

Domination and Power Mechanisms of the Czechoslovak Communist Party at the Philosophical Faculty, Charles University, 1968-1989

Veranstalter: Katka Volná, Philosophical Faculty, Charles University, Prague

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Bericht von: Muriel Blaive, Ludwig Boltzmann Institut, Universität Wien; Nicolas Maslowski, Collegium Minor, Prague

On January 9th 2008, a memorable seminar took place at Charles University in Prague entitled *Domination and Power Mechanisms of the Czechoslovak Communist Party at the Philosophical Faculty, Charles University, 1968-1989*. In fact, this day should almost be coined as the birth of a collective as opposed to conflictual memory of communism in the Czech Republic; at the very least, it can be seen as one of the first serious attempts to a non-militant approach to history of communism.

The chance arrival on the Czech historical scene of a group of seven PhD and MA students in history and literature, including project leader Katka Volná or rather the way in which their research was received, does indeed mark the beginning of a new era. Not all of them even intend to become historians but in this seminar they defended a dispassionate analytical conception of the communist past, while presenting the preliminary results of a project fathered by literature historian Tomáš Glanc – who provides it, along with historian Michal Kopeček, with its academic patronage. They decided to undertake it alone (i.e. without funding) yet, in order to study the influence of the Czechoslovak Communist Party at the Philosophical Faculty between 1968 and 1989, they dug up, inventoried and digitalized more than 30.000 pages of documents from the university archives, an impressive amount of work.

What made this day so special, however, was not so much the first results they presented – although they were as interesting as could be expected – but the circumstances surrounding this seminar. First of all, Katka Volná and her colleagues were pursuing a topic which is still rather unusual in the Czech Republic insofar as it involves not only a study of repression or resistance – a classical repertoire which results from a lasting prevalence of the totalitarian paradigm – but a more nuanced theme, leaving space for an analysis of people's adaptation strategies to the regime. The mentoring of three

more experienced scholars, Michal Kopeček, Jaroslav Cuhra, and Michal Pullmann, indeed helped them to realize that analysis is more useful than moral condemnation. But their insistence to follow this path is all the more pleasing since many established historians, who were already active under normalization and who are not sure how to deal with this personal and collective past, simultaneously occupy positions of power or prestige in a hierarchical system which tends to deprive younger scholars of academic legitimacy. It is true that this state of affairs was disrupted in most recent years through the emergence of young and snapping militants of anti-communist obedience, but the latter built their careers on political stances rather than on actual historical research.

In this context, it was refreshing that the social history of communism did in effect constitute the general frame of interpretation for this project even if it is not yet part of history students' (and professors') vocabulary and is not acknowledged as such. Michal Kopeček, who made an excellent introduction to the final round table, even evoked the concept of „Eigen-Sinn“ as a useful analytical tool; to the best of our knowledge, it is the first time this happened publicly on Czech academic ground. In a country where any type of social approach of communism has been consistently ridiculed since 1989, Katka Volná was commandeering in her statement that she doesn't see „why such a topic shouldn't be studied.“

We touch here upon the truly incredible aspect of this seminar, as she was not really contradicted by anyone in the audience. The room was unexpectedly full (usually this kind of seminars attracts 20 people or less); so full, in fact, that more than 100 people tried to press themselves into a space designed for 50. Most of Prague historians of the older generation sat in the company of current Charles University students, a nice surprise as professors usually don't bother to attend students' smaller seminars. But it was more than that: an unexpected reversal of the prescribed roles; the professors acted as witnesses of the time under scrutiny and acknowledged without discussion the expertise of the young „historians.“

In spite, or rather because, of this, the seminar was the seat of a, to date, uniquely peaceful confrontation between „historians“ – the first generation of scholars who didn't experience communism firsthand (they were small children in 1989) – and „witnesses“. Instead of seizing the microphone and

improvising lengthy presentations of their own, the latter merely brought in a few precisions and thanked the historians for the quality of their work; instead of embarrassingly trying to cut them short or appease them, „the historians“, devoid of any complexes, merely thanked them without comment and moved to the next question.

This new spirit was also illustrated in the composition of the final round table, which brought together not only intellectuals whose careers were impeded for political reasons (Oldřich Tůma, Miloslav Petrušek), but some who continued their career under the normalization regime (Alena Macurová, Miloslav Hroch) and even one historian who, as he explained himself, actually started his career under late normalization (Jan Pelikán.) The tolerance in which the latter was received by the former and, more generally, the pleasant atmosphere of the day – the audience laughing heartily and almost nostalgically on multiple occasions – are the first indicators that a collective, relatively coherent, vision of the communist past is emerging, not only because the tension between formerly opposed camps is relaxing but also because younger generations are gaining legitimacy in discussing this past, which is therefore slowly becoming the past of the whole nation.

Why this happened here and now is of course subject to speculation. Perhaps because the topic is so close to everyone's heart (all professors studied in the very same faculty and probably recognize in the students their own younger selves, and nowadays students can relate to this particular aspect of their elders' history)? Or because most of the „witnesses“ are themselves historians? Or maybe the time is finally right (19 years after the Velvet Revolution, i.e. one generation)? Or maybe because this process was devoid of any external influence (young historians deriving some of their inspiration from foreign research models but being of Czech descent, i.e. legitimate)?

In any case, it can be assumed that this seminar was the first occurrence of a new trend. But although it will certainly develop in the coming years, it will not be without setbacks. This was made clear at the very end of the seminar: when anti-communist historian Petr Blažek made an appearance in the audience at the last hour, it was to publicly accuse one of the panelists of having collaborated with the secret police. This attitude is neither new nor particularly interesting, but it did disrupt the collective, friendly atmosphere of research

which had prevailed so far. After the historian-witness and the historian-judge, the time seems to have come for historian-analysts to put aside normative pre-conceived theoretical standpoints. However, the latter will clearly have to coexist with the former for quite some time before that day comes.

Conference Overview:

Michal Stehlík: Welcome by the Dean of the Philosophical Faculty,

„Normalization of the normalization period“ (presentation of the project by Tomáš Glanc)

„Current state of research on the normalization period at the Philosophical Faculty, Charles University. Introduction to the structure of the Czechoslovak Communist Party at the Faculty“ (Katka Volná, Jakub Bachtřík)

„The Czechoslovak Communist Party at the Faculty from the 'Prague Spring' to the 'Healthy Core'. Analysis of the 'crisis' period as a starting-point for the normalization period“ (Jakub Jareš, Katka Volná)

„Party membership screening, dismissals and dissolution of departments at the Faculty between 1969 and 1971“ (Jakub Jareš)

„Party information system at the Faculty“ (Barbora Hartigová)

„Ideological upbringing at the Faculty – forms of ideological actions“ (Klára Pinerová)

„Evaluations as the basic form of political and academic control“ (Matěj Spurný)

„Entrance exams at the Faculty at the time of normalization: criterias of decision-making“ (Edith Holečková)

„How to research or not to research the normalization period at the Faculty of Philosophy? Personalities with experience at the Faculty in the normalization period discuss the current results“ (Moderator: Michal Kopeček, Participants: Oldřich Tůma, Jan Pelikán, Alena Macurová, Miloslav Petrušek, Miloslav Hroch)

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