

**THE CZECHOSLOVAK COMMUNIST REGIME FROM CREATION TO COLLAPSE (1948–89)**

# BEHIND THE IRON CURTAIN

This year commemorates the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the democratic formation of the Czechoslovak Republic. Let's look back and remember the forty years of communist rule and the events that led to our freedom.

## The communist takeover of 1948

In February, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, supported by the Soviet Union, gained control of the Czechoslovak government. Heavy political pressure and threats of violence forced President Beneš first to appoint Communist ministers and then to resign. Klement Gottwald succeeded him as president.



A parade of police officers on Wenceslas Square in celebration of the first anniversary of the communist takeover.

## Strengthening communist rule in the '50s

Communists suppressed opposition by either executing their opponents or sending them to prisons and work camps. They abolished private ownership of businesses, by confiscating them for the state, and introduced huge collective farms. The only accepted ideology was that of Marxism-Leninism.



Former member of parliament, Milada Horáková, at the mock trial where she faced accusation of treason. She was sentenced to death in 1950.

## The Prague Spring

During the '60s, the tough regime somewhat loosened. In 1968, the reformist politician Alexander Dubček came to power and introduced a new programme. Censorship disappeared and it became easier to get the necessary permissions to travel. This era of liberalization was known as the Prague Spring.



In 1970 the singer Marta Kubišová was forbidden to perform because of her public criticism of the Soviet invasion.

## The Soviet invasion of 1968

The reforms worried the USSR and the Soviets sent a Warsaw Pact army to Czechoslovakia. It arrived on August 20–21 and mostly non-violent resistance was soon suppressed by the soldiers. The Soviet army was stationed in Czechoslovakia and reforms were abandoned.

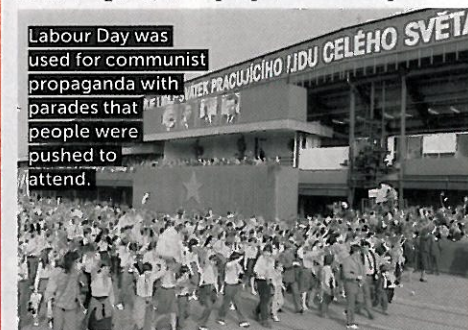


The Soviet army on Wenceslas Square, Prague.

In 1969, students Jan Palach and Jan Zajíc protested against the invasion by committing suicide through setting themselves on fire. Between 1968 and 1969 more than 100,000 people left the country before the borders were closed again.

## The normalization of the '70s

Reformers were removed from the government, opponents of the regime were persecuted and censorship became stricter. Although some individuals tried to challenge the regime (for example by joining Charter 77, an initiative criticising the government and striving for human rights), most people remained quiet.



Labour Day was used for communist propaganda with parades that people were pushed to attend.

## The liberalization of the '80s

In 1987, the Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, introduced reforms called *perestroika* which brought liberalization both to politics (more political candidates) and the economy (a certain level of private ownership of businesses). It is now seen as the first step towards the end of communist rule.



Mikhail Gorbachev during his visit to Prague in April 1987.

# THE VELVET REVOLUTION OF 1989

## The rebellious '80s

In Czechoslovakia, several anti-communist demonstrations took place in 1988–89. One of the first, the so-called Candle Demonstration, was in Bratislava in March 1989.



The 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Candle Demonstration in Bratislava.

## November 17, Prague

A demonstration was organized by students on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Nazi closure of universities, and as a tribute to Jan Opletal's death (a student killed during the anti-Nazi demonstrations in 1939). The protest, starting in Albertov, was supposed to end in Vyšehrad. However, the majority of people headed from Vyšehrad towards the centre of Prague. They were violently attacked by the police on Národní Avenue.



Protesters peacefully resisting the police force.

## Towards freedom

More demonstrations with a much bigger participation of the general public followed. Anti-communist groups formed the Civic Forum and Public Against Violence (in Slovakia). Students and actors went on strike. Czechoslovak television broadcasted the events.



On November 22, around 200,000 people came to Wenceslas Square.

## Free elections

In December, the Communist government resigned and dissident Václav Havel was elected president. The first free elections since 1946 took place in June 1990, and Civic Forum and Public Against Violence won. Czechoslovakia became a democratic country again. A similar process took place in other Soviet satellite states (= formally independent countries, but in fact controlled by the USSR).



A military parade at Václav Havel's presidential inauguration, Prague Castle.

*Note: After the revolution the political differences between the Czechs and Slovaks began to grow, and Slovak politicians demanded greater autonomy. The Czech and Slovak leaders, Václav Klaus and Vladimír Mečiar, finally came to an agreement about the split of the country. On January 1, 1993, the independent Czech Republic and Slovak Republic were established.*

## COMMUNIST CZECHOSLOVAKIA

Communism is mainly based on the ideas of the German thinkers Marx and Engels, who believed in the revolution of the working class and the establishment of a society where all people would be equal and ownership would be common. The Soviet Union (after the October Revolution of 1917), along with other countries in the Eastern Bloc, turned these ideas into totalitarian rule – a political system where one party was in power, opposition was banned and businesses were owned by the state. The state tried to control various aspects of public life through censorship and monitoring by secret police. Although Communists loved to boast about their prosperous economy, the economy in fact faced serious problems.

## LIVING UNDER COMMUNISM

- ✦ People were pushed to join the Communist Party. Prestigious jobs and high positions were only available to party members.
- ✦ Political brainwashing was part of everyday life. For example studying Marxism-Leninism was compulsory at universities.
- ✦ There were constant shortages of goods, from food to consumer goods. Prices were fixed, but there was no variety. A black market existed.
- ✦ Travelling abroad was severely limited.
- ✦ Many Czech and foreign books, films and albums were banned.

## YOUR TURN

After reading about life in a communist state, think about the following questions.

- Which activities that were banned under communism would you miss the most?
- The Communist Party got over 12% of votes in the last Czech parliamentary elections. Why do you think it is still so attractive to people? Do you think it has changed enough to be considered a true democratic party? Can you imagine yourself voting for the Communists? Why or why not?