a classic revolution it took less than a fortnight of people's power to topple the old Stalinist tyranny, with its ruthless security apparatus. It was an extraordinary mass uprising, conducted with stunning discipline and calmness. The national flag was the movement's symbol but unlike elsewhere in Eastern Europe this movement was not driven by the uglier passions of nationalism. Fraternity was not forgotten in the quest for liberty and equality. At the demonstrations in Prague's Wenceslas Square before the Jakes regime fell, the people chanted 'Nemci, Nemci' - 'Germans, Germans' - in recognition of the example they were following, while on the six-month anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre the students held a commemorative rally.

In some ways the uprising echoed that of Paris in May 1968 with the calls for worker-student unity, the wall posters and even some of the slogans: 'Who? if not us! When? if not now!' But a key difference and the hallmark of this revolution was its absolute refusal to be provoked into any violence. This was a triumph of mass popular will, of sheer size and of national unity.

The students were the spark. Many of those who organised the November 17 demonstration, ostensibly called to

mark the 50th anniversary of the death of student Jan Opletal at the hands of the Nazis, had been involved in earlier demonstrations. Student strike committee spokeswoman Monica Pajerova, for example, had been at the demonstrations marking the Soviet invasion and the death of Jan Palach. She and her colleagues had become politically involved through their work on student magazines and newspapers, which were always operating on the margins of legality.

'Sometimes we were censored. If you try to tell the truth you inevitably get involved in politics here.' It was this group that formed the operating committee for the Opletal demonstration and by working through both the official structures and unofficial groups, got both permission for the march and an unprecedented unity. Pajerova was surprised at the huge turnout. After the students had marched to the cemetery 'we felt so strong that we decided to go to Wenceslas Square'.

Following the bloody suppression of that demonstration by the security police the students turned to strike action in an impressive display of organised unity. The November 20 strike was solid. Anger at the police brutality turned to energy. The students became the democratic movement's activists. They set up shrines where their colleagues had been beaten; produced and stuck up leaflets, broadsheets and post-



menal response to the call. The students' dream of worker-student unity was realised.

The motor co-ordinating and directing the movement was Civic Forum. Established just two days after the student demonstration at a meeting in a theatre, it brought together all the opposition forces under one umbrella with Vaclav Havel as its chairperson. Influenced by the egalitarian and tolerant approach of the underground movement, Civic Forum adopted a very open style of work. It always sought a consensus within its ranks and its demands gave clarity and focus to the movement.

Once the movement took off, the Jakes regime was helpless. Even the old social contract it had fostered with the industrial working class collapsed. They were no longer prepared to accept a decent standard of living in return for political servitude. The people no longer wanted to live a lie. All the regime had to rely on was the security apparatus. No Soviet tanks now stood behind them. The Jakes regime found that Talleyrand's maxim of 200 years earlier still held true: 'There are many things you can do with a bayonet, but not sit on one.'

The crisis of the Stalinist regime had been ripening for a long time, but the tragic outcome of the Prague Spring bred a deep scepticism in much of the population about the prospects for political change. There was a respect for Charter 77 and the Chartists - but at a distance. Yet the Chartists' long, hard and often lonely struggle had paid off. Their stand over the last 13 years against abuse, lies and repression, their call for human, civic and democratic rights, has given them enormous moral authority, above all to Vaclav Havel.

But the Chartists also learned a new style of politics which has shaped the democratic revolution. Here Havel, with his skill in bringing together people with different opinions, has been crucial. Silhanova recalls how 'working under difficult conditions in flats and on the streets, we got to know each other as people, we helped out in family affairs, I learned about different ways people live and think. It was our first great school of tolerance.' This is an experience which has led many of the old Prague Spring communists to rethink their attitude towards party politics and to argue that some of the roots of Stalinism are to be found in the zeal and intolerance Lenin showed towards other socialist forces. They are also unhappy that, apart from the peace movement, most of the Western European Left showed little solidarity with their struggles.

The fruits of the egalitarian, tolerant style of Charter politics have been evident in November events. 'No violence' has been one of the most common slogans. The students met the riot police with flowers. It took real political vision for the Civic Forum to get a lieutenant in the riot police to address the crowd at

Letna. He said they were only following orders but he apologised to the crowd, whereupon with a stunning absence of vindictiveness, they cheered him.

Dialogue is the keyword. The Civic Forum has published a poster, 'Eight Rules for Dialogue'. Rule 1 is 'Your opponent is not your enemy but your partner in the search for truth'. Rule 5 says, 'Don't try at whatever price to have the last word', while Rule 8 says, 'Don't confuse dialogue with monologue'. It could usefully be circulated on the British Left!

After 40 years of monolithic Stalinist rule, interrupted only briefly by the Prague Spring, the democratic movement wants the new politics to be shaped by tolerance and reason. In this they are drawing both on the national traditions of Tomas Masaryk, the nation's founder, and some earlier Enlightenment traditions.

The influence of the Prague Spring communists on these developments is somewhat harder to gauge. As an older generation, they have been content with a more behind-the-scenes role. Some played key parts in the Charter movement. The club they formed - Obroda (Renewal) - was harassed by the security forces but has been important in fostering unity among the different opposition groups.

It was on their initiative that the Civic Forum was set up, following a meeting between Havel and Milos Hajek on November 18, and when hardliners tried to provoke resistance to change in Ostrava, it was another Prague Spring leader, Venek Silhan, who was sent to sort it out. Effectively they have acted as a bridge to the older generations and here Alexander Dubcek has been the key figure. He has symbolised the links and continuity between 1968 and 1989. Many younger people know little about him or feel he is too old to lead them, although he is five years younger than President Mitterrand. Yet there is a widespread affection for him, with posters all round central Prague and calls at the demonstrations for him to be president. This largely titular office may suit him best, for he himself remains undecided and ambivalent about his future political role.

The ideas of the Prague Spring remain influential in a broader sense. They cannot be picked up wholesale two decades later, for the world has moved on. Yet as Valtr Komarek, head of the very influential reformist Institute of Forecasting puts it, 'We are a reformist nation'. Thus while the country faces some very severe structural problems - too much clapped-out heavy industry, too little modern technology, a weak service sector, a severely-polluted environment - the initial indications are that they will seek to carry out a progressive modernisation. Civic Forum's impressive seven-point programme, 'What We Want', calls for a democratic political system, a mixed economy, social justice and solidarity, protection of the environment, including 'a change in life-

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ers, spread the strike to other universities, formed the early core of the protest demonstrations and put their case to workers in the factories and offices. Musicians, artists and many intellectuals gave immediate backing, while the Catholic church indicated its wish for dialogue.

Quickly, the ordinary citizens of Prague responded. As Libuse Silhanova, a communist expelled after 1968 and a former spokeswoman of Charter 77 explained, 'This was the moment when the experience of the mass rallies in Leipzig and Berlin linked up in our minds'. The rallies grew in size, confidence and determination during that week, culminating in the phenomenal rally of three quarters of a million on the Letna fields on Saturday November 25.

During that week all sorts of workplaces held meetings. On the Tuesday, Prague's Metro construction workforce, over 5,000 strong, condemned the brutal attack on the demonstration, called for an independent commission to investigate it and demanded real dialogue with all groups in society. A big CKD engineering plant went further and called for free elections. All week support grew for a two-hour general strike which the students and Civic Forum had called for Monday November 27. There were patches of resistance, most notably in the old industrialised region of Ostrava by the Polish border, but overall there was a pheno-



styles', and the development of culture, science and education in ways which develop 'high moral responsibility'.

This is a broadly left-of-centre programme. Its most obvious omission from a West European viewpoint concerns women. The movement here is dominated by men, even among the students. Of the 42-strong central strike committee, only three are women. Pajerova herself admits that 'I have not been much interested in feminist ideas at all until now'. Asked why women have not been in the leadership, she replies, 'Many girls have been involved, typing, making food, things like that. Maybe it's in their nature. I don't know how to explain this.'

The political forces which will carry through this type of programme are inevitably unclear at this stage. The first free competitive elections since 1946 will be held during 1990. The jockeying for position has already begun, although Civic Forum is hoping to retain the unity of the democratic movement by itself participating in the elections.

Unlike in Poland, the Czechoslovak CP has been a real historical force. Yet its capacity to renew itself and win sufficient public confidence to play a part in a coalition government must be questioned. It is desperately cleaning up its act. The old leadership has been kicked out, 1968 reassessed, its own militia disarmed, although the first government announced by Prime Minister Adamec was a complete disaster. As in

the 1960s, it does appear to have generated reformists in its ranks. The Democratic Forum of Communists wants to junk democratic centralism and present an entirely new policy programme. The Forum has already gained a significant rank-and-file following.

However, the problem for the Communist Party is not just shedding the past, but articulating its socialist vision of the future. Here the thinking of the Prague Spring communists speaks to the entire European Left. One of their number, Rudolf Slansky, also a Chartist and engineer, puts it most clearly: 'For 40 years we had a great social experiment under way here. Now we can observe the results of the whole economy being under state and party control. If the state has the complete monopoly, then it has no reason to improve its functioning. Industry stagnates. That's why we think it is necessary for state enterprises to compete in the market.' It is this experience that has reshaped their thinking. The details of a new socialist system remain a question nobody can answer. 'But what we now understand by socialism is as much social justice as possible, the lowest unemployment, the best social security, the same opportunities for all, but not the system of wholesale state ownership. To be a socialist you don't have to support that.'

These values strike deep among the Czechoslovak people. The students

finish their proclamations with the call for 'freedom, democracy and socialism.' Pajerova insists 'that the majority of us are still for socialism... We want to keep the things that are good here ... though perhaps we are for socialism as we don't know anything else. Perhaps we mean like Sweden.'

It's the humanist and moral values, the strong collectivist traditions and sense of social justice and responsibility that appear to have deep roots here. These fuse aspects of the liberal and socialist traditions. But the Prague November has also indicated the new dimension of the environment, and most importantly it has shown a new culture of politics. The movement is still led by men - but without the usual tub-thumping machismo. It's the reassertion of the values of dialogue, reason and discussion as the motor of politics that are most impressive.

Here could be a new type of outcome to the unravelling of Stalinism and the cold war. Events here, as in the GDR, suggest that the new Eastern Europe need not automatically play to the Right. There are now huge opportunities for the Left too. The vision with which END launched the 1980s - of a peaceful, non-nuclear and unified Europe - is no longer a dream. We start a new decade with new hopes and prospects. From across the Atlantic, Mr Fukuyama predicts the 'end of history'; here in the heart of Europe it feels more like a new beginning. ©

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