

Schulze Wessel, Martin: *Der Prager Frühling. Aufbruch in eine neue Welt*. Ditzingen: Reclam 2018. ISBN: 978-3-15-011159-8; 323 S.

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This new history of the Prague Spring is divided into two main sections: the first part presents the deeper roots of the reform ideas of the Prague Spring while the second part deals minutely with the unfolding of the political events during the 8 months in 1968 when Alexander Dubček became first secretary of the Czechoslovak Communist Party (KSC) on January 5, 1968, and the Warsaw Pact invasion during the night of August 20/21.

The principal contribution of this book to the vast literature on the Prague Spring is its deep dive into the process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* – of mastering the painful past of the thousands of communists that had been purged in the early 1950s (Slánský trial etc.). These trials „burdened the political system like a bad nightmare“ (p. 25). The first secretary of the Communist Party Antonín Novotný had been in the Central Committee and therefore shared personal responsibility for these judicial crimes. Prominent victims of these show trials like Josef Smrkovský and Eduard Goldstücker who had risen in the KSC before the Stalinist purges, had been tortured and humiliated. Released in the early 1960s, they gained prominence again during the Prague Spring. The slow rehabilitation of the purge victims since the early 1960s were the first shaky steps towards liberalization and the reforms of the Prague Spring, argues Schulze Wessel persuasively (pp. 38ff). The literary scholar Goldstücker organized a famous conference on Franz Kafka in 1963, rehabilitating the famous writer for the Czechoslovak literary canon.

Next to discourses over the past, ideas about the Socialist future also radically renewed thinking within the Communist Party. The 12th Party Congress of the KSC (1962) followed the lead of the Soviet Communists and designed a path for the transition to communism as the final aim of its historical wherewithal (p. 68). Czech communism encountered both economic and ide-

ological crises. Universities no longer accepted the absolute power of the Communist Party to interpret ideology. Students also complained about a lack of democracy. The Communist Party therefore asked the philosopher Radovan Richta and a team of scholars at the Czech Academy of Sciences to come up with a new vision for Czech society. Their report *Civilizace na rozcestí* („Civilization at the Crossroads“) (1966) analyzed the social and human implications of the „scientific and technical revolution“ unfolding in the world.¹ Richta's team did not shy away from maintaining that the West invested much more in research and technology and was ahead of the socialist world. Unlike Chairman Khrushchev's cant of „the East overtaking the West“ soon economically, Richta did not see such a „convergence“ occurring (p. 78) but rather pleaded for a new type of socialism. Richta became an intellectual star in Czechoslovakia and also coined the term of „socialism with a human face“ for the Prague Spring (p. 80).

Richta was thinking about changing social trends due to the technological revolution. Ota Šik provided food for thought towards economic reforms, advocating the decentralization of the Party planning structure (p. 98) and pleading for allowing market forces to be accepted (p. 106) as early as 1966. Meanwhile the KSC tasked another academician Zdeněk Mlynář with designing a political reform agenda. Mlynář's liberal program demanded more personal freedoms for Czechs (and Slovaks) and also to liberate the state from the political monopoly of the Communist Party (p. 119). Mlynář also dealt with the party's sins of the past (in which he himself had been involved as a young lawyer). Only with a pluralist political system could a repetition of the 1950s terror regime be prevented (p. 121). However, he refused to deal with the problems of the Slovaks, who always felt left behind by Czech intellectuals and politicians in Prague and therefore were demanding more autonomy. While the Czechs wanted more democratization, the Slovaks

¹ The German-Austrian philosopher Günther Anders has pondered these issues before Richta in his path-breaking work: Günther Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen* [The obsolescence of Human Beings], Munich 1956.

demanded federalization (p. 130). Mlynář's theoretical program became the base for the political reforms of the Prague Spring and the new „Czechoslovak path to socialism“ (p. 122). Thus Goldstücker's, Richta's, Šik's and Mlynář's reform ideas one by one advanced in the course of the 1960s and became the core of the „action program“ of the new KSČ in April 1968 (p. 134). Based on plenty of archival work and the utilization of much „grey literature,“ this is Schulze Wessel's contribution to the larger historiography.

Schulze Wessel's summarizing of the deeper roots of the quasi intellectual history of the Prague Spring is riveting. The second part of the book summarizes the factual history of the unfolding of the 8 months of the Prague Spring from Novotný's resignation from his party leadership post until the invasion of the Warsaw Pact.² During these months, time was constantly „accelerating“ (p. 199) and with it the reform process and politics became increasingly „moralizing“ (p. 141). By late 1967 the state was in a state of „aporia“ (p. 145). Deep rifts afflicted the party between the old guard and the reformers (including new parties like the return of the Social Democrats). One of the last of the Stalinists, Novotný's fall in early January 1968 brought the Slovak Dubček into the party leadership. Dubček was not a visionary but exercised a moderating influence on the radical reformers; he did not have a master plan to reform socialism (p. 153). His new style of politics came on display for the first time during the 20-years anniversary ceremonies of the Communist seizure of power in February 1948. He spoke to the people directly and thus „returned to them their role as sovereign“ (p. 154). By March 1968 the Party no longer censored the media. Open debates – public round tables with politicians – and regular public opinion polling more than anything democratized Czechoslovak society. Investigative journalists delved more deeply into the judicial crimes of the KSČ. When Novotný resigned as president in late March, the candidates for his succession carried on open political campaigns. The KSČ's April 5 „action program“ included most of the ideas of the former reform commissions. Proclaiming the new freedom of assembly

further democratized society.

Dubček and the new party leadership anticipated the backlash from the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact allies. Next to Moscow, the East Germans and the Poles opposed the dramatic reforms of the Prague Spring above all else, fearing a spill over into their polities. These allies chided the Czechoslovak leadership in various Warsaw Pact meetings. Ludvík Vaculík's „manifest of 2000 words“, the most important programmatic statement of the Prague Spring reformers, was designed to bring about the „rebirth“ of Czechoslovakia (p. 258); instead brought the Warsaw Pact invasion in August – the Czechoslovak reform project simply had been moving forward to quickly. Moscow no longer tolerated this „counterrevolution.“

Schulze Wessel's book is very persuasive on the domestic side of the Prague Spring but covers the international response – both in the East and the West³ – only minimally (the American response is totally missing). Still, this is a book that belongs into every research library.

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² The factual history of the Prague Spring, leading to the Warsaw Pact invasion, has often been told – among the best accounts are Gordon H. Skilling, *Czechoslovakia's Interrupted Revolution*, Princeton 1976; Jan Pauer, *Prag 1968. Der Einmarsch des Warschauer Paktes. Hintergründe, Planung, Durchführung*, Bremen 1995.

³ For the Western and Eastern responses to the Prague Spring and the invasion of Czechoslovakia, see Günter Bischof / Stefan Karner / Peter Ruggenthaler (eds.), *The Prague Spring and the Warsaw Pact Invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968*, Lanham, Md. 2010.